


1999

Ruffians and Revivalists: Manliness, Violence, and Religion in the Backcountry South, 1790-1840

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<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-6mh6-3402>

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RUFFIANS AND REVIVALISTS: MANLINESS,
VIOLENCE, AND RELIGION IN THE
BACKCOUNTRY SOUTH, 1790-1840

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

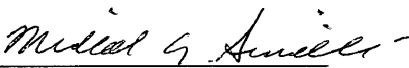
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1999

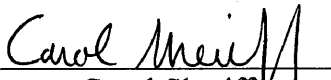
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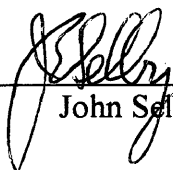
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the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts


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Approved, February 1999


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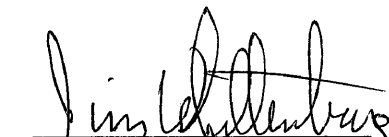


James Whittenburg

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people deserve thanks for their help with this thesis. My advisor, Professor Carol Sheriff, read each and every draft of this thesis and always offered invaluable stylistic and substantive critiques. Her knowledge of nineteenth-century America and seemingly endless patience with the various twists and turns that this thesis has taken over the past years has been greatly appreciated throughout the entire research and writing process. Professors John Selby and James Whittenburg served as readers and their criticisms and suggestions vastly improved the final version of this paper. Professor Whittenburg's seminar on the American backcountry first sparked my interest in the trans-Appalachian frontier and his expertise in this area enabled me to fine tune my interpretation. Professor Selby brought his knowledge of Southern history and keen editorial eye to this project, reigning in my interpretative excesses and forcing me to clarify both my prose and argument.

ABSTRACT

Violence was a brutal fact of life in the antebellum South: masters abused slaves, gentlemen dueled, white settlers battled Indians, husbands beat their wives and children, and poor whites wrestled, boxed, and gouged. It is this last type of violence that forms the subject of this study, for an examination of poor white men's fights—or, to use the term of contemporaries, "rough-and-tumbles"—probes the crucial relationship between violence and gender identity in the nineteenth-century South and, more broadly, provides a glimpse into the "poor white culture" that flourished in the hill and backcountry areas of the South. While many historians have written of a "Southern manhood"—as if it were a code of behavior that all Southern men, white and black, slave and free, adhered to—this project aims to show that class, religion, and race fractured a singular understanding of "manhood" in the antebellum South.

Unlike the plantation gentry, poor white men regarded violence as a *necessary* part of the process of becoming a "man." The slaves, education, political power, lineage, and wealth that plantation masters used to establish themselves as "men" in their communities was not available to the region's plain folk, and they turned fights into tests of manhood. But, poor white men's preference for violent tests of manhood revealed not only a different style of establishing one's manhood, it also showed that they observed a particular, class-based, idea of manliness. Poor whites' rough-and-tumbles highlighted the qualities that they held most dear in their men—"passion," strength, stamina, and boxing "skill"—qualities that the refined and order-loving gentry viewed as evidence of poor whites' "savagery." And this difference in codes of manliness was apparent to both gentry and plain folk: poor whites judged the gentry's unwillingness to box and gouge as cowardly; the gentry claimed that poor whites' rough-and-tumbles lacked civility.

Yet, even in isolated backcountry settlements, poor white men encountered another model of manhood as itinerant ministers, imbued with evangelicalism of the Second Great Awakening, offered salvation along with a new vision of manhood—a Christian manhood. Evangelicals held up the Christian convert as the paragon of manliness: sober and self-controlled; the passion, strength, and boxing skill that many plain folk regarded as essential to one's manhood became sinful, if not unmanly, to the converted. As ministers continued to spread the evangelical message throughout the backcountry, "rough-and-tumblers" or "fighting men," as evangelicals referred to them, made it increasingly clear that a segment of the plain folk population would contest the spread of evangelical values, disrupting sermons with their "disorderly" behavior and threatening ministers with violence. In the end, the conflict between the ways of "rough-and-tumble" and the message of evangelical Christianity was never fully resolved in the antebellum South, forcing men to choose between value systems or live with the contradictions of both.

**RUFFIANS AND REVIVALISTS: MANLINESS,
VIOLENCE AND RELIGION IN THE
BACKCOUNTRY SOUTH, 1790-1840**

INTRODUCTION

The peculiar nature of the social system of the antebellum South has long relegated the white "plain folk" to a secondary position in most historical accounts. Plain folks' minimal participation in the region's dominant institution, black slavery, often places them at the margins of the Old South's history, a nondescript layer of society between the masters and their slaves. Interpretations of antebellum Southern society have frequently presented these people as merely a subordinate white class in a hierarchical world dominated by the patriarchal master class or as active supporters of the peculiar institution and the white man's (or *herrenvolk*) democracy that it fostered. Too often the "plain folks" emerge as accomplices in the master class's program of slavery and political dominance. Members of this white lower class surely joined the masters' slave patrols and probably did not look kindly on black slaves, but acquiring slaves and growing cotton were largely peripheral concerns in their lives. Plain folks instead focused on earning a subsistence from the soil and maintaining ties of kin and community, not becoming part of a system of slavery and cotton.

A central reason why these people, a sizable segment of Southern society, do not figure prominently in the historical record is the lack of primary sources detailing their lives. Outside of census records and tax rolls, Southern poor whites left surprisingly few direct records. Because of the high illiteracy rates that persisted in the antebellum South, we have few traces that provide insights into the thoughts and feelings of these people. Despite this problem of direct evidence, reconstruction of the thoughts and values of the Southern plain folks is far from impossible.

The observations of contemporary observers—mainly European and Northern travelers and itinerant ministers—provide a view into the everyday lives of these "plain folk"; and more important, these observers provide essential sources for reconstructing the mental world of the Southern poor whites. These texts, however insightful and rich, cannot be taken at face value. Between the observations of these writers and the actual lives of the plain folks exists a filter, a filter of values, biases, and prejudices that distorted travelers' perceptions of this particular rural culture. The observers of this "savage" culture (as they labeled it) held values that combined the rationalism of the market world and the refinement of polite culture. The power of market rationalism and politeness pushed many writers to view plain folks, both Tidewater residents and backcountry settlers, as a group of lazy half-wits lacking any sense of culture and manners.¹

To recover this "lost" cultural world, these biases of contemporary observers must be overcome. Unfortunately, the elite biases embedded into the primary source material are not the only problems that plague this sort of reconstruction project. At times throughout this paper the historical record falls silent, leaving obvious gaps in the larger story of plain folk culture and society. The limited nature of the source materials involved with this project often requires speculation to retrace fully the outlines of the plain folk cultural world. Where the evidence fails the historian, speculation and inferences must attempt to fill the void left by a silent record.²

¹On the culture of market and politeness, see Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 202-236, 364-395; Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 353-401.

²Historical models that have influenced these paragraphs are: Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) and Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

The biases of elite sources and the use of speculation are obvious impediments to any historical project, but some outlines of Southern plain folks' cultural world become apparent in these travel accounts and diaries. So rich and varied are these accounts that a general survey of plain folk culture would be all but unattainable in a paper of this size; only a survey limited both geographically and topically would allow for some understanding of the plain folk world. This paper, thus, does not claim to provide a full and complete description of plain folk culture. Instead, it focuses upon one facet of the world of the "plain folks": violence. Violence was an everyday occurrence in the antebellum South: masters beat their slaves, gentlemen dueled, white settlers violently pushed Indians from their lands during westward expansion, husbands beat their wives and children, and members of the "lower sort" gouged one another. It is this last type of violence that fascinates me, since it occurred so often among the "common whites" of the South. More specifically, the violent activities of poor whites in the backcountry areas of western Virginia, western North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee—the areas of the South that I have chosen to study—provide a window through which we can see the indistinct outlines of a plain folk culture. While gouging does not fully explain white plain folk culture in full, it does highlight the shape of gender roles in the Southern backcountry (and possibly for plain folks throughout the South).

Southern violence has fascinated many historians, and it has also generated many diverse interpretations. Yet throughout all of these interpretations, the issue of gender has scarcely been considered. While scholars have emphasized the role of masculinity in the gentry's violent rituals (especially the duel), historians have neglected the gendered nature of poor white violence in the South.³ The most obvious fact of plain folk violence in the

³Both Bertram Wyatt-Brown and Steven Stowe, on the other hand, have used gender and gender roles to explain the importance of gentry violence. See Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) and Steven Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

backcountry was that it was a male-dominated event. Although this statement appears simplistic and obvious, few historians have examined the implications of this statement in full.

The settlers of the Southern backcountry drew firm lines between men and women. Gender dictated everything from the division of labor in the household to styles of dress; within this context, violence was also regulated by gender norms. Though gender may have governed violence in terms of defining who participated (men) and who did not (women), static gender roles did not merely dictate the shape that violence assumed in the areas settled by poor, white migrants. Instead, there was a more circular relationship between gender and violence, each constantly redefining the other. Gender norms may have deemed violence a "manly" pursuit, but the violence itself continually helped to define what it meant to be "manly." Notions of manliness (and therefore unmanliness) pushed men toward violence, while their violent acts constantly set the parameters of manliness itself.

But, while violence was central to the lives of both plain folk and gentry in the antebellum South, it frequently took different forms and was fraught with different meanings for members of each class. Gentry violence—at least between white males—most often took the form of the duel: a ritualistic encounter fought according to the rules of the centuries-old *code duello*, usually witnessed by only the participants and their attendants. The plain folks' "rough-and-tumble," on the other hand, lacked both the ornate rules and private setting of the upper-class duel. Unlike the duel, the rough-and-tumble was not fought according to an elaborate set of rules or with pearl-handled revolvers; instead, it had a rather anarchic quality, in which men acknowledged few rules and used their bodies, teeth, fists, and fingernails as their weapons. Also in contrast to the gentry's duel, the rough-and-tumble was not a solitary struggle between the participants (and their attendants), but a public event in which the entire male community gathered to

watch and wager on the combatants and ultimately decide the “winner” by cheering the “manly” victor and jeering the “unmanly” loser.

Gentry and plain folk obviously held to different forms of violence, but does this indicate that they had two different conceptions of “manliness”? This question cannot be answered in full here, but it seems that violence had a different relationship to gentry and plain folk conceptions of “manly.” Both upper- and lower-class Southern white men surely recognized certain qualities as the hallmarks of a “man,” but this should not force us to overlook the fact that Southern white men adhered to distinct versions of “manhood.” Although the patriarchal family structure, violence, and racial slavery formed a common basis for all white Southern manhoods, issues such as religion and class structure insured that “Southern manhood” would hardly be a monolith. In the Southern backcountry, rough-and-tumbles allowed poor white men to defend themselves not only from slights on their reputations (as did the duel), but the fight itself also permitted them to showcase their pugilistic skills—an ability that plain folk men especially held in esteem. Plain folks seemed to have regarded violence as a *necessary* component of earning the label “man,” for it highlighted some of the attributes that they considered “manly”: passion (meaning the lack of self-control), strength, and one’s “skill” in boxing. For white men of the gentry class, their “manhood” was often assumed (at least by the members of their own class) and violence only seemed to be required when one’s manhood was called into question. And the duel seemingly highlighted qualities that elite white Southerners valued in true “men”—qualities that poor white men did not highly value: self-control, order, and a military-style valor. The rough-and-tumble was an arena where a poor white “man” established (and defended) his manly reputation; the duel was an event in which a gentleman salvaged a tarnished reputation.

Violence also loomed larger and played a more central role in the lives of poor white men because they often lacked many of the material resources that the gentleman used to illustrate his manliness. While many a gentleman used the duel to respond to attacks on one's honor, most members of the gentry did not need to resort to violence to become "men." Elite, white, Southern men often employed their economic power, ownership of slaves, education, lineage, hospitality, and political power to define themselves as "men"—meaning self-controlled and independent (in the sense of without economic dependence)—in the eyes of the community. For the poor white men of the backcountry, the material means to establish one's manliness—slaves, economic independence (many lacked title to land, others depended on slaveowners for credit), education, an esteemed lineage, and political power—were often absent; thus, backcountry white men often invested violence with more weight—and meaning—than did their gentry counterparts. Gentry and plain folk men both employed violence to uphold their status as men, but to members of each class, the standard of "man" and the violence used to attain that ideal were often quite different.

Finally, both plain folk and gentry acknowledged the differences between their combative styles, and this hints at deep cultural differences between the classes of white Southerners. For the gentry, the "lower sorts'" propensity for gouging was symbolic of their lack of civility, refinement, and self-control. In failing to achieve these virtues and by engaging in an extreme (and often gruesome) form of violence such as gouging, gentry men often viewed lower-class men as less than "manly." On the other hand, plain folk men often took the gentry's unwillingness to participate in a rough-and-tumble or to gouge and box as cowardice—a sign that the dueling gentleman was less than "manly."

In the southern backcountry specifically, it appears that standards of manliness and male gender roles not only sanctioned high levels of violence, but that they also necessitated violence. The masculine values of these plain folks placed a great emphasis on qualities such as strength, stamina, and resiliency in battle. The "fight" showcased these virtues, forcing participants to display their strength and stamina before a crowd of onlookers. It was in this rough-and-tumble where men struggled for survival and power within plain folk culture. The results of the brawl were simple, yet it was extremely powerful: the man who emerged victorious, and unscathed, was seen as a man among men by the male community, while his vanquished foe, missing an eye or part of his nose, was judged "unmanly" by his cohorts. Fights were more than random occurrences sparked by deep rooted socioeconomic conditions; instead, they were forums in which men attempted to show that they were "manly." Aside from showing the manliness of some men, the fight was just as important in pointing to those men who could not meet the plain folk ideal of manliness. The fight was equally important in defining what sort of behavior was not "manly."

While this "rough-and-tumble" manliness was a central part of the lives of many men in the Southern backcountry, it would be short-sighted to claim that this was the only standard of manliness that white plain folks observed. The expansion of evangelical religion with the Second Great Awakening at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in fact, offered a competing model of manliness—another Southern manhood—to plain folk men throughout the South. As revivals and itinerant ministers ventured into the isolated settlements of the Southern backcountry, they brought a new set of values that countered many plain folk ways—especially those of common white men. This is not to imply that backcountry settlers, or plain folks throughout the South, were ignorant of Christian doctrines, but that the evangelical Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists held their members to rigid standards and regularly

disciplined transgressors. The drinking and fighting once tolerated or ignored by the more lax branches of American Protestantism would no longer go unnoticed by the growing number of evangelicals throughout the South.

In addition to offering plain folks the hope of salvation, the evangelicals who traveled the "backwoods frontier" proffered a new standard of manliness: a Christian masculinity. Southern historians have examined the impact of evangelical religion numerous times, but the evangelical challenge to plain folk gender norms has gone somewhat unnoticed. Itinerants' message to the unconverted explicitly contested the "virtues"—skill in the rough-and-tumble and "passion"—that many plain folk men held dear—a gendered conflict that many historians have subsequently overlooked. Evangelicals gave an honored place to self-control, tranquility, and sobriety; they created an ideal Christian man who both held his passions in check and respected God. The violent qualities and passion that many plain folks regarded as essential to one's manhood were now seen as sinful by the evangelical flock.

As evangelicals attempted to spread their message—including their notions of Christian manhood—to the communities of the backcountry, they often encountered firm, and sometimes violent, opposition from the plain folks. For poor white men, evangelicals were not only outsiders in their communities; their message of salvation also attacked the fighting and drinking culture in which plain folk men found their manly identity. And plain folks reacted to these affronts to their manhood as they would any other attack on their "manly" status: they responded with violence. "Rough-and-tumblers" or "fighting men," as evangelicals referred to them, disrupted revivals and services and attempted to intimidate preachers with threats of beatings or eye-gouging. Itinerant preachers responded to these threats in a variety of ways—some resisted in a passive and non-violent manner, while other struck back with violence themselves—but it became increasingly clear that the spread of evangelical Protestantism

would be contested by a segment of the plain folk population at every sermon and revival.

This explosive relationship between violence, masculinity, and religion produced intellectual and physical conflicts throughout the Southern backcountry. The contradiction between rough-and-tumble masculinity and evangelical Christianity was never fully resolved itself, forcing men to chose between value systems or live with the contradictions of both. Violence and religion, seemingly opposed to one another on their face, resided at the core of both Southern white men and their culture.

CHAPTER I
"THIS GOUGING, BITING, KICKING
COUNTRY": VIOLENCE AND MANLINESS
IN THE SOUTHERN BACKCOUNTRY

The antebellum Southern backcountry was a violent place. In our mind's eye, the words "southern" and "backcountry" conjure up images of an Indian-battling Andrew Jackson, vainglorious gentlemen dueling at fifty paces, and the brutal, community-organized slave lynching. An equally prominent image is the extremely violent, and sometimes anarchic, behavior of the poor white migrants who moved west of the Appalachians. Known for hard drinking and an eagerness to fight, these backcountry men became notorious for their violent acts. Both contemporaries and historians have reached a consensus that violent activities, especially among white men, were an important part of the culture that developed west of the mountains. Yet despite arriving at this consensus on the importance of violence in white Southern culture, historians have been unable to agree on its causes. Southern notions of "passion," poor economic prospects, the "frontier conditions" of the region, ancient beliefs in "honor," and the persistence of "Celtic" folkways have all been advanced as reasons for the white Southerner's propensity for violence.¹

¹Elliott J. Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), 18-43; Dickson J. Bruce, Jr., *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1979), 3-20; Sheldon Hackney, "Southern Violence," *American Historical Review*, 74 (1969), 906-925; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), vii-xxi, 3-87; Steven Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins

Both Bertram Wyatt-Brown and Steven Stowe have analyzed the relationship between violence and gender among the gentry, but historians have generally failed to recognize the gendered context of violence in the Southern backcountry. Similarly to the gentlemen, backcountry settlers clung to a plain folk version of what historians have termed "Southern manhood." The typical white Southern male made his manhood evident to those above and below him by taking care of (or controlling) his family and preventing his honor and reputation from being tarnished by detractors. In their effort to sustain the weight of the imperatives of patriarchy and the honor code, Southern white men exhibited an aggressive masculinity that appeared to transcend the multiple levels of this hierarchical society.²

While concern for honor and caring for dependents tend to be associated with gentry culture, these concepts also had an impact on the development of backcountry masculinity. The ideology of patriarchy, for example, exerted a two-way influence on poor whites. On the one hand, "common whites," like the elite, applied patriarchy in the traditional sense of caring for one's "dependents."³ Though many did not have the means (or the desire in some cases) to acquire slaves, poor whites did have large families to support economically and physically. On the other hand, patriarchy provoked a quite different reaction from the men themselves. The gentry's rhetoric and belief that the upper class had to "care" for lower-class whites as well as

University Press, 1987), ix-xviii, 5-49; Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 9-33; Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1988), 146-170; W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941, rev. ed., 1991), 25-75; Kenneth S. Greenburg, "The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel in the Antebellum South," *American Historical Review*, 95 (1990), 57-74.

²Greenburg, "The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel," 57-74; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 25-88, 117-148, 272-291; Stowe, *Intimacy and Power*, 5-49, 161-224.

³The terms "common whites," "poor whites," and "plain folk" will be used interchangeably. These terms refer to the non-planter lower class of the antebellum South. While these people tended not to hold large numbers of slaves, slave-holding does not exclude individuals from this category. Instead, the terms "common whites," "poor whites," and "plain folk" denote those who participated in this backcountry culture.

blacks pushed many poor white men to cling to a definition of manliness that emphasized their self-sufficiency and independence (which may or may not have been real) from gentry control. Belief in "honor," loosely defined, also affected poor whites' notion of manliness. Backcountry men did not bind themselves to an elaborate, gentry-style "code of honor," but they did take seriously criticisms against important backcountry virtues such as physical strength and drinking ability. This backcountry standard of "Southern manhood," like its gentry counterpart, entailed the use of violence. Whether a man's wife "misbehaved" or someone offended a man's reputation, backcountry poor whites regarded violence as an acceptable recourse for insults to their manhood.⁴

The relationship between violence and masculinity in backcountry culture was not something unconscious, but a link noticed by both members of the culture and observers of it. Both the connection between masculinity and violence and the prominent place it held in white Southern culture is quite evident in the observations of Bishop Henry Benjamin Whipple on his tour of the American South in the early 1840s. After the trial of a boy of "some 8 or 9 years," who was charged with "fighting," Whipple described the exchange between the boy and his father. The father did not censure the child for his actions, but instead offered some valuable advice. He said in an instructive tone, "Now you little devil, if you catch him down again bite him, chew his lip or you never'll be a man."⁵ This common white culture placed few bounds on violence and expected men to be successful in these rituals if their manhood was to be recognized by the poor white male community. And conversely, failure to be adept in combat resigned a man to the ranks of the "unmanly." The power that this culture exerted among common whites cannot be denied, but it should be remembered that this masculinity was far

⁴Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 62-87.

⁵Lester B. Shippee, ed., *Bishop Whipple's Southern Diary, 1843-1844* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1937), 24-25.

from universal, even among backcountry men. Issues such as class, religion, and education further confused the idea of "manliness." In many cases, the strains caused by these differences produced multiple masculinities throughout the South.⁶

Within the context of backcountry masculinity, the importance of violence must not be overemphasized. Victory in a "rough-and-tumble" or triumph in a hunt was a crucial part of being a man, but violence was only part of the process of separating the "manly" from the "unmanly" in the backcountry South. A man's ability to provide for his family and bequeath land to his descendants, among other things, also contributed to the process of constructing gender roles among poor whites. Though violence was only a single element of Southern manhood, albeit an important part, it allows us to see both the gender roles and the power relationships within the communities of the trans-Appalachian frontier. In terms of the "masks" that cultures require men and women to wear, the "mask" of violence was a device used to separate men from women.⁷ The man regarded as a skilled boxer, champion rough-and-tumbler, or legendary eye-gouger inspired the respect, admiration, and possibly fear of his male peers. But, what made violence so important to poor whites in particular was its prevalence, widespread acceptance, and the gendered meanings that poor whites invested in it. Poor whites possessed few institutions or outlets to channel their aggressions, like their gentry counterparts, and they encountered many forces that exacerbated hostilities, namely alcohol and a rough backcountry environment. For them, violence became a convenient and quite important act of release. In an atmosphere where a man's reputation was of the utmost

⁶Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites: Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 170-178.

⁷The "mask" analogy is from Gerda Lerner's definition of gender: "Gender is the cultural definition of behavior as defined as appropriate to the sexes in a given society at a given time. Gender is a set of cultural roles. It is a costume, a mask, a strait-jacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance," in *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 238.

importance, a public act, an event such as a fight, became a logical forum for establishing one's manliness.

Not only was the fight a proper arena to demonstrate one's potency, but it was also one of numerous interactions and events that defined power relationships among poor white men in the backcountry. While the place and importance of violence was symbolic of the inter-gender (male-female) power relationships in the backcountry, violence had an even greater impact on intra-gender power relationships. It appears that to common whites the lines drawn between men were of equal, if not greater, importance than the lines between men and women. In the eyes of many backcountry men, women were "obviously" inferior, but this assumption did not imply equality among all poor white men. A rough egalitarianism may have characterized the mythological frontier of the American historical imagination, but in the southern backcountry it appears that plain folks created a hierarchical environment that clearly separated the "manly" from the "unmanly" within their class. This winnowing process took place in the aftermath of a fight when the male community lauded the champion as the "best man," while his foe was viewed as supremely "unmanly."⁸ The gentry's duel, on the other hand, was hardly a necessary part of becoming a man for an upper-class male, for this violent encounter did not highlight one's "manly" traits—as a rough-and-tumble did for plain folks—it saved one's reputation.

Yet, it would be inaccurate to claim, as some historians have, that a uniform relationship between violence and masculinity developed throughout the South. The common emphasis on rectifying affronts to one's honor, maintaining control of those "below" him, and participating in violent activities might have created an image of a homogeneous Southern

⁸On the use of masculinity as a social construct see Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, eds., *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1-7; Peter N. Stearns, *Be A Man!: Males in Modern Society* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), 1-13; E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 1-71; see also David Leverenz, *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989); David G. Pugh, *Sons of Liberty: The Masculine Mind in Nineteenth Century America* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983).

manhood, but the class structure of Southern society created competing, class-based masculinities. Plain folks and gentry often adopted distinctive practices to fulfill their masculine ideals. These forms of masculine behavior were so divergent that they frequently became a source of conflict between the gentry and the lower sort. Besides the friction generated by the great disparities of wealth in the South, masculine subcultures also appear to have exacerbated tensions between the gentry and the plain folks. In this conflict of cultures, the plain folks of the South's hinter regions used their variation of white Southern manhood in a greater effort to create a culture of their own in defiance of the gentry's effort to establish cultural hegemony.⁹

These differences between gentry and plain folk masculinities become most apparent in men's attitudes toward different types of violence. Socioeconomic class, for example, specifically circumscribed those who could and those who could not participate in the South's most famous act of violence: the duel. As one historian of dueling noted, "A gentleman fought another gentleman with a pistol on the field of honor, according to the rules. A gentleman horsewhipped or caned a person of the lower estates."¹⁰ To many white Southerners, the term "gentleman" denoted a particular class of people. Although gentlemanly status was not completely dependent on possessing the trappings of Southern elitism—a large number of slaves, land, and a grand plantation house—material goods usually helped one gain the title of gentleman. The poor whites who failed to reach this level of economic success rarely reached gentleman status. Because poor whites lacked substantial wealth and the concomitant "gentleman" status, social convention barred them from participating in the genteel form of violence, dueling.¹¹

⁹On the creation of a plain folk culture, see Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites: Class and Culture*.

¹⁰Jack K. Williams, *Dueling in the Old South: Vignettes of Social History* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1980), 26.

¹¹Williams, *Dueling in the Old South*, 26-39; William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (London: W.H. Allen, 1963), 67-94; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 166-167,

Whereas the duel held a special significance for the planters who engaged in it, an "affair of honor" carried little weight for the lower classes. The duel was unpopular with plain folk men because it failed to highlight the fighting "skill" they so highly valued in "men." Instead, poor whites placed numerous other types of violence at the center of their own conception of masculinity. Although it is difficult to gauge in any quantitative sense which forms of violence were most prevalent, contemporary accounts assign a high prominence to less restrained forms of white male-on-white male violence: eye-gouging, head-butting, and biting. Many of the Europeans and Northerners who toured the backcountry remarked at the frequency with which white men fought one another. Thomas Ashe, although known for his hyperbole, noted that fighting among the lower sort "might be called a national taste, which the laws appeared afraid to violate."¹² Ashe erred in claiming that no laws existed against these violent practices (Kentucky, Virginia, and South Carolina, among other states, passed laws against such practices); but his remark confirms what other contemporaries perceived, that white male-on-white male fighting was a central part of backcountry male culture. Whether writers labeled it "boxing," "fighting," or "rough-and-tumble," they referred to a typical type of violence engaged in by the white male settlers of America's backwoods.¹³

349-361; Stowe, *Intimacy and Power*, 5-49; Greenburg, "The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel," 57-74; Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, 21-43; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 9-33.

¹²Thomas Ashe, *Travels in America, Performed in 1806, for the Purpose of Exploring the Rivers Allegheny, Manongahela, Ohio, and Mississippi*. . . (Newburyport, Mass.: E.M. Blount, 1808), 99.

¹³On the fighting engaged in by poor-whites in the backcountry see, Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch'," 18-43; Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites*, 62-66, 137-138, 156-158, 170-178; Tom Parramore, "Gouging in Early North Carolina," *North Carolina Folklore Journal*, 22 (1974), 55-62; James I. Robertson, "Frolics, Fights, and Firewater in Frontier Tennessee," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 17 (1958), 97-111; James I. Robertson, "Revelry and Religion in Frontier Kentucky," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 79 (1981), 354-368; Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, 89-113; McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 146-170; Ray Allen Billington, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1981), 76, 270-272; Thomas D. Clark, *The Rampaging Frontier: Manners and Humors of Pioneer Days in the South and Middle West* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1939), 30-38, 123-126.

These visitors to the newly formed settlements west of the Appalachians were not, however, impartial observers. With their origins in the North or Europe, these men held cultural values that were often diametrically opposed to those esteemed by backcountry settlers. Their judgments also must be considered in light of the competing versions of masculinity that flourished in the nineteenth century. These upper- and middle-class Northern and European men, unlike their Southern counterparts, espoused a market-capitalism version of manhood that emphasized self-restraint and industry, and not violence and brashness. Their criticisms of poor whites' violent rituals, further, belie the notion that one type of masculinity, or "American manhood,"¹⁴ existed at that time. With the exception of authors who hoped to draw migrants to America's "virgin lands" (and usually painted a more benign picture of the American backcountry), the behavior of the "lower sorts" appalled the sensibilities of most observers. Charles William Janson on his tour of the West, for example, painted an unfavorable portrait of the country folk: "the lower class in this gouging, biting, kicking country, are the most abject that perhaps ever populated a Christian land."¹⁵ Ferdinand-Marie Bayard concurred with Janson by noting that "the customs of the less well-to-do people of this region [western Virginia] are wild and violent."¹⁶ This sort of criticism came not only from European observers, many of whom believed that the American West represented democracy

¹⁴In contrast to what E. Anthony Rotundo notes in *American Manhood*, numerous factors affected the construction of masculinity. Most significantly, class, ethnicity, region, and race often prevented a homogenized "American manhood" from emerging.

¹⁵Charles William Janson, *The Stranger in America: Containing Observations Made During a Long Residence in that Country, on the Genius, Manners, and Customs of the People of the United States*. . . (London: Albion Press, 1807), 304.

¹⁶Bayard quoted in Lee W. Ryan, ed., *French Travelers in the Southeastern United States, 1775-1800* (Bloomington, Indiana: The Principia Press, 1939), 70.

run amok, but also from American citizens. Charles Fenno Hoffman, a Northerner, described Southern plain folks as a "heathen race" that was "more savage than the Indians."¹⁷

Preconceived cultural prejudices may have compromised travelers' objectivity, but their observations nonetheless provide us with a view into this culture of violence. Present-day historians often generally speak of the "fighting" that occurred throughout the backcountry, but those who traveled the backcountry noticed a wide variety of "manly" customs. Eye-gouging was one of the most common of these violent acts. "Gouging is performed," Patrick Shirreff explained, "by twisting the fingers into the hair of the victim, and with the thumb forcing the eye out of its socket. This savage act has long been known in Kentucky and some of the western states, and was often resorted to when parties quarreled."¹⁸ Charles Janson, in his travels through the West, described the anatomy of an eye-gouging. He began, "The delicate and entertaining diversion, with propriety called GOUGING, is thus performed."

When two boxers are wearied out with fighting and bruising each other, they come, as it is called, to close quarters, and each endeavors to twist his fore-fingers in the ear-locks of his antagonist. When there are fists clenched, the thumbs are extended each way to the nose, and the eyes *gently* turned out of the sockets.¹⁹

Shirreff and Janson, nevertheless, were not the only travelers to witness this spectacle; witnessing an eye-gouging, it seems, was one of the most common recollections of backwoods travelers. Thomas Anburey explained that "[t]his most barbarous custom [eye-gouging], which a savage would blush at being accused of, is peculiar to the lower class of people of this province." He continued "at one time it was so prevalent, that the Governor and Assembly were obliged to pass

¹⁷Charles Fenno Hoffman, *A Winter in the West*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper Brothers, 1835), 2:231, quoted in McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 146.

¹⁸Patrick Shirreff, *A Tour Through North America; Together with a Comprehensive View of the Canadas and the United States*. . . (Edinburgh, 1835; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1971), 236.

¹⁹Janson, *The Stranger in America*, 300.

a law which made it criminal."²⁰ In the period after the Revolution, eye-gouging became so commonplace that North Carolina reportedly earned the reputation among foreign and Northern diarists as the "foremost gouging area in America." Gouging was supposedly such an accepted mode of settling disputes in this area that Isaac Weld exclaimed, "In the Carolinas and Georgia, I have been credibly assured. . . that in some parts of these states, every third or fourth man appears with one eye."²¹ While Weld's figures are most likely overstated, the frequency of such acts cannot be ignored; gouging, it appears, was a time-honored maneuver cultivated by "fighting" men. Thomas Anburey came to this conclusion when he observed one warrior "who constantly kept the nails of both of his thumbs and second fingers very long and pointed; nay, to prevent their breaking or splitting. . . he hardened them every evening in a candle."²²

Eye-gouging appeared to have been an accepted practice in backcountry fights, but it also had a crucial cultural function, especially in relation to masculinity. Recognition as a "man" involved many public expressions of violence. Two men fought one another in the view of their peers where admitting defeat became a public act that symbolically emasculated the loser in the eyes of the community. For the fighters' purposes, gouging emerged as an effective method toward gaining the submission of an opponent and acknowledgment of one's own manhood. In the long run, keeping one's eyes intact after many fights was a badge of success, while losing an eye was symbolic of a man's inadequacy.²³

²⁰Thomas Anburey, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America*, 2 vols. (1789, reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1923), 2:202.

²¹The Carolinians propensity for gouging is noted in Parramore, "Gouging in Early North Carolina," 60; Isaac Weld, *Travels through the States of North America. . . During the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797* (New York, 1800), 144.

²²Anburey, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America*, 2:203.

²³Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites*, 170-178; Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, 89-113.

The gruesome practice of gouging may have riveted travelers' imaginations, but travel diarists also recorded numerous other methods of torture that backwoodsmen employed in the course of a fight. These methods, like gouging, entailed specific cultural meanings in the masculine subculture of the Southern frontier. Charles Janson, a man seemingly obsessed with the "beast-like" manners of these backcountry settlers, often provided graphic descriptions of the cruelty doled out in the course of a "rough-and-tumble." As Janson explained, "The eye is not the only feature which suffers on the occasions. Like dogs and bears, they use their teeth and feet, with the most savage ferocity upon each other."²⁴ Another typical backcountry fighting maneuver was head-butting. And again, Janson exhibited his cultural prejudices by comparing backcountry settlers with animals. He stated, "Another bestial mode of assault used by men in North Carolina is properly called butting. . .and is executed in the same manner as practiced in battle between bulls, rams, and goats."²⁵

Aside from butting, Janson noted that the "loss of eyes, mutilated noses, and indented cheeks so frequently surprise and shock the traveler."²⁶ One especially brutal character, a man named John Stanley, "sharpens his teeth with a file, and boasts of his dependence upon them in fight. The monster will also exult in relating the account of noses and ears he has bitten off, and the cheeks he has torn."²⁷ This level of violence among men apparently occurred often, but lore and legend celebrated men for their especially violent reputations. Although the origins of these legends are unknown, these larger-than-life fighting champions, whether their exploits were genuine or not, served a valuable cultural purpose for many men. In a world where living up to

²⁴Janson, *The Stranger in America*, 302; see also, Robertson, "Frolics, Fights, and Firewater," 97-111.

²⁵Janson, *The Stranger in America*, 303; Gorn, "Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch," contains excellent accounts of backcountry fights.

²⁶Janson, *Stranger in America*, 304.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 302.

the demands of a violent masculinity was so critical, these seemingly unbelievable characters served as objects of emulation and standards that many men strove to meet. Just as aspiring gentry attempted to imitate the refinement, civility, and wealth of the "manly" great planters, plain folk men strove to parrot the actions of men such as Thomas Penrise, a North Carolina man whose exploits reached these legendary proportions. During a foiled attempt to cheat some "half-drunken sailors" at a game of cards, Penrise evinced his manliness when he "knocked out the candle, then gouged out three eyes, bit off an ear, tore a few cheeks, and made good his retreat."²⁸ Although the credibility of Penrise's legend is questionable, the cultural ramifications of his reputed actions are not. The man who was able to gouge or bite with skill became a backcountry hero who inspired both admiration and fear from his contemporaries. Men who lost their facial features, however, wore them as a confirmation of their loss of "manly" status. The lost eye or the missing piece of nose was not only a physical loss, but also a loss of status within the male community.²⁹

Just as the particular methods used by participants in this male culture ran the gamut from gouging to head-butting, the "fight" itself also took numerous forms. The traditional "rough-and-tumble" usually involved two participants battling in the midst of a bloodthirsty crowd, but on other occasions the fight took on an even more anarchic incarnation: the battle royal or free-for-all. One traveler through Kentucky in the early 1800s commented on the process whereby a man-on-man fight turns into a community-wide free-for-all. He remarked that "if the conqueror seems inclined to follow up his victory without granting quarter, he is generally attacked by a fresh man, and a pitched battle between a single pair ends in a battle

²⁸Ibid., 302.

²⁹On the significance of the nose see, Greenburg, "The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel in the Antebellum South," 57-74.

royal, where all present are engaged."³⁰ It appears, as in the case of this Kentucky battle royal, that gaining acceptance as a "man" by the male community involved participation in this ritualistic form of violence.³¹

The number of eye-gougings and lip bitings that actually occurred throughout the backcountry remains a mystery to historians. The fact that European travelers continually noted these incidents, though, gives weight to the belief that "fighting" was a pivotal part of life for backcountry men. Observers believed that a high level of drinking and the lack of "worthy commercial pursuits" promoted the use of violence by poor whites. Though travelers' claims are likely overdrawn, socioeconomic conditions and alcohol undoubtedly aggravated the violent tendencies of many plain folks. The connection between alcohol consumption and violence, for one, gained the spotlight in the writings of both contemporaries and later historians. Travelers to the South harped on the plain folks' excessive drinking habits. "When I was in Virginia, it was too much whiskey. . .in Tennessee, it is too, too much whiskey!" wrote a Northerner from below the Mason-Dixon line.³² Historians have further confirmed these contemporary evaluations. William Rorabaugh has estimated that over fifty percent of the adult-male population of antebellum America consumed between six and twenty-four ounces of liquor daily, with the standard fare being a whiskey or brandy in the vicinity of ninety proof. Rorabaugh adds that these levels of alcohol consumption were even higher in the underdeveloped areas of the South and West. It is far from clear whether the origins of Southern violence lay with alcohol consumption, but its contribution to the brutality of Southern violence cannot be overlooked.³³

³⁰Fortescue Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country, Through the States of Ohio and Kentucky* (Pittsburgh: Gramer, Spear, and Richbaum, 1810), 118.

³¹Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch'," 18-43; Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, 89-113.

³²Quoted in McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 92.

³³W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3-23, 248; McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 90-92, 106-108, 126-130, 179-181; Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, 74-

These same observers and historians also found connection between high levels of violence and the lack of a market economy. Many diarists of British or Northern origins often linked the violence of the backcountry to the lack of capitalist values among the people who resided in those parts. According to the emerging bourgeois culture of the early market revolution, capitalism and strong religious values moved people toward steady and sober habits, the antithesis of backcountry culture (as many travelers saw it). In his travels through present-day West Virginia, Thomas Ashe cited the lack of "worthy commercial pursuits, and industrious and moral dealings" as an explanation for the brutal clashes that often erupted on the frontier.³⁴ One historian echoed this point of view, contending that the lack of a market economy pushed "backcountry whites. . . into a semisubsistent pattern of living. . . [in which] rural hamlets, impassable roads, and provincial isolation—not growing towns, internal improvements, or international commerce—characterized the backcountry."³⁵ The nonexistence of a market economy, however, cannot fully account for this violent male subculture. New York City's Bowery B'hoys, for example, though regulated by the clock-based rhythms of a market society at the workplace, participated in an all-male working-class culture that involved violence and heavy drinking in their leisure time. Far from isolated in "rural hamlets" or locked into a subsistence mode of production, the Bowery B'hoys maintained a discordant culture in a world that personified capitalistic order.³⁶

75; Gorn "Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch," 24-27; Robertson, "Frolics, Fights, and Firewater," 97-111; Cecil-Fronson, *Common Whites*, 173, 176-178.

³⁴ Ashe, *Travels in America*, 82-85, quoted in Gorn, "Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch," 25.

³⁵ Gorn, "Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch," 34. While not seeing the economic system as the only reason for this violent culture, Gorn cites it as a major factor in its development.

³⁶ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 257-271, discusses the Bowery subculture of New York City.

The lack of a developed market economy and high levels of alcohol consumption may have characterized the areas where violence occurred in the backcountry, but these facts do little to explain what produced such ritualistic and frequent violence. These interpretations lack the power to explain why lip-bitings and eye-gougings were accepted as sport or as a means of settling disputes. Linking the importance of violence with backcountry gender roles and masculine identity may be more profitable. As Peter Stearns has pointed out about masculinity, "all [men] have to carve out some distinctiveness from women, most commonly from the mother, to achieve identity as males."³⁷ Unlike the men who strove for polite society and refinement or sought shelter from the dislocations of early capitalism in clubs and secret societies, backcountry men lived in a world in which violence was often necessary for defense. In areas where runaway slaves and Indian attacks put fear into the hearts of many white settlers, violence possibly became a conditioned reaction. Considering this environment, it became almost instinctive for backcountry men to endow violence with such great prestige and to denigrate those who did not esteem violent tendencies.

The ritualistic nature of the rough-and-tumble and the close connection between violence and maintaining one's "manly" status emerges quite clearly in one particular fight in the Virginia backcountry, in the area of present-day West Virginia. In one of the many taverns that dotted the Virginia backcountry in the late eighteenth century, two men, while drinking themselves into an alcoholic haze, began to debate the comparative merits of their horses. After a frantic horse race failed to resolve the debate, the men decided that the only way to settle the disagreement would be to "rough-and-tumble." Thomas Ashe's description of this fight highlights many elements of poor white male culture. First, his observation that one of the fighters, "a Virginian," conducted himself in the fight with "beauty and skill" gives the reader the impression that men cultivated the "rough-and-tumble" as an art—a symbol of their masculinity.

³⁷Stearns, *Be A Man!*, 21.

Ashe's descriptions also suggest that upholding one's masculinity was directly tied to winning or losing on the field of battle. After a back and forth battle between the "Virginian" and the "Kentuckyan," the man from Kentucky eventually "gave out." The scene at the close of the fight clearly points to the repercussions the fight had for the validity of each competitor's masculinity in the eyes of the community. The victorious Virginian's masculinity remained intact, and the onlookers lauded him for his efforts. As for the loser, Ashe recalled, "The poor wretch, whose eyes were started out from their spheres, and whose lip refused its office, returned to the town, to hide his impotence." Losing a fight not only revealed a man's inability to be a competent fighter, but it also questioned the very basis of his manliness: his passion (and not self-control as the gentry would have argued).³⁸ Community reinforcement of the manly norms of the backcountry surfaced in the cheering of winners and the jeering of losers in the aftermath of many fights. After one especially brutal confrontation, Charles Janson observed, "The victor, for his expertness, receives shouts of applause from the sportive throng, while his poor eyeless antagonist is laughed at for his misfortune."³⁹

In these detached areas of the Southern backcountry, violence was a *central* and *necessary* part of becoming a "man"; whereas on the plantation, the duel was more episodic, peripheral, and not wholly necessary to attain the status of "man." The centrality of the "rough-and-tumble" to white plain folk culture in the South highlights plain folks' efforts to create a manliness (and whole culture) that set them apart from the gentry and slaves. Rough-and-tumbles point to two things that plain folk men valued: their whiteness and their masculine ideals. The rough-and-tumble was implicitly a white only event, for Southern plain folk, despite their hostility toward the gentry, surely felt that only men with white skins could earn the title "man."

³⁸ Ashe, *Travels Through America*, 96-99. This story is also recounted in Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch,'" 25-27.

³⁹ Janson, *The Stranger in America*, 300.

One telling incident from the Tennessee backcountry illustrates how poor whites differentiated themselves from black slaves. A backcountry man awoke from an alcoholic stupor to find his face blackened by a mischievous prankster.⁴⁰ The astounded man proclaimed, "Who dared treat little John like a brute?" While the coloring of his face was an obvious racial affront, the incident also involved questions of masculinity. In their interactions with slaves, the masculine rituals of poor whites—aside from their class function—also had a racial aspect, for no white "man" would engage in a rough-and-tumble with a black slave (or free black, for that matter). Expressing his indignation with what he took as an attack on his manhood, "Little John" exclaimed that he "is not the man to be walked [on]" and "I'm as good a bit of man's flesh as skin ever-covered." To show that he was not to be taken as an emasculated slave, John announced, "Come out here, any ten of you, and I'll mount you one after another."⁴¹ Poor whites actively pointed to this masculine divide between themselves and slaves. In the context of the backcountry world, violence, again, became the most potent device to clarify these differences.

Not only did common whites draw this class-culture line between themselves and slaves, but they marked an equally rigid line between their culture and that of the gentry.⁴² The rough-and-tumble emerged as a crucial cultural marker because it hinted at the differences between plain folk and gentry conceptions of "manliness." As the culture of refinement spread

⁴⁰On manliness, race, and blackface, see, David R. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), 115-132, 178-181; Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990), 165-182.

⁴¹Hoffman, *Winter in the West*, 2:222-223.

⁴²Eugene Genovese, "Yeoman Farmers in a Slave Holders' Democracy," in Genovese and Fox-Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 249-264; Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites*, 1-66, 97-203; see also James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982); *ibid.*, *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1990); Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

through America after the Revolution, the gentry code of manliness during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century increasingly held self-control, order, and refinement as the hallmarks of a true “gentleman.” A gentleman would only duel when provoked; violence apparently was a last resort, employed only when the gentleman’s “manly” refinement, civility, and self-control was not recognized. Plain folk, on the other hand, eagerly sought violent encounters, for it was in the fight that the treasured “manly” qualities of common white culture—passion, strength, and fighting “skill”—were put on view. Whereas some historians have viewed the men of this lower class as aspiring planters, many of their actions indicate a contempt and even scorn for the refinement of the upper-class white Southerners. This cultural chasm between the poor white and gentry masculinities became apparent when one gentleman, a Mr. Fauchée, met the wrath of a defiant “low fellow.” During a game of billiards in which a poor white stumbled into the room, “some words arose, in which he [the ‘low fellow’] first wantonly abused, and afterward would insist on fighting Mr. Fauchée.” Being “totally ignorant of boxing,” Fauchée declined the offer of the “low fellow” to participate in the argument-settling ways of the backwoods. Fauchée soon realized, however, that his gentlemanly demeanor would not quell the backwoodsman’s desire to fight. “He had scarcely uttered these words, before the other flew at him, and in an instant turned his eye out of the socket, and while it hung upon his cheek, the fellow was barbarous enough to endeavor to pluck it entirely out, but was prevented.”⁴³ This conflict between a backcountry man and the gentlemanly Mr. Fauchée points to the larger difference in both culture and standards of manliness that divided classes in the South. Class distinctions produced two different models of Southern manhood with values that often came into conflict. The place of violence and the types of combat acceptable to the Southern gentlemen were quite foreign to the backwoodsman. When Fauchée stated that he was “ignorant of boxing,” the huge gap that existed between the masculinity of the gentry world and that of the backcountry came into focus.

⁴³ Anburey, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America*, 2:201-202.

"Southern manhood" thus was not a monolithic gender construct. The class segregation of Southern society allowed these two divergent variants of masculinity to blossom, while being directly in conflict with one another. More importantly, the "lower fellow's" gouging of Mr. Fauchée was also symbolic of poor whites' efforts to establish a culture of their own amidst the socioeconomic and political hegemony of the planter elite throughout the South. The elites of Kentucky, to show just one example, attempted to control the development of a separate backcountry culture by passing a law that jailed anyone who "shall unlawfully cut out or disable the tongue, put out an eye, slit the nose, ear or lip."⁴⁴ The Kentucky law, like many others, proved to be a paper tiger. The fact that even after the Civil War this violent culture continued to dominate the areas west of the Appalachians exemplifies the impotency of these laws. An 1881 incident in Tennessee mirrored the violent incidents that occurred some hundred years before, but with one exception. The vast improvements in technology and the proliferation of guns gave backcountry violence a new, deadly quality. On that day in a tavern in Tennessee, "one word brought on others, and Will was being heartily cursed by Don when he seized a china dish and beer mug and hurled them at Don, causing the blood to flow. Will ran out doors and Don after him. Don fired his pistol twice, hitting Will twice, who fell dead."⁴⁵

The violence of the Southern backcountry, then, performed a vital cultural and class function in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For the white men who lived on the Southern frontier, these activities were a central component of their identity as men. This plain folk manliness coexisted with a gentry manhood that held different attitudes toward violence and the relationship to manliness to that violence. In the gentry world, violence, usually in the form of a duel, was a controlled affair in which only those of a specific social

⁴⁴"An Act to Amend the Penal Laws of this Commonwealth, February 10, 1798, [January session]," in William Little, ed., *The Statute Law of Kentucky*. . . , 3 vols. (Frankfort, Kentucky: [n.p.], 1809-1819), 2:13.

⁴⁵Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 53-54.

status—those men who had achieved a “manly” civility—took part. Backcountry violence, on the other hand, contained a public element and an unchecked quality that showcased what plain folks held as “manly”: passion and pugilistic skill, not the refinement and self-control of gentry culture. The particulars of the backcountry “code of violence” embodied common whites’ efforts to forge a class-based culture that maintained values and rituals that differed from those of the gentry. In their construction of a masculinity based on public violence, however, backcountry folk only partly succeeded.

The most significant impediment to the maturation of a class-wide plain folk masculinity based on fighting and other violent rituals came not from the gentry, but from a force that defied class. Beginning with the First Great Awakening, but ultimately reaching fruition with the great revivals of the early nineteenth century, evangelical religion posed a direct challenge to the manly values of the Southern backcountry. As Rhys Isaac has observed, many converted plain folks abjured the violence of their region and embraced an evangelical ideology that stressed self-control and self-denial over boldness and indulgence.⁴⁶ Although Elliott Gorn notes that “conversion was far from universal, and . . . the evangelical idiom became a foreign tongue”⁴⁷ in the backcountry, the impact of evangelicalism cannot be based merely on church membership figures, especially after Kentucky’s 1801 Cane Ridge revival. The plain folk code of manliness, despite its prevalence, never encompassed all the white males of the backcountry, especially as the wave of itinerant ministers converted many settlers to the ways of self-control, not passion, and self-denial, not the self-indulgence of violence. This rising evangelical culture, by preaching against violence (as the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians did in the backcountry), issued a

⁴⁶Rhys Isaac, “Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists’ Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765 to 1775,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., XXXI (1974), 345-368; see also Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1760-1790* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

⁴⁷Gorn, “Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch,” 37.

frontal assault on the common white version of manliness. By the early nineteenth century, as the revivals spread throughout the backcountry, evangelicals offered plain folk men a model of manliness that significantly departed from the ways of the rough-and-tumble, a Christian manliness that allowed plain folk men to become a "man" through self-control and conversion. Revivalism eventually created a conflict between violence and manliness in plain folk culture that persisted well after Reconstruction. As an historian of the postbellum South pointed out, "Male culture and evangelical culture were rivals, causing sparks when they came into contact and creating guilt and inner conflict in the many Southerners who tried to balance the two."⁴⁸ Many plain folks, and their culture of rough-and-tumble manhood, faced challenges from both within and without in the antebellum era. While these plain folks battled to create a masculinity distinct from that of the gentry, they ultimately faced equally strong pressures from what they considered an "unmanly" subculture emerging within their own class: evangelical religion.⁴⁹

⁴⁸Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 14; In contrast to Ownby's claim that this conflict persevered into the postbellum period, Malcolm J. Rohrbaugh, *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier: People, Societies, and Institutions, 1775-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 60-62, 146, 148-149, 151, argues that the expansion of churches proved to be "a calming influence on the frontier."

⁴⁹John B. Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1972); Paul K. Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Richard Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790-1865* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978).

CHAPTER II

THE EVANGELICAL CHALLENGE

The idea of the "South" calls to mind a barrage of images, some real and others fictitious, some in harmony with one another and others in stark contrast. Two of the most prominent images of the South in the historical imagination are those of the "fighting South" and the "praying South." The historical record speaks volumes about the centrality of violence in the Old South. The brutally exploitative system of slavery, the bloody duels, the Indian wars on the Southern frontier, and the fierce rough-and-tumbles of the backcountry, are part and parcel of the "fighting South" image. The South, on the other hand, was eventually also home to spirited revivals and camp meetings, a region with a deep commitment to evangelical Protestantism. Given the power of each image, is it possible that the violent, eye-gouging Southerner could have populated the same region as the God-fearing evangelical?

A simple explanation for this apparent contradiction is that social and geographic barriers separated those Southern folk with religious inclinations from their violent counterparts. With both a physical and social gap between these two classes of people, violent culture and evangelical religion could live in a relatively peaceful coexistence. This interpretation, however, does not hold because the messengers of religion and the men of violence did not exist in isolation from one another. In fact, the paths of these two subcultures crossed quite often, and the interaction and relationship between the two profoundly affected Southern society.

The historians who have explored both plain-folk and gentry violence in the South have not approached a consensus on the relationship between the "praying South" and "fighting South" images. Elliott Gorn, in his discussion of poor white violence in the backcountry, admitted that evangelicalism had a significant impact on some Southerners, but attempted to downplay the role of religion by arguing that "conversion was far from universal, and, for many in backcountry settlement. . . the evangelical idiom remained a foreign tongue."¹ In his study of the transference of Celtic folkways to the backcountry of the South, Grady McWhiney argued that there was little conflict between religion and the violent ways of the "crackers" who inhabited the backcountry. McWhiney suggested that the lax doctrines of some Southern religious denominations allowed men and women to engage in their Celtic traditions without the fear of being branded a sinner.² In contrast to this interpretation, I would suggest that the rise of evangelical religion in the South was a force that consumed people without regard to pre-existing racial, class, and ethnic divisions. But, because evangelical religion contained doctrines with many radical implications for Southern society, its impact has produced contradictory interpretations among historians.

Evangelical religion undoubtedly exerted a powerful influence on antebellum Southern culture. Though religion's impact was widespread, it can possibly be seen in a clearer light if we assess its relationship to constructions of masculinity in the Southern backcountry, where it

¹Elliott J. Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), 37.

²McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 171-192. A recent article by Edward R. Crowther argues that "over time, many religious and secular ideals, which were not necessarily dissonant in their expressions, had fused to produce a hybrid and distinctly Southern value, a holy honor that drew on evangelical and martial traditions for its sustenance, and animated and, for white Southerners, justified Southern behavior." Crowther's interpretation, while interesting, fails to explain two things: gentry and plain folks' initial hostility toward religion and the fact that the conflict between traditional masculine values and religious values carried on well into the late nineteenth century. This evidence seems to point out that these two value systems were incompatible and that merging the two would be difficult. See Crowther, "Holy Honor: Sacred and Secular in the Old South," *Journal of Southern History*, LVIII (1992), 619-636.

had numerous and complex effects. Historians have frequently noted that evangelical religion created an image of the pious and pure woman, but what impact did evangelical religion have on the prevailing notions of manhood?

Rather than the law or the planter's economic and cultural hegemony, evangelical religion posed the most serious threat to a unified idea of manliness among the plain folks. On one level, the spread of evangelical norms throughout the South challenged prevailing notions of white Southern masculinity. Evangelical religion created a competing ideal of manhood, one that emphasized self-control and non-violence and rejected the aggressiveness and pugnacity of traditional masculinity. In terms of ideals and values, evangelical and traditional backcountry masculinity were polar opposites. It was this wide cultural chasm that eventually led to violent conflicts between the proponents of evangelical manhood and the hard-drinking devotees of rough-and-tumble masculinity in the early nineteenth century.

On another level, however, evangelicals' attempt to reform backcountry manners in accordance with the ideal of evangelical masculinity strengthened existing backcountry notions of manhood. Evangelicals' constant attacks on backcountry men's propensity to drink and fight encouraged many a man to defend his practices. And common whites' defense of traditional masculinity was plain enough. "Ruffians," as ministers labeled them, came to camp meetings, drank heavily, and disrupted services. They entered churches in the course of a sermon and openly threatened ministers and members of the congregation. On some occasions, they even attempted to preempt camp meetings by threatening incoming itinerants with "horsewhippings" and "beatings."

The behavior of many preachers, the supposed exemplars of evangelical manhood, also often undercut the evangelical movement. Though some preachers practiced doctrinaire Christianity and literally turned the other cheek in the face of violent attacks, others betrayed the ideal of evangelical manhood by dealing with ruffians in the typical backcountry manner.

Many of these preachers, who had backcountry roots and were often schooled in the ways of rough-and-tumble manhood before their conversions, did not back down from a challenge to fight, and on some occasions even led their congregations in pitched battles with the men who disrupted their revivals. It seems that the actions of the men of religion, then, had a complex effect on masculinity in the backcountry. The diverse reactions of preachers to threats of violence allowed these two masculinities to endure in a tension-filled coexistence. The men of God attempted to reform plain folk men in accordance with their own notions of manhood, while backcountry men fought, figuratively and literally, evangelicals' efforts at every juncture. Although evangelical religion offered a new manliness (evangelical manhood), its imperfect and haphazard application by its supporters eventually confused the idea of a monolithic masculinity among the plain folks. After the Second Great Awakening, backcountry men had distinct versions of masculinity to consider, two dissimilar value systems that remained in contention until well after the Civil War.³

A full consideration of this conflict between evangelical and backcountry masculinities requires a careful examination of the religious milieu in which this conflict developed. Friction between evangelical and traditional backcountry norms did not originate with the Second Great Awakening, but had roots in the First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s. At this time, evangelicals broke away from the Anglican hierarchy, a church that had tolerated the violent habits of plain-folk and gentry, and founded churches that adhered to new doctrines and stricter ethical codes, which influenced a new standard of manliness.

³In contrast to the this point of view E. Anthony Rotundo argues to for the existence of singular "American manhood." See Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993). On masculinity in the post-Civil War era see, Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

The advance of evangelical religion, aside from the enormous impact it had throughout Southern society, presaged many of the conflicts that would emerge between traditional masculinity and the new ethic put forth by the proponents of evangelical Christianity in the nineteenth century. Religion had a significant impact on the values and manners of men in the South, especially among the small farmers. In the Virginia Piedmont the influence of the Separate Baptists engendered a mood of Christian fellowship and order among men who once participated in eye-gougings and horse races. Baptist churches encouraged men to reject the honor-bound, violence-driven values of old in favor of a self-controlled evangelical manhood. To ensure adherence to the new ethic, male members of these churches subjected themselves to both the external control of church discipline and the internal regulation of conscience and the evangelical values. This move away from rough-and-tumble manhood, while especially strong in the Virginia Piedmont, surfaced throughout the South. In rural North Carolina, for example, one historian has argued that evangelicals aimed to "provide coherence in a disordered society and to revamp it along the laws of God. Not content with the order of men, they sought an order of God."⁴

The Great Awakening's attempt to reform the violent habits of men was significant, but throughout the South eye-gougings and nose-bitings continued to be a part of everyday life. This is not to say that people were ignorant of religion, but that without constant surveillance from fellow church members and the minister, people soon "backslid" into their old habits. On the eve of the American Revolution, the Anglican itinerant Charles Woodmason found that the manly ways of the backcountry survived the excitement of the Great Awakening. Woodmason warned his readers, "Only I would advise You when You do fight Not to act like Tygers and

⁴Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites*, 178, 169-202; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 161-177; Isaac, "Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists' Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765 to 1775," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., XXXI (1974), 345-368.

Bears as these Virginians do—Biting one anothers [sic] Lips and Noses off and *gouging* one another—that is, thrusting out one anothers Eyes."⁵ Woodmason attributed such behavior as gouging to backcountry settlers' ignorance of religion (most of the people who settled the backcountry were in fact of some Protestant denomination), but it was more likely that a lack of a regular minister and the disciplinary functions of a formal congregation contributed to the proliferation of violence. Most people, even in extremely isolated areas of the South, probably encountered a minister on occasion, but church membership figures, for example, illustrate how few people fell under the regular direction of a congregation. Even after evangelical denominations obtained converts with the Great Awakening, by 1790 only one in every ten Southerners was part of an established congregation.⁶

The lack of ministers, the scarcity of churches, and the weakness of existing congregations, needless to say, suppressed backcountry church membership below the national average. The paucity of churches should not suggest that the plain folks of the backcountry lacked a conception of Christian morality, but without a regular church body to discipline members, "sinful" activities (such as fighting and drinking) among the population would go unpunished. In contrast, the masculine culture that stressed violence and aggressiveness thrived in this environment. Without an active church community to punish church members and criticize non-church members for their violent acts, a male community that celebrated acts of violence against other men (in addition to acts of violence against Indians, women, children, and animals) flourished. This culture had such strength in the backcountry that it pushed one

⁵Charles Woodmason, *The Carolina Backcountry of the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*, Richard J. Hooker, ed., (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 158; Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch,'" 18.

⁶Anne C. Lovelace, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 32.

observer, Charles William Janson, to describe "the lower class in this gouging, biting, kicking country," as "the most abject that perhaps ever populated a Christian land."⁷

On the eve of the Second Great Awakening, the backcountry South mirrored the world that Charles Woodmason described some forty years previous. A committed man of religion, one "J.T.," expressed the dismay of many Southern evangelicals about the state of religion in Kentucky. "The dead role of religion is truly discouraging here, as well as elsewhere. It appears a wonder of mercy, that God is so kind to this *Sordis*, as to afford her the means of Grace, without this she would certainly run into total infidelity."⁸ In eastern Tennessee, religion was in a similar dead state in the 1790s. Itinerant preachers attacked the frontier sins of gambling, fighting, and drinking without effect. Others encountered hostile congregations that often came to the infrequent Sunday services in an alcoholic stupor, more intent on making a mockery of the sermon than gaining religious instruction. The men and women who had moved from the coastal settlements to the backcountry areas obviously had some encounter with Christianity, but what accounted for their seemingly irreligious behavior?⁹

The lack of an institutional basis for religion in many parts of the South disturbed itinerants as they visited the backcountry, but it also fueled the fires of reform within them. Itinerants focused on the Southern backcountry, and it was here that the religious excitement of the nineteenth century began. The leading component in the outburst of religion was the large, outdoor, multi-day revivals that featured preachers of various evangelical denominations: the

⁷Charles William Janson, *The Stranger in America: Containing Observations Made During a Long Residence in that Country, on the Genius, Manners, and Customs of the People of the United States*. . . (London: Albion Press, 1807), 304.

⁸The testimony of "J.T." appears in Richard McNemar, *The Kentucky Revival; or, a Short History of the Late Extraordinary Out-pouring of the Spirit of God, in the Western States of America* (Albany: E. and E. Husford, 1808), 14.

⁹David E. Harrell, Jr., "Tennessee," in Samuel S. Hill, ed., *Religion in the Southern States: A Historical Study*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1983), 289-312.

camp meeting. The camp meeting, a European tradition carried to America by immigrants, proved particularly helpful on the frontier because it allowed people without a local church or settled minister to come together at a central location where they could hear preachers and enter into fellowship. The Presbyterian minister James McGready held the first of these dramatic religious events in the late 1790s. Throughout the next four decades of the nineteenth century, camp meetings persisted as the predominant form of frontier religious expression.¹⁰

The 1801 revival at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, a pivotal revival in the spread of the Second Great Awakening, was the model Southern camp meeting. Cane Ridge was far from typical, for its size and number of conversions exceeded the results of subsequent revivals, but it illustrates the profound impact of revival culture on backcountry life. The revival drew about 25,000 people from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio, lasted for six days without intermission, united the South's three dominant denominations (Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists), and produced innumerable conversions. In terms of the course of Southern religious development, Cane Ridge had even greater importance. The mass conversions of the event spawned an expansion of religious activity throughout the South. Camp revivals were so popular in the South that Methodist Bishop Francis Asbury estimated that approximately four hundred camp

¹⁰Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Charles A. Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting: Religion's Harvest Time* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1955), *passim*; John B. Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 36-70; Boles, "Revivalism, Renewal, and Social Mediation in the Old South," in Edith L. Blumhoffer and Randall Balmer, eds., *Modern Christian Revivals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 60-83; Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp Meeting Religion, 1800-1845* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1974), 36-95; Bruce, "Religion, Society, and Culture in the Old South: A Comparative View," *American Quarterly*, 26 (1974), 399-416; Charles Reagan Wilson, "The Southern Religious Culture: Distinctiveness and Social Change," *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 38 (1993) 357-367; William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978); David Edwin Harrell, Jr., "The Evolution of Plain-Folk Religion in the South, 1835-1920," in Samuel S. Hill, ed., *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 24-51; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 51-52; Lovelace, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order*, 68, 72-77.

meetings occurred within ten years of Cane Ridge. The impact of Cane Ridge, and revivals in general, was that it brought many plain folks into contact with religion and pushed them to condemn zealously the "sin" that continued in the backcountry.¹¹

The camp meeting had an outwardly religious function, but it also served as the premier social event in the Southern backcountry. An excursion to a distant camp meeting allowed an escape from the doldrums of farm work. Adolescents put on their proverbial "Sunday best," hoping to find a mate along with God. Camp meetings were also a time to sing and pray with the friends and family that one only occasionally saw on the isolated backwoods frontier. Camp meetings, on the other hand, were also renowned as places of blatantly irreligious and unchristian behavior. Just as fire-and-brimstone preaching and dramatic conversion experiences were part and parcel of a revival, liquor and prostitutes were also common fare at camp meetings. Many people apparently came to the camp ground in search of physical gratification, not godly sanctification. In terms of gender norms, camp meetings also provided an arena for men to act out the traditions and rituals of backwoods masculinity. At a camp revival a man could find a good supply of whiskey or rum, go on a hunt, and engage in a brawl with another man. An observer of Southern revivals explained that the presence of this "ruffian" element often disrupted the camp meeting.

Many of these young, and even middle-aged persons never came on the camp ground, unless it was to interrupt the quiet of the meeting. While they were about these wagons, they learn to run, jump, wrestle, play, yell, swear, talk vulgar, and in some instances, there is more mischief done to the morals of

¹¹ Asbury's figure appear in Bruce, *And They All Sang Hallelujah*, 52; Paul K. Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 64-163; Conkin, *The Uneasy Center: Reformed Christianity in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 124-129; Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting*, 62-66; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 48-52; Boles, *The Great Revival*, 63-68; Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 16-30; Lovelace, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order*, 68-69.

the youth of the land about these wagons, than there is religious good effected on the camp ground.¹²

Like many other evangelicals, this man argued that the social functions of the revival, especially the presence of drinking and fighting, subtracted from the religious purposes of the event.¹³

The revival of religion in the South, more specifically, had a significant impact on Southern gender roles, especially for men. Evangelical culture attacked as sinful many of the pastimes of both upper-class gentlemen and plain-folk roughnecks. Not only did evangelicals assail the masculine customs of the backcountry, they offered an evangelical version of manhood that rejected the violent ways of contemporary Southern society and stood apart from the status quo. Whereas pleasure-seeking formed a central part of plain-folk masculinity, evangelical men sought to avoid distracting entertainments that could divert their attention from God and challenge their moral standards. In the backcountry, a man was expected to drink hard and fight at the drop of a hat. Evangelicals sought to change this image of men, demanding that the converted man avoid clouding his faculties with alcohol and exercise self-control. Finally, evangelicals expected the reborn man to observe what Donald Mathews has labeled his "religious duty," which essentially entailed responsible Christian behavior. Unlike the backwoodsman who celebrated his independence, the responsible Christian recognized his subjection to God and his obligation to live an austere life on Earth.¹⁴

Evangelical religion and its differing standard of manliness possibly appealed to those plain folk men who rejected the hard drinking and fighting that traditional plain folk manliness glorified. Age, for one, may have played an important role in a man's decision to join an

¹²Quote appears in Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting*, 225.

¹³Johnson, *Frontier Camp Meeting*, 208-228; Bruce, *And They All Sang Hallelujah*, 54-55.

¹⁴Donald Mathews has explored the evangelical conception of manhood in his *Religion in the Old South*, 120-124.

evangelical denomination. Although no data exists on the ages of those converted by itinerant ministers at camp revivals, it seems plausible that for many older men, forging one's masculinity in a fight was no longer physically possible. The rough-and-tumble was obviously the sport of the strong and virile, not the weak, aged, and infirm; evangelical religion offered the older and physically weak a manliness based on discipline and commitment to God, not on physical characteristics. The religious atmosphere engendered by the Second Great Awakening spread the evangelical ideal of masculinity wherever frontier preachers journeyed. The transition from the ways of traditional masculinity to those of the evangelical ideal required a significant shift in values for backcountry men. Four examples illustrate both the dramatic differences between evangelical and traditional masculinities and how men reacted to the emergence of the new ideal of manhood. The reactions of backcountry folk ranged from open acceptance of religion and formal renunciation of their violent ways to outward hostility to the new ideal and its champions.

After hearing an itinerant speak at a meeting house or revival, many rough-and-tumble men renounced their "sinful" habits and vowed to conform their lives to the dictates of God's word. Frontier itinerant Jacob Young, on his mission through the backcountry settlements of Kentucky, recounted the conversion of a "rough man." During a sermon at a shabby meetinghouse in the woods, Young remembered the entrance of "a very large man." As a man who had been raised in the backwoods, Young recognized the man as one of the "rough men on the frontier of Kentucky" whom he himself had interacted with in his youth. At first, Young sensed hostility in the man, for he did not look for a seat "but stood erect, gazing on the speaker." But the man had no intentions of disrupting the service or attacking the preacher; instead, as Young claims, the man came to seek out the word of God. "Before I was half through [the sermon] I saw tears roll down his rough cheeks. . . . No doubt they [Young was referring to the man and his criminal-minded brother-in-law] had been together in many a

bloody affray. On my next round [four weeks later] he joined the Church, and soon after became a Christian."¹⁵

Jacob Young's experience with the conversion of a "rough man" was far from unique, for many frontier itinerants witnessed similar conversions of rough-hewn backcountry men. Itinerant minister Alfred Brunson recorded the conversion of "a noted infidel, by the name of Parker" who was renowned through the village for his "wickedness and mockery of religion." After Parker experienced Brunson's riveting Sunday morning sermon, "an arrow from the Almighty's quiver reached his [Parker's] heart." Typical to the conversions of many "rough-and-tumblers," this backcountry man resisted the evangelical impulse and "fled like a stricken deer." Parker could not resist, however. He eventually gave in and renounced his former ways, becoming a model evangelical man.¹⁶

Jacob Young's (and for that matter any itinerant's) description of the entrance of the "rough man" into the Christian fold clearly juxtaposes the images of the evangelical man against the rough, backwoods variety. The man's past involvement in "many bloody affray" is contrasted with his joining the church. The conversion of this particular fighting man required not only a new-found appreciation of the sacred, but a transformation of masculine ideals. Young implicitly suggests in this description that to become a church member, one must renounce the "manly" ways common to plain folk culture. It must be remembered, yet, that Young's narrative of the man's conversion was designed to be instructive, not objective. Young's moralizing account is more of a morality play than a factual relation of one man's

¹⁵Jacob Young, *Autobiography of Pioneer; or, The Nativity, Experience, Travels, and Ministerial Labors of Rev. Jacob Young with Incidents, Observations, and Reflections*, (Cincinnati: Poe and Hitchcock, 1860), 95-96.

¹⁶Alfred Brunson, *A Western Pioneer; or, Incidents of the Life and Times of Rev. Alfred Brunson*. . . (Cincinnati: Walden and Stowe, 1880), 247-248. For similar conversion experiences see, David Purviance, *The Biography of Elder David Purviance*. . . *Written By Himself*. . . (Dayton, [Ohio?], 1848; reprint, [Kimberlin Heights, Tennessee: [n.p.], 1940), 204; Jeremiah Jeter Bell, *The Recollections of a Long Life* (Richmond: The Religious Herald, Co., 1891), 155-56.

conversion, in which the Christian man that attempts to live by God's dictates is contrasted with the lowly fighting man. Even with Young's moral and cultural biases considered, his account provides a valuable perspective on plain folk notions of manhood and the conflicts between evangelicals and rough-and-tumblers. These tales of backcountry conversions, while based on factual events, also served as propaganda for evangelicals' effort to Christianize the American frontier. As a part of this Christianization effort, evangelicals sought to impose a different standard of manhood, one more in tune with doctrines and aims of evangelical Christianity.

Similar images and juxtapositions figure in the conversion experience of Peter Cartwright, a man once firmly enmeshed in the manly habits of common whites, but who found God and eventually became an itinerant minister. Being somewhat more educated than his backcountry contemporaries, Cartwright was far from typical; but, he did take part in the rough-and-tumble culture at one time and his life and writings illustrate the dramatic changes in manly values as one became "reborn." After realizing that he was a sinful human being and that the ways of drinking, gambling, and fighting were far from virtuous callings, Peter Cartwright repudiated backcountry masculinity. In a gesture symbolic of the transition in masculine values that accompanied the conversion experience, Cartwright claimed, "I went and brought my pack of cards, and gave them to mother who threw them into the fire, and they were consumed, I fasted, watched, and prayed, and engaged in regular reading of the Testament." Cartwright's experience suggests that to fully become an evangelical man, all the vestiges of the violent manhood must be erased. The burning of the pack of cards, a symbol of backcountry masculinity as much as a jug of whiskey or a gouged eye, became representative of Cartwright's rebirth.¹⁷

¹⁷Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, The Backwoods Preacher*, W.P. Strickland, ed., (Cincinnati: Graham and Jennings and Graham, [1856]), 34-35, for Cartwright's youth see, chapters, 1-5; For another perspective see, John Bayley, *Confessions of a Converted Infidel; with Lights and Shades of Itinerant Life, and Miscellaneous Sketches* (New York: M.W. Dodd, 1856).

The transformation to the evangelical way from the rough-and-tumble ways obviously caused some degree of psychological tension for people like Cartwright and Jacob Young's "rough man." But in other cases the shift was characterized by a violent clash between evangelicalism and rough-and-tumble life. A remarkable insight into the mental transition from rough-and-tumble culture to the ideal manhood of evangelical Protestantism is seen in the conversion experience of James Finley, a man raised in the backwoods and converted at Cane Ridge in 1801. Although Finley too was far from typical, his upbringing and his pre-conversion habits made him a part of the violence-based manhood of many plain folks.

In his earliest days in the woods of Kentucky, Finley lived the backcountry "manly" life. He remembered his younger days: "Occasionally I would take a spree; would swear when angry, and fight when insulted, at the drop of a hat. Backwoods boys were brought up to the trade of 'Knock down and drag out'." As Finley matured, he expressed only a minor interest in religion, and his interest was not significant enough to mitigate his drinking and fighting habits. In 1801, Finley and a group of friends made the trip to Cane Ridge to find hard drink and maybe a good brawl, but not religion. Finley expressed his own intentions of avoiding conversion at Cane Ridge: "Now, if I fall it must be by physical power and not by singing and praying; as I prided myself upon my manhood and courage, I had no fear of being overcome by any nervous excitability, or being frightened into religion." As Finley and his group entered the camp ground and the fiery preaching began to work its influence on Finley, he resolved to resist the apparent workings of the spirit. To prevent giving into conversion, he turned to his masculinity. He claimed, "I became so weak and powerless that I found it necessary to sit down. Soon after I left and went into the woods, and there I strove to rally and man up my

courage." Not only did Finley seek to "man up" his courage, but he also turned to the one of the rough-and-tumbler's favorite drinks, brandy, to prevent being consumed with enthusiasm.¹⁸

Throughout the entire ordeal, Finley's value system tied qualities such as "strength," "vigor," and "manhood" with resistance to evangelical religion. In the world view of many backcountry men, yielding to conversion was the ultimate betrayal of one's masculinity, and Finley's experience suggests that conversion was just as "unmanly" as a gouged eye. Both of these things, the conversion experience and the gouged eye, signified a man's renunciation of backcountry masculine values or an open avowal of his ineptitude in the "manly" customs. Finley expressed his fear of being considered "unmanly" when he ran from the camp ground and turned to brandy to avoid the "shakes." Before he finally gave into conversion, Finley's final barrier remained his masculinity: "Notwithstanding all this, my heart was so proud and hard that I would not have fallen to the ground for the whole state of Kentucky. I felt that such an event would have been an everlasting disgrace, and put a final quietus of my boasted manhood and courage."¹⁹

Resisting the conversion experience by falling back on the traditional manly ways of the backcountry was a recourse that other men turned to during the height of Southern revivalism. At a revival in Kentucky soon after Cane Ridge, Peter Cartwright and other revivalists encountered a party of "drunken rowdies who came to disrupt the meeting." During the course of the sermon the emotional preaching affected one of the "rowdies." Cartwright remarked, "This large man cursed the jerks, and all religion. Shortly afterward he took the jerks, and he started to run, but he jerked so powerfully that he could not get away." The man's reaction points to the fact that many resisted conversion because, among other things,

¹⁸James B. Finley, *The Autobiography of James B. Finley; or, Pioneer Life in the West*, W.P. Strickland, ed., (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1856), 164-167.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 168.

they realized that it was in conflict with their rough-and-tumbling habits. In his battle with the "jerks," the man, in predictable fashion, turned to the bottle: "Although he was violently agitated [with the jerks], he took out his bottle of whiskey, and swore he would drink the damned jerks to death." Again, we see that many men resisted the evangelical wave and that they used their "manly" customs and rituals as tools of resistance. The reasons why they fought being "reborn" is unknown, but it is evident that the fighting culture of the backcountry developed into an effective weapon against evangelicalism.²⁰

Ministers sought to inculcate the values of evangelical manhood through both the camp revival and the local meetinghouse. Once men entered the evangelical fold, the church did not relent in its effort to impress the virtues of evangelical manhood on male church members. Church disciplinary procedures proved effective at preventing male church members from "backsliding" into their old habits. The congregation monitored the behavior of its members, rebuking and even excommunicating guilty persons for their transgressions of God's laws. The violent and drunken acts of the plain-folk were the frequent targets of the church's wrath. This constant reinforcement from the congregation eventually pushed many Christian men to comprehend that self-control was the way of God, while fighting and hard drinking were sinful acts.²¹

The formation of temperance societies in the backcountry South proved to be another method by which evangelicals endeavored to reform these rough men. Temperance societies contended that if society wished to reform the sinful behavior of men, restricting their access to liquor was a suitable starting point. As many evangelicals were eager to point out, many eye-gougings and nose-bitings occurred after the whiskey or rum started to flow. Although the

²⁰Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, 50-51.

²¹Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites*, 178-202; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 40-46.

actual number of backcountry temperance societies is unknown, the presence of these institutions acted as another bulwark of evangelical manhood. Among their many targets, temperance advocates attacked the heart of backcountry manhood: the tavern. Taverns and bars not only furnished men with their "firewater," but they also provided a place to conduct manly activities such as fighting, card playing, and horse trading. To the man who adhered to the fighting ways of the backcountry, the temperance society, like the church disciplinary council, most likely represented another attack on many common whites' way of life.²²

Not only was the temperance movement in the abstract an affront to rough-and-tumble masculinity, but those who joined these temperance movements also symbolically challenged the standing-order masculinity in the backcountry. Temperance societies, while endeavoring to form a moral social order, were also vehicles for female assertiveness and middle-class respectability, two forces at odds with male culture in the backcountry. This confluence between newly emerging class and gender norms probably proved further irritating to fighting males. Beyond temperance advocates' attack on male culture, membership in a temperance society was symbolic of a new evangelical order that provided new roles for women, roles they did not have in backcountry settlements, and different and more polite notions of respectability that were foreign to the backcountry. Temperance was a confluence for new ideals of gender and class in America.

With the exception of those involved in the temperance movement, most unconverted folk fell outside of the church's formal efforts at moral reform. This did not, however, hinder many religious men from taking up the cause of moral reformation. Striving to mend the ways of the sinful residents of the backcountry, preachers traveled to the frontier, initiated camp

²²Lovelace, *Southern Evangelical and the Social Order*, 130-158; Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites*, 196-202; On alcohol consumption in the South see, W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

meetings, and preached in open-air and inside shabby meetinghouses and private homes. Despite their good intentions, ministers did not always receive a warm welcome as they came to reform the countryside. Interaction between the hard-headed, and often drunk, backcountry ruffians and the equally stubborn men of God proved to be a volatile mix. As many conversion experiences have illustrated, the values of backcountry masculinity and the evangelical ideal of manhood were polar opposites. The friction between these two, competing ideals of manhood did not exist merely in the realm of abstractions, but surfaced in real, hand-to-hand confrontations in meetinghouses and on camp grounds throughout the backcountry. On these occasions, the "roughnecks" and "ruffians" of the backcountry disrupted sermons and services, challenged ministers to fight, and often ran ministers out of town, threatening them with severe punishment if they returned.

When ministers faced ruffians intent on disrupting their "holy" mission, their reactions to these challenges illustrate how on one level, evangelical masculinity and traditional backcountry masculinity were opposites. But on another level, this gap between the evangelical vision of manhood and the reality of its practice actually helped to sustain traditional backcountry practices. As itinerants and their converted flocks continued to attack the customs of rough-and-tumble culture, backcountry men hardened in their defense of their masculine ideals. These same men of God also minimized the distance between evangelical and backcountry masculinities and reinforced the importance of backcountry ways when they reacted violently to the "ruffians" who disrupted their religious services. Instead of destroying backcountry masculinity, ministers' actions frustrated the notion of one masculinity in the backcountry and allowed for these two very different ideals to coexist.

Bishop Francis Asbury's journey through Kentucky in the early nineteenth century shows both the violent resistance that many missionaries faced and their self-controlled responses to local opposition. On the trail through Crab Orchard, "we found company enough;

some of whom were very wild. . . Some of them gave us very abusive language; and one went upon a hill above us, and fired a pistol towards our company." In contrast to the "wild" behavior of this backcountry man, Asbury and his troop moved onward with Christian dignity, vowing only "to travel in our order; and bound ourselves by honour and conscience to support and defend each other."²³ Even in the face of this challenge from the backwoodsmen, Asbury and his followers held true to the ethic of self-control.

The evangelicals who ventured into the backcountry to spread religion not only endured violence on the journey, but also when they spoke from the pulpits of frontier churches and the platforms at camp revivals. Maxwell Pierson Gaddis's experiences in the Kentucky backcountry in the 1830s illustrate that widespread mockery also came with the great number of conversions. The feverish religious atmosphere encouraged many of the backcountry's "rough men" to openly poke fun at revival culture. Gaddis relayed one of these incidents in his biography:

It was not long till I became the 'song of the drunkard.' About nine o' clock some young men of the 'baser sort,' assembled under the shade of a locust-tree to make sport of the religion of Christ. They sang songs and exhorted, laughed, and responded 'Amen,' 'Lord grant it,' etc. They wound up their profane exercises by holding a mock class meeting, in which they related their experience with the same tone of voice and peculiar manner of some of my old acquaintances at M. One of them would occasionally shout and clap his hand, and the others would audibly respond 'AMEN!'²⁴

Faced with these challenges, many backcountry itinerants chose to resist lowering themselves (they would have seen it as that) to the level of the rowdy backwoodsman. Frontier preachers pursued the path of stern, yet non-violent, defiance in the face of a drunken man's belligerent

²³Francis Asbury, "Kentucky, 1790-1815: As Seen by Bishop Francis Asbury," Walter B. Posey, ed., *Filson Club Historical Quarterly*, 31 (1957), 335, 333-348.

²⁴Maxwell Pierson Gaddis, *Foot-Prints of An Itinerant* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1855), 93-94.

and antagonistic behavior. When the Reverend John Young encountered a "half drunk" and "very lusty fighting man" who came to "beat" him, Young did not resort to violence in response to the man's behavior, but "reproved him very sharply. . . [and] the said man opened not his mouth."²⁵

These exemplars of evangelical manhood revealed a similar restraint when challenged in front of the congregation in the course of the sermon. "Preaching at a private house," Jacob Young received a challenge from some local men who did not hold religion in the highest regard. "Two of these ruffians entered just after I had read my text," and "one of them pressed through, pushing men and women till he came near enough to lay his hand upon me." Young's congregation, knowledgeable of the ways of backcountry men, "expected to see a fight, or to see him best me."²⁶ The man was eventually dissuaded from engaging in a brawl with Young in the meetinghouse. At a camp meeting in 1815, Young again encountered a group of "rowdies" committed to interrupting the revival. Instead of engaging them on their own terms, Young displayed the importance of the self-control of an evangelical man. "When they would not obey orders, I would take hold of them and lead them out of the congregation." Not only did this instance show the importance of self-control in evangelical manhood, but it also

²⁵John Young, "The Autobiography of the Reverend John Young, 1747-1837," David L. Steele, ed., *Methodist History*, 13 (1974), 31, 17-40; On reactions to these challenges see also, Lorenzo Dow, *History of Cosmopolite; or the Writings of Lorenzo Dow, Containing His Experiences and Travels. . .* (Philadelphia: Jas. B. Smith and Co., 1859).

The colporteurs who distributed religious materials in the backcountry encountered similar resistance and violence. Violence against colporteurs was so frequent that the American Tract Society's Executive Committee warned its members against engaging these "hoary-headed sinners." The Executive Committee stated, "Intercourse with ignorant, bigoted, or sceptical persons, will often tax the patience, and test the character of the Colporteur." The report went on to say, "If God imparts the grace to bear opposition and ignorant cavils with meekness and forbearance, you may thus furnish a demonstration of the reality of the gospel. . . . Angry controversy convinces nobody, and honors not the gospel." *The American Tract Society Documents, 1824-1925* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 66, 68. On the violence that many colporteurs faced, see David Paul Nord, "Religious Reading and Readers in Antebellum America," *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (1995), 241-271.

²⁶Young, *Autobiography of a Pioneer*, 123.

indicated how evangelical religion essentially created two ideal masculinities in the backcountry. Although he did not offer to participate in a rough-and-tumble, Young considered his actions manly. In the eyes of the disruptive "rowdies," on the other hand, Young was a coward and less than a man because he was unwilling to fight in the style of the backcountry.²⁷

Ministers also often used these violent encounters to instruct the congregation in the proper behavior of an evangelical man. After a local "rowdy" began to issue threats toward James Finley, a member of Finley's frontier congregation reciprocated by warning this "rowdy" that he would "whip [him] like a dog" if he continued to harass the minister. He went on to boast that the local Methodist church had "come to the conclusion, that inasmuch as you are constantly abusing Finley, that if you do so again they have given him the liberty to give a sound flogging." Finley, having overheard the man's claims, scolded him and stated that the council had given him no such "liberty." He went on to further rebuke this wayward sheep of his congregation because he considered fighting uncharacteristic of a Christian man.²⁸

In the eyes of the whiskey-swigging, backcountry brawlers, the behavior of men like James Finley and Jacob Young betrayed the code of manhood that governed the backwoods. Backing down from the challenge of a fight sullied one's honor, and was not, as evangelicals would argue, an exhibition of self-control. Before evangelical religion spread to the backcountry, a disinclination to participate in a rough-and-tumble or a failure to gouge an eye were the marks of someone who was less of a man. Evangelicals challenged the notion of a unified masculinity in the backcountry and the supremacy of the existing version of manhood. Although the brawlers would continue to view a man's preference not to fight as cowardice,

²⁷Ibid., 336.

²⁸Finley, *Autobiography of James B. Finley*, 187-188.

there was now a community of evangelicals in the backcountry that would praise a man for his self-control and Christian dignity and respect him for his rejection of violence.

If there were preachers and parishioners that adhered to the dictates of the evangelical ideal, other evangelicals did not live in accord with the idea of a Christian man and their behavior illustrated the immense gap that often existed between ideal and practice. For every minister like Jacob Young, James Finley, and Francis Asbury who would resist using violence when confronted by "ruffians," others such as Peter Cartwright and the members of many backcountry congregations dealt with "ruffians" in a wholly different manner. At a camp meeting revival in the backcountry attended by James Finley, some members resorted to violence when some "lewd fellows of the baser sort" came to break up their meeting. As one of these men "struck the preacher a violent blow on the face and knocked him down," a virtual melee broke. During the course of this near riot, one member, a "Brother Birkhammer," was anything but the paragon of evangelical manhood when he "seized their bully leader. . . and crushed him down between two benches."²⁹ The unrestrained violence of this incident suggests that evangelical manhood did not completely consume all those within the Christian fold; and evangelicals' use of violence to support the Christian cause actually reinforced the place of fighting in backcountry society.

Not only did the congregation turn to violence on occasion, but some ministers also chose not to exercise self-control when challenged by a "ruffian." After a near-brawl with a fighting man, Peter Cartwright dealt with the hypothetical question of "what would I have done if the fellow had gone with me to the woods[?]" Cartwright's answer to the question was a far cry from the ideal of the non-violent, self-controlled man. "This is hard to answer," he began, "for it was a part of my creed to love every body, but to fear no one; and I did not permit

²⁹Ibid., 252.

myself to believe any man could whip me till it was tried; and I did not permit myself to premeditate expedients in such cases."³⁰ Cartwright lived up to this claim and brawled intensely when a group of backcountry men attempted to disturb his camp meeting. Face to face with the leader of the mob of "ruffians," Cartwright, after dodging a few punches, "had not the power to resist temptation, and. . . struck a sudden blow in the burr of the ear and dropped him [the leader] to the earth." Justifying his actions to the congregation, Cartwright felt that "under the necessity of the circumstances we have done right."³¹

The behavior of men such as Brother Birkhammer and Peter Cartwright illustrate that many of the converted fell far short of the ideal of evangelical manhood. When faced with a violent situation, they failed to exercise self-control and elected to indulge themselves in an old-fashioned brawl. This blatantly unchristian conduct by the converted men of the backcountry can be seen in two, somewhat contradictory, lights. Instead of helping to achieve one of the evangelical crusade's goals, the curtailment of "manly" violence in the backcountry, these brawling evangelicals actually reinforced the existing norms of backcountry masculinity by not employing self-control in the face of a challenge. On the other hand, by essentially beating the violent backwoodsman at his own game, the rough-and-tumble, backcountry preachers, although refusing to adhere to the evangelical ideal, could possibly have gained the respect of the plain-folk by appealing to their ideals of masculinity. In the cases of Brother Birkhammer and Peter Cartwright, the former interpretation probably applies more readily than the latter. For these men, it appears that their own backcountry roots would not allow them to "lose face" by backing down from a "ruffian." This is not to say that these men did not believe in

³⁰Cartwright, *The Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, 130-132.

³¹Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, 91-92; This discussion of violence among the religious of backcountry has been influenced by Catherine L. Albanese, "Savage, Sinner, and Saved: Davy Crockett, Camp Meeting, and the Wild Frontier," *American Quarterly*, 33 (1981), 482-501.

evangelical manhood, but that their old ways died hard, and that these two contrasting ideals of masculinity probably coexisted in an uneasy tension in the minds of these men and many other backcountry Christians.³²

Evangelical religion confused the existing class-based relationship between violence and masculinity in the antebellum South by offering men a new masculine ideal irrespective of class. Ministers did take notice of class by implementing different preaching styles for different classes, but whether one was a plain-folk or a member of the gentry, the substance of the message was the same: violent behavior was not the way of God. These men learned that the ideal of evangelical manhood insisted that dueling and eye-gouging were sins, not sports, means of resolving disputes, or exhibitions of one's masculinity. No matter how clear the line between evangelical and backcountry masculinity, the actions of the recently converted blurred the theoretical dichotomy between the two. The fighting parsons who led backcountry revivals, instead of destroying men's violent ways, reinforced them by attacking disruptive "ruffians." Despite evangelicals' attempt to create a new social order, the old ways of violence and hard-drinking continued on into the 1890s. After the Second Great Awakening, then, the idea of a monolithic "Southern manhood" or "backcountry manhood" was nothing more than a chimera. Through their imperfect application of the ideal of evangelical manhood, evangelicals created "manhoods" and "masculinities" throughout the South, not a new paradigm.³³

The complex relationship between violence, masculinity, and religion, while interesting in and of itself, also has an impact on the ongoing debates concerning the consequences of evangelical religion in the South. Historians vehemently disagree, for example, about the

³²Albanese, "Savage, Sinner, and Saved," 482-501.

³³On the conflict between manly and religious values in the postbellum South see, Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

connection between religion and the Southern social order. On one hand, Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have treated Southern religion in a functionalist light and portray it as a force that legitimated the standing order. By giving the slave regime a biblical basis, religion proved to be another agent that reinforced the hegemony of the planter class within the Southern social hierarchy. On the other side of the issue, some historians contend that while Southern evangelicals did capitulate to the ideology of the existing order, they sought to reform Southern society and attacked the behavior of the planter class on many occasions.³⁴

In relation to masculinity, religion was a force that challenged the status quo. Whether one was a plain-folk or a gentleman, evangelical religion was intolerant toward "manly" violence and the entire notion of masculinity it upheld. Moreover, considering that violence was a central part of Southern culture and a main instrument of social control throughout the South, it was a truly radical proposition for evangelicals to proclaim that violence was ungodly and sinful. This indictment of violence not only rankled a few overly sensitive planters and backwoodsmen, but it challenged a central element of the Southern social order. Some evangelicals did support the pro-slavery ideology of the Southern planter class, but evangelical religion on the whole offered a new social order for the converted: one based on love and fellowship, not violence and fear. Aside from its failures and shortcomings, evangelical religion significantly challenged the existing social order by offering a new conception of a "man," one that affected all Southern white men, from the dignified planter to the lowliest poor white.

³⁴This note does not encompass all the works that deal with religion and the Southern social order, for it would be far too large to fit into one note. For one view see, Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "The Divine Sanction of a Social Order: Religious Foundations of the Southern Slaveholders' World View," *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, LV (1987), 211-233; Ibid., "The Religious Ideals of Southern Slave Society," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, LXX (1986), 1-16; On the other side of issue see, Lovelace, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order*, 130-185; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 81-135; Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites*, 169-202.

CONCLUSION

This essay has suggested that the violence that was such a part of life in the southern backcountry was not merely an unpleasant side effect of alcohol abuse or a lower-class attempt to mock the more "dignified" violent rituals of their social superiors. Instead, I have argued that violence was one facet of the larger culture of the poor whites who settled the trans-Appalachian frontier after the American Revolution. Within this culture, violence was a crucial social ritual, one with important gender attachments and cultural meanings. Violence was one of the many tools that men used to distinguish themselves from women. In this process of self-identification, men crafted a masculine ethos that placed a high value on virtues such as strength, vigor, and stamina. Those who chose not to live up to this ideal of manliness endured the undesirable tag of "unmanly" or "effeminate."

The lines between men and women and manly and unmanly, however, were not as clear as they might seem. Southern manhood did not develop wholly within this one violent context. Class lines and the new value system associated with the Second Great Awakening in the South confused and blurred the seemingly clear gulf between the manly and the unmanly. The trappings of economic success, gentility, and refinement allowed an upper- (or middle-) class man to maintain his manly status (or honor) without gouging an eye or biting a cheek. The idea of a "Christian man" allowed a poor white man to secure his manliness by respecting God and exercising self-control, not resorting to violence.

The fact that black and white defined slavery and freedom in the Old South should not obscure the class lines that divided whites against one another. Among whites, the line drawn

between the gentry and the plain folk was in many instances just as clear as the divide between white and black. Violent social rituals, for example, were one of those instances in which the issue of class came into plain view. In the Old South, gentlemen duelled at a set number of paces and with a certain type of revolver—all according to the *code duello*. Plain folks were less punctilious. The common folk of the backcountry seemed to praise the spontaneity and anarchy of their rough-and-tumbles; in their world, violence lacked a rigid code or rules. These class differences often entered into confrontations between plain folk and gentry throughout the South. For these men did not face one another simply as white men; they did so as members of two different social classes, each with two opposing modes of combat.¹

The divisions between men and women, black and white, and gentry and plain folk all contributed to the particular place of violence in southern society; only religion squarely attempted to remove violence from its time-honored position. The expansion of evangelical religion immediately following the American Revolution produced a new ideal of manliness, one at odds with the duelling southern gentlemen and the backcountry brawler. Evangelical christianity cut across class divisions and redefined manhood in terms of self-control and dignity, not the strength and vigor honored by both gentry and plain folk. The evangelical man was encouraged to abstain from violent encounters; by resisting the temptation toward violence, the evangelical in fact reaffirmed his commitment to God and rejection of the sinful ways of the world.

The existence of a plain folk manliness quite different from those of the gentry and evangelicals points to the existence of a distinct plain folk culture in the antebellum South. While common whites' "whiteness" might have created a degree of kinship with the planter

¹This is not to say that all white Southern men can be placed in the categories of "gentry" and "plain folk." There are always some men, whether they be middling slaveholders or non-slaveholders who owned large tracts of land, that defy easy categorization.

class—as it did at the polls or in front of slaves and free blacks—the plain folks' use of particular types of violence and their differing standard of manliness were part of a process whereby plain folks established themselves—socially and culturally—between the planters and slaves. This is not, however, a new and bristling insight. Historians of the South's plain folk population have recently argued that plain folks self-consciously differentiated themselves from the planters above and the slaves below them.²

But too often, plain folk culture is treated in a vacuum, as if common whites lived in isolation from planters and slaves. The development of a plain folk culture and its subsequent transformations, instead, are directly related to the fact that plain folks frequently encountered slaves and planters—and sought to separate themselves culturally. Violence and subsistence farming might have provided plain folks with a sense of themselves, but they received constant cultural reinforcement from their interactions with slaves and planters. As we saw when a "low fellow" confronted the gentlemanly Mr. Fauchée, plain folks often contrasted their "manly" fights with the orderly duels of the gentlemen. To plain folk men, the rough-and-tumble was the true test of one's manhood—and Mr. Fauchée's "ignorance of boxing" likely reinforced this perception in their minds. The "cultivated" Fauchée served as the "other" by which plain folks defined their own standard of manhood.³

This conclusion about the distinctive and differential nature of plain folk culture also stems from the methodological insights that I have borrowed from cultural anthropologists and European cultural historians. Just as historians and anthropologists have uncovered social structures and the shape of cultures by examining events as diverse as Balinese cockfights and French cat massacres, I have aimed to do something similar by limiting my inquiry to plain folk

²For an important example see, Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites: Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1992).

³On the Fauchée incident see, Thomas Anburey, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America*, 2 vols. (1789, reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1923), 2:201-202.

violence.⁴ This approach, I hope, helps to remedy some of the shortcomings of studies that have been limited to specific geographic areas. Regional and local works often examine plain folk communities in exhaustive detail, but they treat these communities as if they were cut off from the "outside world." A local approach misses the crucial interactions that go on outside of the community—the plain folks' contact with planters and slaves. By limiting the focus to violence in the Southern backcountry, on the other hand, we can see plain folks as both a distinctive culture and part of a complex social hierarchy. Plain folks manufactured and transformed their culture through the process of "othering"—and slaves and planters, those above and below them in the social structure, served as the most crucial others. When "Little John" asserted his "manly" status after being blackfaced (an obvious racial affront) or Mr. Fauchée expressed his "ignorance of boxing," the distance between planter, plain folk, and slave cultures came into view. In a study based on a single geographic area, the planters and slaves who proved so crucial to the development of a plain folk culture are ignored, for they reside on the outside of the plain folk community.⁵

The numerous accounts of eye-gougings and "rough-and-tumbles" in the Southern backcountry obviously tell us much about the plain folks that settled there in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But, these travel accounts were far from impartial. The Northern and European travelers who wrote of the "savage" encounters in the "backwoods"—as they labeled them—did so with a belief in the superiority of their own societies. They frequently invoked a condescending and moralizing tone as they compared the "civilization" of the North with the less than civil nature of life in the backcountry. And for these diarists—especially those from the Northeast—"civilization" was synonymous with industrialization and

⁴Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight," in Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 412-453; Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984).

⁵Charles Fenno Hoffman, *A Winter in the West*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper Brothers, 1835), 2:222-223.

the development of a market economy. As one observer of life in the backcountry argued, plain folks gouged one another because they lacked "worthy commercial pursuits"—the market activities that were present in the North and in Europe.

While European and Northern travelers' interpretations are highly questionable, the very subjectivity of their accounts and their frequent contrast between the "savage" backcountry and "civilization" of the Northeast tells us as much about the mindset of Northerners undergoing a great transformation—the so-called market revolution—as it does about the plain folks themselves. These upper- and middle-class travelers were, in many ways, the embodiment of the emerging bourgeois mentality of the antebellum North. For them, the expansion of market capitalism also entailed a prominent shift in values: their middle-class world was one based on self-control, rationality, politeness, and the centrality of the market to economic life. The plain folk Southerners who occupied an important part of their travel diaries were symbolic of the values that Northerners had rejected or perhaps left behind.⁶

In contrasting the "civilization" of the Northeast with the "savagery" of the Southern backcountry, these upper and middle-class diarists overlooked the "savage" elements in their own societies: the urban artisan subcultures, the laborers on the North's canals, and the settlers in Northern backcountry areas. These travelers would most likely not contend that the North lacked its own "savage" population, but instead sought to project an image of the North as they wanted it to be—an emerging market capitalist, bourgeois civilization. For these upper- and middle-class Northerners to admit that their region had its own version of backcountry rough-and-tumblers—say, the Bowery B'hoys—could only damage their idealized view of the "North." Their "North" was an emerging bourgeois society that slowly became incompatible

⁶For an account of the "market revolution" see, Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York, 1991).

with both the subsistence farming of the plain folks and the slave-based agriculture of the Cotton South.

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