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CAVALIERS AND CRACKERS:  
LANDLESS WHITES IN THE MIND OF THE ELITE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Arch Dalrymple III Department of History  
The University of Mississippi

by  
Jeffrey Glossner

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## ABSTRACT

Due to their marginalized role in southern society, landless white southerners have often been overlooked by historians who study social class, politics and intellectual culture in the antebellum South. But depictions of landless white southerners were prominent in contemporary elite literature and their place was debated extensively by social commentators. These depictions marginalized landless whites from southern honor culture and marked them as a people who were not quite white in a social and biological sense. This characterization was both a cause and effect of elite southern unease with the presence of a class of poor landless whites. This unease manifested itself in the intellectual debate over slavery. Southern elites feared a political revolt as antislavery messages aimed at poor laboring southerners began to grow. Interaction between landless whites and slaves also magnified elite unease with the class. They were often seen as conduits for illicit actions by slaves, and most importantly as a common catalyst for insurrectionist plots. In the post-Nat Turner South, fear of slave rebellion dominated elite concerns over the future of slavery and hastened the development of proslavery ideology. Poor whites were a crucial part of concern over the protection of slavery, and proslavery ideology would often highlight the role the slave labor system could have in curing their ills, or in preventing the development of an antislavery class consciousness. These fears were a clear impetus in the development of antebellum proslavery ideology, which sought to illustrate the positive good that slavery promised to southern non-slaveholders. The inconsistencies between elite southern ideology, white supremacy, and the social realities that landless whites faced, intensified elite worries about the loyalty that these people had for the South and the institution of slavery, ultimately resulting in arguments that stressed secession as a way to separate southern landless whites from potential class and political allies in the antislavery North.

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## INTRODUCTION

In much of the South in the decades before the Civil War, the social culture of plantation slavery produced a society that relegated poor landless whites to the fringe of society. Landless whites stood outside of mainstream southern culture, partly a product of their economic condition, as well as their lack of property. These people had little aspiration to one day own slaves or become part of a culture modeled on aristocratic ideals of plantation slavery. Growing inequality in the antebellum South made ascension into slaveholder society, or even into the yeomen middle-class, a distant fantasy. Depictions of this class of people, in the growing print media culture of the antebellum south, reflected this marginalization. Increasingly, through the antebellum period, southerners cherished a chivalric honor culture created and propagated by elite southern slave owners. This culture, which sprang from the social relations of slavery, emphasized the importance of racialized chivalric paternalism, patriarchalism, social hierarchy and white supremacy. Most landless white southerners were either unable to or uninterested in living up to these standards. They were often unfavorably compared to enslaved black laborers and were characterized in ways that blurred the lines of nineteenth century conceptions of race and privilege.

Landless whites, as opposed to landowning yeomen or middle-class non-slaveholding professionals and artisans, often did not meet the standards of elite understandings of whiteness, which were also synonymous with their definition of southernness. Elite depictions and understandings of these people reflected an underlying unease elite slave owners felt about their

impoverished neighbors, who to them seemed incompatible, not only with elite aristocratic culture, but also with the political duties required of southern republican gentlemen. This unease brought the social role of landless whites to the forefront of elite thought. Elite southerners feared an unruly class who socialized with slaves, and who also served as a rhetorical tool to antislavery adversaries in the North. White supremacy served as their most effective tool in keeping non-slaveholders loyal to slavery, and these interactions and resistance to southern honor culture, signaled to slave owners that a common southern white identity may not have been inevitable. Tensions between the realities that landless southern whites experienced, and the ideals of white equality under the slave labor system, triggered a conscious response from elite southerners. They sought to justify their system to lower class white society. They did this partially by marginalizing landless whites in popular culture, and also explained that these men rebuked the mainstream ideals of southern honor culture, a product of their poor character and biological lineage. Cultural understandings and stereotypes turned to social and political fears, and these fears provided an impetus for secession and the creation of a systematic and radicalized proslavery ideology in the decades before the Civil War.

In the late-antebellum period, elite southern writers sought to shore up support for slavery and its culture. They made efforts to justify slavery to non-slaveholding men by emphasizing the economic and social privilege it afforded them, and appealed to them with the prospect of social mobility through slave owning. With the rise of an aristocratic mainstream southern honor culture in the decades before the Civil War, landless whites became increasingly alienated within southern society and, with the rise of antislavery arguments meant to appeal to laboring whites, slave owning elites became concerned with the possibility that landless whites could affect political change if they came view slavery as the cause of their marginal place in the southern

economy and social hierarchy. In their depictions of and engagement with landless whites, Southern intellectuals, in the decades before the Civil War, did not hide their unease with their presence. This was especially true when they vied with antislavery northerners to provide their respective interpretation of slave society. For antislavery writers the existence of landless whites helped to prove the degrading effects of slavery on white labor, prompting a response from their proslavery adversaries.

The importance of landless whites, a categorization often synonymous with those who contemporaries termed “poor whites,” to the politics and intellectual culture of the antebellum south is a subject that has received little sustained interest from historians. This is largely due to the focus of historians of the antebellum period on the coming of the Civil War. Poor non-slaveholding whites generally supported secession, so it is often presumed that there was little worry among elite southerners that they constituted a threat to their rule. Additionally, the historical record of the poor white in the antebellum South is wholly inadequate in illustrating the day to day social and cultural interaction of non-slaveholding whites and slaveholders. A look into the cultural perceptions of elite southerners, and those whose writing they influenced, evidences a widespread fear of landless whites and their potential cultural, racial and political impact on the future of the slave south. This manifested itself in the stereotyping of landless whites, fear of interracial interaction and in the radicalization of proslavery arguments which began to target the laboring class in ways it never had before. Despite evidentiary shortfalls, it is clear that the presence of a large population of landless whites in southern slave society was unsettling to those who justified their dominance on the ideals of racial superiority and the equality of all white men. This prompted a reflexively defensive response from elite slaveowners and their literary henchman. Elite southerners propagated a stereotyped image of landless whites



because they felt uneasy with their very presence. Political fear as well as fear of biracial crime and insurrection hastened proslavery radicalization in the face of antislavery appeals, as cultural and class conflict manifested itself in the mind of elite southerners.

In the immediate decades before secession, engagement with landless white southerners constituted a significant impetus to argue for the ability of slavery to lift all whites economically. By 1860 virtually all southern white men could vote, regardless of their economic lot, and with the fear of landless whites turning towards antislavery politics, motivation was given to separate potentially disloyal southerners from a federal union which could one day challenge slavery. Similar to how historians have sought to integrate class conflict between slaves and their masters into an interpretation of the coming of the Civil War, it is clear that a reintegration of consideration of class, both in an economic and cultural sense, between poor landless whites and their aristocratic slave owning rulers, is important to understanding the social and cultural mindset that led to secession.<sup>1</sup>

While the mass of southern landless whites may have been marginalized culturally and socially from the mainstream of southern society, they did constitute a large portion of its white population. Non-slaveholders in general made up the vast majority of white society. In 1840 four million southerners were classified black and eight million white. Of those eight million less than fifty thousand were large slaveholders, and more than seventy-five percent were non-slaveholders.<sup>2</sup> Discovering how many of these non-slaveholders were landless or “poor whites” is nearly impossible. Bill Cecil-Fronsman in his study of southern non-slaveholders estimated

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<sup>1</sup> See John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic, vol. 1 & 2*, and William Freehling, *The Road to Disunion vol. 1: Secessionists at Bay* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 52.

that twenty to twenty-five percent of southern whites were “true” poor whites, putting the number well over one million.<sup>3</sup> Landless whites were a significant portion of the white population of the South, and in certain sections of the cotton south they constituted a majority of whites.<sup>4</sup> In 1842, North Carolina planter Ebenezer Pettigrew estimated that half of the white people in his county were “without money, without credit, and the most of them without property.”<sup>5</sup> While not an accurate measurement, Pettigrew’s comments indicate that poverty was much more widespread than many have thought. One contemporary estimated that only 32 percent of white southerners had any interest in slavery and South Carolina’s William Gregg claimed that “nearly one half... are substantially idle and unproductive.”<sup>6</sup> If anything, it seems that elite southerners actually overestimated the number of poor whites in southern society. This perception was a symptom of slave owners’ anxieties about southern poor whites, making them excessively worried about the potential that this group had in affecting the society they supposedly ruled.

Most landless white southerners worked as general laborers and as farm tenants who worked plots of land that they did not own. While the diversity and amount of work available to landless whites varied by region, those not employed as tenant farmers worked largely as a supplemental labor force, doing odd jobs for planters and business owners, and often working alongside free and enslaved blacks. For the most part landless white laborers served as a

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites: Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 86, 90,

<sup>5</sup> Ebenezer Pettigrew quoted in Guion Griffis Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 69.

<sup>6</sup> George M. Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South* (Washington, D.C.: Buell & Blanchard, 1856), 1-3, William Gregg quoted on 2.

temporary and expendable labor force. The use of free labor rose in the South in the late-antebellum period, and increasingly landless whites, whom filled a diverse amount of menial roles, were used to stitch together the needs of the expanding slave economy.<sup>7</sup> Some historians have seen this “hodgepodge” of professions as a barrier for the development of a class consciousness. The experience of laboring poor whites could vary greatly, with diverse professions, jobs, and social relations, and were divided along an urban and rural divide.<sup>8</sup> Though these people always stood at the bottom of the economic ladder regardless of their specific job or location. They were a particularly mobile people who either stood outside society all together, squatting or living as subsistent tenant farmers, or were used as an adaptable labor force.

Herrenvolk democracy has defined historians’ view of the role of southern poor whites in the coming of the Civil War. This argument posited that poor whites were pawns of the racial hegemony of the slaveowning class. Historians such as Ulrich Bonnell Phillips and George Fredrickson argued that universally racist poor whites were persuaded into supporting slavery in order to preserve the superior racial status it created for them.<sup>9</sup> Eugene Genovese argued that this racial hegemony convinced non-slaveowners to adopt the social ethos of the planter aristocracy. Genovese claimed this was possible because southern non-slaveowners ultimately aspired to one

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<sup>7</sup> Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 39-41; Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South*, 84, 97; Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 71.

<sup>8</sup> See Stephen V. Ash, “Poor Whites in the Occupied South, 1861-1865,” *The Journal of Southern History* 57 no. 1 (1991), 41-42.

<sup>9</sup> Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929), 339-53; George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 58-96.

day own slaves.<sup>10</sup> Landless whites were less compelled by this argument than yeomen farmers. Often landless whites did not aspire to be slave owners.<sup>11</sup> They were the most mobile segment of society, rarely remaining in one area for enough time to develop the wealth to buy a slave, and often did not have access to the fertile lands that planters and middle-class yeomen did.<sup>12</sup> Because poor whites supported herrenvolk democracy, historians have assumed they had little effect on the development of southern intellectualism and politics.

Methodological difficulties have often masked the importance of poor landless whites to the ideology and social world of the South. The earliest academic work on poor whites downplayed their social significance, and characterized them as being unable to look past their racism towards a critique of the slave labor system. These works measured the importance of poor whites by their ability to penetrate the structures of politics, finding that they came up short as an oppositional threat to slaveowners.<sup>13</sup> Frank Owsley was the first historian to separate poor whites from the landholding Yeomen class of southern whites. He found that the majority of non-slaveholders were not “poor white trash” but landowning self-sufficient farmers. These “plain folk” did not resent the planter class, but looked up to them as examples of what they could become.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, “Yeomen Farmers in a Slaveholders’ Democracy,” *Agricultural History* 49 no. 2 (1975), 331-342.

<sup>11</sup> David Brown, “A Vagabond’s Tale: Poor Whites, Herrenvolk Democracy, and the Value of Whiteness in the Late Antebellum South,” *The Journal of Southern History* 79 no. 4 (2013), 806.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Collins, *White Society in the Antebellum South* (New York: Longman, 1985), 86-88; James M. Denham, “The Florida Cracker Before the Civil War As Seen Through Travelers’ Accounts,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 72 no. 4 (1994), 435-468.

<sup>13</sup> Paul H. Buck, “The Poor Whites of the Ante-Bellum South,” *The American Historical Review* 31 no. 1 (1925), 41-42, 51-53; see also Avery O. Craven, “Poor Whites and Negroes in the Antebellum South,” *The Journal of Negro History* 15 no. 1 (1930), 14-25.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949).

Owsley's work set the stage for a historiographical undertaking to illuminate the "average" southerner, an effort that largely downplayed the importance of class differences and thusly the importance of poor landless whites to the antebellum South. Besides William Harris, who argued that plain folk had a rudimentary understanding of class distinction from slaveholders, historians have claimed that white society was far more united by their common cultural and religious heritage than divided by their class differences. Bill Cecil-Fronsman found that poor whites and non-slaveholders often clashed with elite slaveholders, but explained away these instances by arguing that a racial hegemony diffused class conflict and diverted poor white energies towards conflict with blacks.<sup>15</sup> Such arguments led historians to largely ignore the importance of landless whites to the ideology and worldview of elite southerners. Because poor white southerners ended up supporting secession, most historians have assumed that slave owners felt they had nothing to worry about when it came to resistance from impoverished laborers. A referendum on slavery, the likes of which the vote on secession presented, had never taken place in the South. Slave owners were never completely convinced of landless white loyalty, and projecting backwards from secession helps to mask the true importance of class relations to the minds of elite southerners.

Charles C. Bolton's *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South* is the most complete work on the lives of these people. His narrow geography, covering just northeastern Mississippi and the North Carolina upcountry—due to the source deficiencies inherent in studying antebellum poor whites—and focus on economics and politics, led Bolton to dismiss the importance of poor

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<sup>15</sup> William J. Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterland* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985); Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites*, 7-8; see also Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989).

whites to antebellum southern society. Poor non-slaveholding whites in general were unable to develop a sustained political movement to challenge planter rule, and were easily manipulated into supporting proslavery politics.<sup>16</sup> Elite southerners' depictions of landless whites are one of our few windows into the lives of antebellum southern poor whites, while not being an unbiased view of these people, it gives us a look into the effect that this large class of people had on the psychology and ideology of its ruling class. Landless whites were not an invisible minority within southern society, their presence was of social, cultural and psychological influence to the elites who employed them, interacted with them and attempted to explain their existence.

The methodology of most of the work on poor whites and class, fails to adjust for source deficiencies, relying on quantitative methods and political history to illustrate a class relationship that largely occurred in the day to day, and at the cultural, psychological and intellectual level. Many mistake a failure to penetrate party politics as an indication that poor whites did not truly resent their rulers and that their rulers did not fear them. They explain why race diverted landless whites from becoming anti-slavery, but fail to illuminate the level of tension between landless poor whites and elite southerners. Bolton is correct to assert that non-slaveholders in general “never developed a sustained political movement to challenge the prerogatives of the slaveowners who ruled the region,” but what he fails to highlight is that the very presence of poor whites, which he does acknowledge as a “troubling” aberration in a white supremacist society, constituted a political concern in and of itself.<sup>17</sup>

While the class conflict exhibited in slave resistance, and its role in the coming of the Civil War, has been explored by historians such as Eugene Genovese and John Ashworth, class

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<sup>16</sup> Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 113, 42-43.

conflict within white southern society is seen as being of minimal importance in the decades before the Civil War.<sup>18</sup> Interpretations of the coming of the Civil War have argued that poor whites, and non-slaveholders in general, were pawns of the racial and cultural hegemony of the slaveholding ruling class. Earlier work on poor whites, by historians such as Paul Buck and Avery O. Craven, began the trend of downplaying the social importance of poor whites. These historians showed poor whites to be unable to see through their racism and discover their economic interest in attacking slavery politically. Buck argued that antislavery works that sought to appeal to non-slaveholders, such as Hinton Rowan Helper's *The Impending Crisis of the South*, went largely unread by non-slaveholders, and were overpowered by the message of "moderate reformers" who used racial appeals to prevent the development of a class consciousness that could threaten slavery. Like those who would follow in his footsteps, he measured the importance of poor whites in the antebellum years through their ability to penetrate the political debate, finding they came up short as an oppositional threat to slave owners.<sup>19</sup>

William Harris, in *Plain Folks and Gentry in a Slave Society*, took on the subject of a non-slaveholder class consciousness, finding a rudimentary understanding among the laboring class of their degraded position in the slave system. He also argued that elite southerners perceived the resentment that arose from these sentiments and in the late antebellum period began to express a concern for the potential consequences of it.<sup>20</sup> This interpretation is refuted by Harris' contemporaries, historians such as Grady McWhiney and Bill Cecil-Fronsman, who argue that

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<sup>18</sup> See Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1975) and John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic, vol. 1 & 2* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Avery O. Craven, "Poor Whites and Negroes in the Antebellum South," 14-25; Paul H. Buck, "The Poor Whites of the Ante-Bellum South," 41-54.

<sup>20</sup> William Harris, *Plain Folks and Gentry in a Slave Society*.

white society was far more united by their common cultural and religious heritage than divided by their class differences. McWhiney, in *Cracker Culture*, traced northern and southern cultural differences back to the peopling of colonial America, finding a Celtic cultural heritage that united southerners of different economic stations.<sup>21</sup>

Cecil-Fronsman likewise engaged class conflict within white southern society, finding that poor whites and non-slaveholders often clashed with the elites, but explained away these events by arguing that a racial hegemony diffused class conflict and diverted poor white energies towards conflict with blacks.<sup>22</sup> Bolton, later, would offer that because southern poor whites were a particularly mobile people local communities would only have to contend with small group of permanent residents, making them of limited threat to the local maintenance of slavery.<sup>23</sup> Historians who have broached the topic of white class conflict in the South have tended to view racism and localism as harmonizing factors in preventing any serious class tensions.<sup>24</sup> The literature suggests that non-slaveowners had more in common than not, and while they expressed a sustained, if muted, resentment of planter culture and social domination, racism and local cultural relations helped to keep the white South largely together. Most of these conclusions, though, are drawn from the fact that poor whites and non-slaveholders never created an antislavery political movement and ultimately voted for secession.

According to Lacy Ford, slaveholders marshalled southern yeomen towards protection of slavery through an appeal to traditional political ideology and the ideals of independent republicanism. Principles of economic independence coupled with the political culture of

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<sup>21</sup> Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South*.

<sup>22</sup> Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites: Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina*.

<sup>23</sup> Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South*, 112.

<sup>24</sup> David Brown, "A Vagabond's Tale: Poor Whites, Herrenvolk Democracy, and the Value of Whiteness in the Late Antebellum South," 803.



traditional republicanism merged to create a political atmosphere that saw attack on the slave owner's human property as an attack on the property rights that southerners viewed as key to their economic independence.<sup>25</sup> Similarly Stephanie McCurry found these ideals expressed through the religion of the southern common man, which, through the apparatus of the church, was used to bring average southerners to secession.<sup>26</sup> But these interpretations rely on their subjects' allegiance to property rights and an aspiration to become slaveholders someday. Historians have argued that mainstream ideals of property ownership, and eventual slave ownership, were not a primary concern for many of the poor whites of the south, and they fail to explain the role that landless whites had in the developments of southern politics in the lead up to the Civil War.<sup>27</sup> Proslavery and pro-secession southerners worked very hard to get non-slaveowners, even poor landless whites, to adopt their particular worldview. Why would proslavery advocates work so hard to appeal to a class of people they already had in their back pocket? Elite literary engagement with poor whites indicates that in fact they felt an acute anxiety about poor white support of slavery. While poor white southerners ultimately did not pose a threat to slavery—or to the interests of planters—it is clear slave owners worried about the politics of their impoverished white neighbors.

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<sup>25</sup> Lacy K. Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>26</sup> Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeomen Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> David Brown, "A Vagabond's Tale," 806, Brown claims that "a close reading of recent scholarship on poor whites within the context of earlier studies of yeomen suggests that not only were there important distinctions between yeomen and poor whites, but also two groups of rural propertyless white men existed by the late antebellum era: one with yeoman aspirations; the other wedded to a culture of crime, backwoods fighting, and interracial fraternization that distanced them from the mainstream."

Recent scholarship has sought to explain the cultural dimensions of southern elite engagement with southern poor whites. Matt Wray in his study of how popular culture stigmatized poor whites claims that antebellum works portrayed what they called “poor white trash” as something “not quite white.”<sup>28</sup> This image accomplished the task of justifying the degraded position of poor whites within the southern white supremacist hierarchy. But at the same time it helped northern antislavery writers that the institution of slavery was a cause of degradation amongst the southern laboring class. Additionally, recent work by Jennifer Hughes and Edward Baptist has illustrated the role that humor and personal slights had in the antagonization of planter elites by poor whites.<sup>29</sup> These works give insight into how the cultural worldview of the southern elite reflected underlying social anxieties, and how these anxieties can be illuminated through elite literary sources. Understanding the cultural world of elite southerners is crucial in understanding why landless whites sat so far outside of a mainstream southern culture obsessed with imitating the trappings of the elite aristocratic South.

Elite southerners often viewed themselves within what is referred to as the “Cavalier” mythology. William Taylor has illuminated a cultural and intellectual understanding among the southern elite which saw themselves as part of a struggle that stretched back to the English Civil War. According to Taylor many elite southerners viewed northerners as descendants of the English who supported the parliament—or “Roundheads”—and themselves as descendants of the

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<sup>28</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White*; see also Allison L. Hurst, “Beyond the Pale: Poor Whites as Uncontrolled Social Contagion in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred*,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 63 no. 3 (2010), and Susan J. Tracy, *In the Master’s Eye: Representation of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

<sup>29</sup> Jennifer A. Hughes, “Hysterical Power: Frontier Humor and Genres of Cultural Conquest,” in *Southern Frontier Humor: New Approaches*, edited by Ed Piacentino, 42-59 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013); Edward E. Baptist, “Accidental Ethnography in an Antebellum Southern Newspaper: Snell’s Homecoming Festival,” *The Journal of American History* 84 no. 4 (1998), 1355-1383.

Cavaliers, who supported the monarchy. They viewed their ancestry from the English country gentry as the root of southern culture and ethics. This mythology also implied a biological superiority among aristocratic southerners. While this viewpoint over-simplified biological complexities and the true lineage of southerners, it was crucial to how elite southerners viewed the society they inhabited.<sup>30</sup> David Hackett Fischer—who thought Cavalier mythology was largely built on historical fact—has illustrated an ideological strain of thought, one descended from the Royalists who migrated from the south of England to Virginia in the mid to late-seventeenth-century in the “cavalier migration,” which saw liberty as a privilege for aristocratic Englishmen and imposed a social hierarchy that put slave owning Virginia “gentlemen” above laboring whites.<sup>31</sup>

Grady McWhiney points out that regardless of the mythical qualities of elite southern belief in Cavalier biological lineage, these “Southern Gentlemen” sought to pass on the chivalric trappings that had defined the Cavalier mythos. It was the Cavalier’s belief in an honor code that McWhiney credits for the South’s sustained bravery in the Civil War. This honor code led southern elite writers to in turn view the North as increasingly materialistic, and argued that the southern way of life preserved the selfless republican ethic that they saw as the founding ideals of the United States. In this view those in the southern aristocracy were not only the ideal “Americans” but also of superior biology, character and ethics.<sup>32</sup> Ritchie Watson Jr. argues that this ethos was so powerful in the antebellum south that the yeomen ethos, which had defined the

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<sup>30</sup> William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1963), xv-xix.

<sup>31</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 212-225, 410- 418.

<sup>32</sup> Grady McWhiney, *Confederate Crackers and Cavaliers* (Abilene: McWhiney Foundation Press, 2002), 21-25.

Old Southwest before the 1830s, began to give way to an ideal that idealized the planter aristocrat, or Cavalier. The South thusly became united under a Cavalier mythology that put it at odds with the North and the West, and in the years before the Civil War began to shed the more populist and democratic outlook that defined the early Southwest.<sup>33</sup>

Bertram Wyatt-Brown claims historians of the South have largely ignored the concept of “honor,” which he calls the “keystone” of southern ethics. This was the result of a modern valuative understanding of southern ethical ideology, which often saw Cavalier honor culture, and southern ideology in general, as a facade meant to “hide the region’s guilt over race domination.” Honor’s incompatibility with twentieth-century ideals of morality led scholars to downplay its importance in explaining why Americans fought a war for its principles. Southern honor culture has been relegated to the status of mythology, but this myth was widely believed and stretched from colonial Virginia to the end of slavery in the United States. The southern “code of honor” was pervasive throughout the history of the South and was widely adopted at least by southern cultural elites and displayed most prominently within the Cavalier mythology. The southern ethic of the colonial period was a “harsh code” that could be traced back to the ancient Mediterranean and remained prominent in the South through the nineteenth century, gradually becoming infused with the ethos of American Christian gentility.<sup>34</sup> The characteristics that historians have used to define a distinctive class of poor whites are, in many respects, the result of contemporaneous aristocratic cultural ideals that marginalized and alienated certain types of non-slave owners. Understanding the characteristics of southern elite honor culture is key in understanding how they viewed their impoverished neighbors.

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<sup>33</sup> Richie Devon Watson, Jr., *Yeomen Versus Cavalier: The Old Southwest’s Fictional Road to Rebellion* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1993), 7-9.

<sup>34</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), vii-xi.

Both honor and race defined the boundaries of elite southern culture. This culture was imitated by the mass of middle class and yeomen southerners who looked towards the elite for the optimal southern ethic and code of manners. Landless white southerners—marginalized from mainstream culture—often had to adapt their own forms of cultural and social formalities, and these social interactions often of a biracial character. Interaction with blacks further broke the bounds of respectable white society in key ways, by blurring the racial boundaries of the South, as well as the boundaries of the social ethic of manners and respectable interactions. As early as 1930, historian Avery O. Craven stressed the importance of black and poor white interaction to the social world of the antebellum south. Craven, seemingly taking the images of elite accounts at their word, argued that the lives of poor whites and those of slaves were almost identical in material condition. He highlighted as well the illicit exchanges between slaves and poor whites that plagued plantation culture. Whiskey was sold to slaves, often in exchange for stolen goods.<sup>35</sup>

Eugene Genovese broached the topic of how slaves themselves perceived poor whites, arguing that slaves perceived poor whites to be lower on the social ladder than even themselves. He also illuminated a perception among these slaves that the institution of slavery hurt non-slaveholders as much as it hurt themselves.<sup>36</sup> This raises questions about why poor whites never developed a sustained opposition to slavery, or accomplished any kind of political revolt, if even slaves perceived the degraded status of the poor whites created by planter rule. Historians such as Bolton and Cecil-Fronsman further illuminated biracial interaction between poor whites and slaves. These interactions occurred within a wide variety of activities, both economic and social. Landless poor whites played a central role in a slave's ability to participate in trade and other

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<sup>35</sup> Avery O. Craven, "Poor Whites and Negroes in the Antebellum South," 14-25.

<sup>36</sup> Eugene Genovese, "Rather Be a Nigger Than a Poor White Man," in *Towards a New View of America*, edited by Hans L. Trefouse, 79-96 (New York: B. Franklin, 1977).

illegal activities outside of the plantation. These works show a lower class world where racial distinctions often necessarily fell apart.<sup>37</sup>

Recently, Jeff Forret has attempted to illustrate the extensive relations that existed between slaves and poor whites, finding that the ways that slaves and poor whites interacted did not reflect a rigidly enforced racial hierarchy or social structure. In their place, though, he does find a system of community censure and ostracizing that reflects the poor white's marginal role in southern social culture. Slaves and poor whites interacted within an often violent system of social interaction, which imitated, in a more rough and rowdy form, the masculine honor culture of southern aristocracy. Through clandestine trade and leisure relationships, a "common identity as an impoverished, inferior, and biracial southern lower class" began to form. Forret claims that "such a reorientation along class lines could have menaced the existing social fabric."<sup>38</sup> Forret's focus is not how these marginalized peoples affected the wider white social world around them but the effect that the slave system of labor had on them, finding poor whites as well to be victims of the planter dominated economy of the South. He is concerned with dispelling the myth of universal hatred between poor whites and blacks that has been central in past interpretations of lower class relations in the antebellum south. This bolsters an interpretation that places fear of landless whites at the center of class relations, as Follet, among others, has shown, social, sexual, and most importantly criminal relations between slaves and poor whites were common. Southern elites were very much concerned with this interaction for a variety of reasons.

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<sup>37</sup> David Brown, "A Vagabond's Tale," 804.

<sup>38</sup> Jeff Forret, "Slaves, Poor Whites, and the Underground Economy of the Rural Carolinas," *The Journal of Southern History* 70 no. 4 (2004), 822; see also Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside*, and Jeff Forret, "Slave-Poor White Violence in the Antebellum Carolinas," *North Carolina Historical Review* 81 no. 2 (2004).

The fear that slave owners had for the potential interaction of slaves with non-slaveholders was particularly acute in relations to biracial crime and the planning of slave insurrections. Fear of slave insurrection has long been seen as a central force in the creation of proslavery ideology, and the role of whites, and fear of their involvement in them, is prominent in contemporary discussions of the topic. Little work, though, has been done to illuminate the role of poor whites in slave insurrection, or of the fear of their involvement with insurrections, despite the fact that poor whites were often suspected of plotting with or supplying rebellious slaves. In the post-Nat Turner South, fear of insurrection drove much of the proslavery rhetoric that began to emerge in the period. Slavery was presented as a way to control the millions of unruly blacks, who otherwise would be turned loose upon the South. Fear of disloyal non-slaveholders helped to bolster the paranoia that reached its apex in this period.

With the rise of antislavery appeals that targeted the laboring class of the South, fears of white resistance to planter rule became increasingly palpable by the 1850s. Contemporary accounts show that slave owners saw evidence of these arguments penetrating the intellectual world of the landless whites. It is clear in the efforts put forth by elite southern writers in the 1850s to bring poor non-slaveholders into the proslavery fold that they feared them turning against slavery politically; they even went so far as to argue for the positive effects of slavery on free labor. Elite slaveholders perceived a significant threat to their domination of southern politics, some even feared that non-slaveholders could align with the growing Republican party and help threaten slavery on a national level. This fear became even more acute in the late 1850s as appeals to laboring white southerners increased in assertiveness and frequency.

I have chosen to use “landless whites,” when appropriate, and “poor whites” when referring to contemporaneous accounts, as these writers rarely made distinctions as to the relative

wealth of the mass of southern poor whites. Landless whites, as opposed to poor land owning yeomen, had not made the jump into property holding, did not own farms, and thusly were less vulnerable to political arguments that stressed the importance of property rights and the ability to own and purchase slaves. Southern politicians often claimed that slavery as an economic system helped to raise the white race to an equal footing, and slaveholding represented an opportunity for all whites to become economically independent and successful. Landless whites often did not work with an aim above mere subsistence, and had little opportunity accumulate wealth, let alone purchase slaves. The boundaries of the antebellum southern social world were often defined by the cultural expectations and aspirations of slave owning men, and living up to these expectations was what defined someone as either a “Southern Gentlemen,” or “poor white trash.” This marginalization fed off of not just cultural conceptions of poor whites, but also off of the social and political fears generated by the existence of landless whites. If they did not seem to aspire to be slave owners, they were seen as a potential threat to the ideological justification and perpetuation of the slave labor system.

Discussion of landless whites largely took place within the context of debates over universal suffrage, the reopening of the slave trade, and, most importantly, industrialization and the future labor system of the South. Within this industrialization debate is where elite southerners most acutely expressed their fear of the potential for landless whites to become a problematic class in southern slave society. Elite discussions of landless whites illustrate a strain of political argument that emphasized the potential for landless whites to become politically aligned with, or at least sympathetic to the arguments of, antislavery northerners, and even anti-slavery southerners such as Hinton Rowan Helper. Looking at how elites perceived and dealt with landless whites can illuminate the extent of the effect that these people had on society at



large. Landless whites' political and economic importance was negligible, but that does not mean they were not influential. Surveying contemporaneous sources such as social and political commentary, popular literature and travel accounts, with an eye towards how this lower class was viewed, shows the true importance of poor whites to the mind of the southern elite.

Some of the most useful sources in illuminating the social and cultural relationship that existed between landless whites and elite slaveholders, as well as how seriously elites took them, are contemporaneous travel accounts, works of social and political commentary and literature aimed at upper-class southerners. Finding the context of these accounts, both in the text, and in the larger contemporary debates they were engaging, helps to illuminate how they were shaped by real life concerns and how, in turn, they shaped the image of poor whites in the mind of, at least, the southern elite. In addition to these works, sources such as slave narratives, and the rare first-hand account of a poor white man, can give us insight into the day to day reality of lower class interaction, and how it intersected with the world of the elite slaveowner. Reading not only what elite southerners wrote about their society, but also what outsiders wrote about how southerners perceived their society, gives us insight into what was implied in private conversation, and the views that were projected by the Elite southerners who guided these observers through the South, providing a fuller view of how the elite South saw the class of landless southern whites.

Cultural and social marginalization, involving specific ideals of respectability and community, served the purpose of separating a loyal class of non-slaveholders who bought into a specific cultural ethos from those lower class whites who ignored the norms of aristocratic southern culture. A mix of class and cultural interests converged to perpetuate stereotypes of cultural, moral, biological and spiritual inferiority amongst many of the poorer elements of the

South. These cultural representations of class anxieties are valuable in explaining why slaveholders felt the need to propagate a proslavery political view so forcefully, given their dominant political power which seemed to be under little legitimate threat. The mind of the elite antebellum South was often on their impoverished neighbors. Anxieties and fears, about the variety of ways that these people could threaten social order and slavery, elicited several responses from elite southerners. This includes the cultural marginalization of the class, a strengthening of proslavery ideology, attempts at separating them from slaves and, ultimately, provided another impetus towards separation of antislavery northerners from their potential allies, newly enfranchised poor southern whites.

In the face of northern attacks on slavery, and growing economic inequality among southern whites, elite southerners had to justify and promote the institution of slavery as an equalizer amongst white men. The tensions created by the landless white example struck at the heart of the proslavery ideology that emerged in the period between 1830 and 1860. It was not just slave resistance and northern attacks on slavery that drove this defense. Class conflict did exist in the antebellum South, even if it never manifested itself in a sustained attack on slavery and the southern elite. Divisions between non-slaveholders were exploited in the elite defense of slavery, and cultural ideals of Cavalier heritage and systems of honor shaped how they viewed social relations. These ideals were both a cause and effect of the degraded position of landless whites within southern slave society. White supremacy and a pan-white unity and identity was not a certainty, and elite southerners knew it. That white supremacy did ultimately overcome these stark class and cultural divisions is a testament to the overwhelming social and cultural power of slavery in the antebellum South. The problem of landless whites in southern society laid bare the limits of racial ideologies, and despite their social and cultural marginalization

within this society, white supremacy would ultimately prove a force powerful enough for landless whites to overcome these economic and cultural divisions.

## CHAPTER I

### IDLE, DISHONORABLE AND NOT QUITE WHITE:

#### THE LANDLESS WHITE IMAGE IN ANTEBELLUM SOUTHERN HONOR CULTURE

The stereotyped image of the landless white was common in the elite literature and social commentary of the antebellum south. In popular novels, travelogues, and in works of political and social science, elite southerners spent much effort to portray a stereotyped version of the poor landless southerner. They were characterized as idle, unclean, ignorant, mischievous, un-masculine and physically inferior to the traditional southern patriarch. These perceptions were often the product of valuative judgements made by elites based on the landless poor white's inability to live up to the standards of the culture of aristocratic slave owners. This image, within the trapping of southern aristocratic honor culture, portrayed a people who were outside the bounds of respectable white society. Poor landless whites had a social and cultural status that was near that of enslaved blacks, and in certain contexts, lower. They were compared to the enslaved, often unfavorably, and portrayed in ways that implied they were not "white" and thus not full "southerners."

In a society where ownership of land and slaves were the prerequisites for the characteristics that were seen as truly "southern," it is no surprise that poor landless whites would be marginalized from much of mainstream society. But this marginalization—while perhaps partly a product of their destitution—was amplified and spread by specific cultural

ideals, which played out in the politics of social relations through elite southern engagement with the idea of “poor whites.” The mass of middle- and upper-class southerners viewed themselves within a chivalric mythology through which they styled their worldview by the standards projected by slave owning aristocratic southerners. In order to protect their sense of honor—which was defined by the standards of a Cavalier mythology that stressed chivalrous masculinity, patriarchalism, paternalism, romantic gender ideals and the importance of whiteness—elite southerners created a popular image of the landless white southerner that showed them to be outside the boundaries of mainstream ideals and culture. Coupled with their not quite white biological classification, these imaginings of poor whites placed them at the fringes of respectable southern white society.

Southern authors in the antebellum period, worked consciously to construct a mythology of southern social culture. It permeated through the imagination of the mass of middle- and upper-class southerners through the antebellum period—ramping up in the late-1820s and reaching its polemical peak during the sectional conflict of the 1850s—and came to influence how southerners viewed “the South” and what a “southerner” truly was. Landless whites failed to live up to the standards of a chivalric Cavalier culture that stressed the importance of patriarchal paternalism and honor. Slavery formed the confines of this cultural ideal, and landless whites often did not aspire to be slaveholders, nor did they idealize the trappings of elite aristocratic planter culture. They were thus relegated to the status of dependent, beholden to the dominant planter class, and were described in ways that reflected this status. They were not black, due to the preservation of their political status as white men, but culturally and socially they were certainly not quite white.

The stereotyped image of the landless southern white stretches back through the colonial period. Writing in the early eighteenth century William Byrd, a prominent Virginia planter, had harsh words for the poorer elements of Virginia and North Carolina society: “I am sorry to say it, but Idleness is the general character of the men” of this region. “All his wants proceeded from indolence, and not from misfortune,” Byrd argued, “he had good land, as well as good health and good limbs to work it.” He did not stress a cultural or biological explanation for this at the time, but blamed their environment: “the air is so mild, and the soil so fruitful, that very little labour is required to fill their bellies, especially where the woods afford such plenty of game. These advantages discharge the men from the necessity of killing themselves with work.”<sup>39</sup> Byrd expanded on this argument by detailing the living conditions of a poor family. He described a “poor dirty house, with hardly any thing in it but children, that wallowed about like so many pigs.” “It is a common case in this part of the country,” he explained, “that people live worse upon good land... this man was an instance of it for though his plantation would make plentiful returns for a little industry.” Further he challenged this poor man’s ability to live up to his social responsibilities as a male: “the woman did all that was done in the family, and the few garments they had to cover their dirty hides were owing to her industry.”<sup>40</sup> This simplistic environmental argument would be echoed a century later, in the 1830s, by Florida slave owner Achille Murat. Commenting on the problem of frontier squatting, Murat, an ex-Frenchman, claimed that these poor squatters were “not very industrious... their poverty is entirely the fruit of their idle and drunken habits.” But he also highlights a cultural component to this idleness, arguing that many

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<sup>39</sup> William Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts: Containing the History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* (Petersburg, VA: Edmund and Julia C. Ruffin, 1841), 87.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

of the poor squatters “although industrious, and with the means of rapidly augmenting their substance, pursue this sort of life from choice, from taste, and, perhaps, even from habit.”<sup>41</sup>

“Cracker” was the first distinct derogatory term used to describe landless whites in the South.<sup>42</sup> It first appears in the historical record in a 1766 colonial administrative report. Officer Gavin Cochrane reported on complaints from Cherokee that “white people came into their hunting grounds and destroyed their beavers.” Cochrane had the “Beaverers” arrested and “three of the lawless people called crackers” were brought in, and according to Cochrane they “behaved with the greatest insolence and told the Officer they neither valued him nor the Lieutenant Gov.”<sup>43</sup> Cochrane’s characterization implies a disloyal and lawless character, and this image would be reflected in portrayals of landless whites through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Matt Wray has observed that “as the Cochrane fragment attests, crackers had reputations for being ill-mannered, arrogant, treacherous, and cruel, stealing from Indians and propertied white colonists alike... their lawlessness made them enemies to the colonial government and to the local Cherokees.”<sup>44</sup> This lawlessness made these men “the first organized band of criminals that ever operated in this country.” Years before the organized protests of the colonial patriots’ movement, “crackers” were asserting their own autonomy from colonial governments.<sup>45</sup> This represents a shift from the simple idleness characterization illustrated by Byrd. Landless white men were no longer simply lazy, living high off the hog of the southern wilderness, but “crackers” who were a dangerous and untrustworthy group of potential criminals.

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<sup>41</sup> Achille Murat, *The United States of North America* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1833), 51-52.

<sup>42</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White*, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Gavin Cochrane quoted in Mitford Mathews, “Of Matters Lexicographical,” *American Speech* 29 no. 3 (1954), 126.

<sup>44</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White*, 36.

<sup>45</sup> Mitford Mathews, “Of Matters Lexicographical,” 127.

Or as Wray argues: “Cracker was not so much a term of contempt as it was a term that spoke to the fears and anxieties and grudging respect” of other colonists.”<sup>46</sup>

Byrd’s early descriptions of landless whites also took on a racial dimension. Describing the landless whites of the pine wooded areas of upcountry Virginia, Byrd again provides an environmental argument for the idleness of the poor, commenting on the regions “easiness of raising provisions” and the “slothfulness of the people.” These men reminded Byrd of “Indians” who “impose all the work upon the poor women.” Byrd provides a particularly descriptive account of the character of wretched poor whites as he saw them:

They make their wives rise out of their beds early in the morning, at the same time that they lie and snore, till the sun has risen one third of his course, and dispersed all the unwholesome damp. Then, after stretching and yawning for half an hour, they light their pipes, and, under the protection of a cloud of smoke, venture out into the open air; though, if it happens to never so little cold, they quickly return shivering into the chimney corner. When the weather is mild, they stand leaning with both their arms upon the corn-field fence, and gravely consider whether they had best go and take a small heat at the hoe; but generally find reasons to put it off till another time. Thus they loiter away their lives, like Solomon’s sluggard, with their arms across, and at the winding up of the year scarcely have bread to eat. To speak the truth, it is a thorough aversion to labor that makes people file off to North Carolina where plenty and a warm sun confirm them in their disposition to laziness for their whole lives.<sup>47</sup>

Byrd found innate character deficiencies in the poor—often immigrants—who populated these regions. It is telling that Byrd sees these deficiencies as similar to the characteristics that defined his colony’s Native American neighbors. The landless whites of this region were described in ways that not only portrayed them as lazy, but also as innately different than the type of people who formed the better part of white society. This racialized characterization is further indication of the broader uncomfortability that elite southerners had with their poor neighbors.

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<sup>46</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White*, 37.

<sup>47</sup> William Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts*, 27-28.



This unease toward the poorer elements of southern society was reflected in characterizations and social marginalization of landless whites in the antebellum period. The idle character would remain and was used by various commentators for their own specific purposes. Frederick Law Olmsted used this characterization of poor whites in order to bolster his preconceived notions of the degrading effects of the slave labor system.<sup>48</sup> Olmsted, like most who wrote travel accounts of the South, lived amongst elite slaveowners, and his understanding of poor whites reflected the image he likely learned from his elite slave owning hosts.<sup>49</sup> Olmsted's journey from the North began in 1852 by which point his preconceived notions, driven by the divisive debate over slavery, had been fully formed. Olmsted used depictions of landless whites within the southern economic system to illustrate the detrimental effects of slavery on white work ethic.<sup>50</sup>

Historian Frank Owsley places Olmsted as a main proprietor of the "idle" myth of southern work ethic, commenting that he possessed an "unusual skill in the art of reporting detail and of completely wiping out the validity of such detail by subjective comments and generalizations." For example, Olmsted description of southern life is full of evidence of the general well-being and prosperity of the southern populace, even landless whites, yet he claims that "the majority of the Negroes at the North live more comfortably than the majority of whites at the South." A claim characterizing the majority of southern whites as poor.<sup>51</sup> This poorness

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<sup>48</sup> See Carl R. Osthaus, "The Work Ethic of the Plain Folk: Labor and Religion in the Old South," *The Journal of Southern History* 70 no. 4 (Nov., 2004) and Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South*, 2-3.

<sup>49</sup> See Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 42-43.

<sup>50</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States*, edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 538-540.

<sup>51</sup> Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South*, 2; Olmsted quotation from Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1861), 237.

and its antecedent, laziness, Olmsted contends, was created by slavery itself, as the racialized social structure of the slave labor system made poor white men look at “manual agricultural labor” with “contempt, and for its necessity in himself.”<sup>52</sup>

Alexis de Tocqueville's impression of poor white southerners reflected Olmsted's understanding of southern slave society fostering laziness among laboring whites. De Tocqueville lumped all white southern men into a whole “aristocratic body,” but within this white aristocracy there were “many who were poor, but none who would work; its member preferred want to labour.”<sup>53</sup> Elite southern social commentator Daniel Robinson Hundley similarly found an innate laziness among southern poor whites. Laziness, he contended, was their chief characteristic and a product of a general lack of character and ability. “They are about the laziest two-legged animals that walk erect on the face of the Earth,” he explained, “even their motions are slow, and their speech is a sickening drawl... while their thoughts and ideas seem likewise to creep along at a snail’s pace.” They only cared to live hand to mouth, drink liquor, hunt, vote, sleep, and “loung[e] in the sunshine of a bright summer’s day, and to bask in the warmth of a roaring wood fire.”<sup>54</sup>

Landless southerners were the most mobile segment of southern society. Planter control of fertile land prohibited the accumulation of wealth necessary to purchase either land or slaves.<sup>55</sup> One southerner claimed to have officially appraised many poor white families’ “whole

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>53</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, translated by John C. Spencer (New York: Edward Walker, 1847), 396.

<sup>54</sup> Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1860), 262-263.

<sup>55</sup> Bruce Collins, *White Society in the Antebellum South*, 86-88; James M. Denham, “The Florida Cracker Before the Civil War as Seen Through Travelers’ Accounts,” 435-468.

household property” to be lower than \$20.<sup>56</sup> Contemporary social commentator Daniel Robinson Hundley explained that “the Poor White Trash rarely possess energy and self-reliance enough to emigrate singly from the older Southern States to the South-west, but usually migrate by whole neighborhoods.” They would move as a group with their “whole stock of worldly goods packed into a little one-horse cart of the rudest workmanship.<sup>57</sup> These often destitute and mobile people were seen by their more affluent neighbors as being unclean, mischievous, lazy, and ignorant. Their houses were “dirty,” their children “wallowed about like so many pigs,” they were “ignorant,” “rude,” “lawless,” “drunken,” “annoying,” and the “men were too lazy to do steady work.”<sup>58</sup> Many landless whites reportedly lived as squatters, inhabiting land that did not belong to them by constructing temporary and rudimentary housing, and often moving from place to place as they were eventually run off the land.

When describing laboring whites who worked in the turpentine industry and lived in what he referred to as the “turpentine forest,” Olmsted claimed that they had “almost no property but their bodies,” they would “commonly hire or ‘squat’ and build a little log cabin, so made that it is only a shelter from rain.” These accommodations were minimally constructed and had “no more furniture or pretension to comfort than is commonly provided a criminal in the cell of a prison.” Olmsted also claimed that they lived a bare subsistence in their lifestyles, growing “a little corn, and possibly a few roods of potatoes, cow peas and [collards].” Sometimes they had a few roaming pigs and “pretty certainly” a rifle and dogs, used by the poor patriarchs who “occupy

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<sup>56</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States; with Remarks on Their Economy* (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), 468.

<sup>57</sup> Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, 271-272.

<sup>58</sup> William Byrd, *The Westover Manuscripts*, 119, Matt Wray; *Not Quite White*, 56; Achille Murat, *The United States of North America*, 51; Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South*, 89; H. C. Bruce, *The New Man: Twenty-nine Years a Slave; Twenty-nine Years a Free Man* (York, PA: P. Anstadt & Sons, 1895), 28.

most of their time in hunting.” He portrayed a destitute people who were inferior in “morals and intelligence,” to the enslaved blacks who worked alongside them in the turpentine industry. They were “vagabonds... people without habitual, definite occupation or reliable means of livelihood.” They had a poor work ethic and only worked for wages “when driven to it by necessity.”<sup>59</sup>

Poor whites were said to have lived in nearly destitute conditions, in homes that lacked the care of industrious wife. Hundley described a rudimentary log hut, the “rude dwelling” was filled with “a few rickety chairs, a long bench, a dirty bed or two, a spinning-wheel... a skillet, an oven, a frying-pan, a triangular cupboard in one corner, and a rack over the door on which to hang old Silver Heels, the family rifle.” Outside stood a “rude” kennel for a dog, and a clearing created by the patriarch, where “he pretended to cultivate.” Poor white women were portrayed as ugly, unladylike, and worn. “If anything,” Hundley explained, “after the freshness of their youth is lost, the women are even more intolerable than the men.” Their decrepit state was largely the result of their “disgusting habit of snuff-dipping, and even sometimes pipe-smoking... Being usually addicted to this filthy and disgusting vice, or whatever else one may choose to call it, it is not at all strange that the female Sand-hillers should so soon lose all trace of beauty, and at thirty are about the color of yellow parchment, if not thin and pale from constant attacks of fever.” These descriptions reflected a conception of poor white southerners as separate from the mainstream of southern culture which practiced an aristocratic ideal of gendered manners. Further these women failed as mothers, as their children were seen as near wild animals, and “every house” contained a half-dozen “dirty, squalling, white-headed little brats, who are

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<sup>59</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, 388-389.

familiarly known as Tow-Heads—on account of the color of their hair, as well as its texture and generally unkempt and matted condition.”<sup>60</sup>

Poor landless whites were also exceedingly “ignorant,” to prove this Olmsted quoted a Charleston newspaper, which reported that the North Carolina upcountry was in a “large portion” inhabited by a people who “nearly all” believed in witchcraft, “and attributed everything that happened, good or bad, to the agency of persons whom they suppose possessed of evil spirits.”<sup>61</sup> Olmsted reflected the view of the elite southerners who courted him, a view that was prevalent in the popular treatments of poor landless whites at the time. Elite literary authors such as Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, as well, went out of their way to portray poor whites as being of low character, morals and intelligence. One character in particular, in Longstreet’s 1850 novel *Georgia Scenes*, manifested many of the negative characteristics common in popular antebellum southern literature. Ransy Sniffles, “a sprout from Richmond,” had “fed copiously on red clay,” an act that reflected his lowly position and poor intellect. Matt Wray has observed that, clay-eater stereotype made popular by Longstreet, and imitated by other antebellum authors was a “grotesque comic” caricature.<sup>62</sup> This character was used as a humorous depiction of the lower class popularized by with the growing market of Northern and Southern middle class readers.

Critiques of landless whites did not always come from elite writers. Even an ex-slave in the North perceived this characterization. Henry Bibb, an escaped Kentucky slave, referred to “the poor and loafing class of whites,” who were “about on a par in point of morals with the

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<sup>60</sup> Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, 260, 264

<sup>61</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, 386-389.

<sup>62</sup> Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, *Georgia Scenes: Characters, Incidents, etc., in the First Half-Century of the Republic* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1897 [Reprint]), 68, Matt Wray, *Not Quite White*, 39-40.

slaves at the South,” as “generally ignorant, intemperate, licentious, and profane.”<sup>63</sup> Though here the characterization would likely have been driven by a desire to illustrate the role of the slave labor system in degrading the character of laboring whites. By the same token, southern authors often used stereotypical depictions of landless whites as a way to illustrate their innate inferiority. This was most prominent in works of popular literature widely read within the upper class of the South.

The use of stereotyped landless white characters in literature goes back to the early southwestern form of editorial political combat. Between 1820 and 1840 editors in the expanding southwestern United States often blurred the lines of genuine reporting, disguised themselves as commenting readers, and adopted the language of the largely illiterate laboring class. As Edward Baptist has observed, newspaper editors in the “Old Southwest increasingly realized in the 1830s that the words of common white ‘crackers,’ and their ways of putting them together, possessed a freshness and humor that classical republican platitudes had lost.” The language of the poor whites was used by elites to appeal to the common man.<sup>64</sup> This verbal style would be adopted by many southern writers to illustrate their cultural inferiority.

The comedic literature of the old southwest gave way to the romantic literature, most prominently seen in the “plantation novel” genre, that emerged in the 1820s and became increasingly popular and available throughout the antebellum period. Earlier plantation novels were less concerned with the politics of slavery, as later ones would be, but most were directly engaged with Cavalier mythology. Popular writers such as John Pendleton Kennedy and William Gilmore Simms, as well as publications such as the *Southern Literary Messenger*, as early as the

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<sup>63</sup> Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave* (New York: published by author, 1850), 24.

<sup>64</sup> Edward E. Baptist, “Accidental Ethnography in an Antebellum Southern Newspaper,” 1360-1361.

1830s, began to popularize an aristocratic and chivalric idea of “the South” which laid its basis in the Cavalier mythology.<sup>65</sup> Even in the 1830s landless whites were seen to have been out of place within the developing aristocratic honor culture of the antebellum south. As Ritchie Watson Jr. explains of Stark Young’s popular 1834 plantation novel *So Red the Rose*, which takes place within the plantation district of Natchez, Mississippi, elite southerners were enamored by stories of “the piney-woods whites, the squatters” and “the people back among the bayous,” but depictions of the day to day lives of elite southern Natchez residents was decidedly devoid of interaction with poor whites. Young even make a point to declare that “the human dregs of the river” did not concern “the town of Natchez itself nor the society of the great plantation houses.”<sup>66</sup>

The Cavalier view of respectable southern white society allowed elite southerners to view their poor landless class as outsiders, a dependent class who only had what they had through the generosity of the paternalist slaveholder. Those who believed in the Cavalier mythology saw southern aristocrats as the descendants of the Cavaliers of the English Civil War, the English country gentry who supported the monarchy. In their view, those who descended from the English “Roundheads,” or those who supported the parliament, were of deficient innate character, of bad blood. This played out in how they viewed southern social culture. Cavalier heritage, especially in the three decades before the Civil War, became central to southern social culture as many emulated the chivalrous ethos of the English aristocracy. The biological element of this argument implied that those who did not fall into the cultural ethos of elite southern aristocrats were innately inferior.<sup>67</sup> Northerners were usually the target of arguments of innate

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<sup>65</sup> William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, 126-127.

<sup>66</sup> Richie Devon Watson, Jr., *Yeomen Versus Cavalier*, 2, quotes from Stark Young, *So Red the Rose* (Nashville: J.S. Sanders & Company, 1962[Reprint]), 8.

<sup>67</sup> William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, xv-xix.

inferiority, but poor whites who did not aspire to be slave owning aristocrats fell into this categorization as well. Moving from the cultural and environmental arguments of William Byrd, proslavery southern elites in the antebellum period insisted that the condition of southern poor whites was a result of physical and moral weaknesses that were in fact biological in origin.<sup>68</sup> If poor southern whites were in a degraded position it was because of their poor lineage and not the result of any failings of southern society, and certainly not a result of the slave labor system.

Implicit in the Cavalier worldview was a strong sense of chivalric honor. The honor code that pervaded the South defined how southerners viewed their place in American society. The Cavalier honor code instilled not just a sense of biological superiority, but also came to be viewed by southerners as the truest form American republicanism. Here cultural differences turned to social and political differences, as those who acted outside the bounds of the specific ideals of southern chivalric honor were seen as dishonorable and of low personal character and ethics. Important to that understanding of republicanism were the reciprocal responsibilities of the slave master based paternalistic outlook. Paternalism was not just a way to view the master-slave relationship, but according to Eugene Genovese it was a way of life, an all-encompassing worldview that instilled “a strong sense of duty and responsibility toward those in dependent status.” While this worldview was clearly self-serving, especially as it concerned the master-slave relationship, Genovese warned we should not project modern values onto a self-image that grew out of a lived cultural and intellectual context.<sup>69</sup> While the paternalistic ethos may have been born from the justification of slavery, it manifested a total worldview that emphasized the burden of responsibility of the patriarchal paternalist to all his “dependents.”

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<sup>68</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White*, 48.

<sup>69</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History* (New York: Allen Lane Penguin Press, 1977), 282, and Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 78-86.



William Taylor sees southern literary culture as the best source for understanding the South's struggle with their own social code and the wider developments of the nineteenth century. Paternalism served as the best route in justifying the aristocratic social code of the South. As Taylor argues "the image of sunshine and happiness around the old plantation home could, it was felt, win the sympathies of many, especially women, whom the abstract justifiers—Biblical, Constitutional and historical—were unable to touch." That is until Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. Stowe showed southerners that paternalism "was a sword that cut two ways." She took the South's popular literary conventions and used it in a way that hurt the honor code of the southern aristocracy.<sup>70</sup> The paternalist ideology necessitated the relegation of poor whites to a separate social status, either as dependent laborers or as destitute creatures in need of philanthropy and pity.

The South's cultural world was partly built within the literary genre of plantation novels, where authors such as William Gilmore Simms and John Pendleton Kennedy used the trappings of the historical romance to defend the honor of planter culture. The genre reached its apex in the 1850s as southerners sought to defend the south and slavery from the negative depictions contained in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As Matt Wray has observed, the plantation novel generally "featured heroic male protagonists from the planter class, who defended planter class women from the violent, sexual predations of poor whites and upstart, middle-class men," though "they reserved their full contempt for the poorest whites," depicting poor southern whites with all the negative attributes common of their stereotyped image.<sup>71</sup>

Popular literature portrayed landless whites as idle, unsophisticated, violent and untrustworthy. Augustus Longstreet's "clay eater" Ransy Sniffles was delighted by nothing "so

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<sup>70</sup> William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, 280.

<sup>71</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White*, 55-56.

much as a fight,” enough so that he “had been kept for more than a year in the most torturing suspense as to the comparative manhood of Billy Stallings and Bob Durham.” He had yet to be able to induce them to fight and set out to bring about a brawl. Ransy is shown as a schemer who tries to get otherwise honorable men to fight for dishonorable reasons. The poor character of the landless white class is used by Longstreet in order to illustrate the superior honor of two respectable Southern Gentlemen who Sniffles fails to induce to improper behavior. Sniffles is deceptive, calculating, untrustworthy in his aims and, ultimately, incapable of success. Longstreet uses an over the top and humorous characterization of Sniffles to emasculate and marginalize poor whites who challenged the authority of aristocratic planter culture.<sup>72</sup>

In *The Master's House*, a popular 1854 novel, Thomas Thorpe depicts poor whites as troublemakers who used the privileges of a race based slave society to exploit the property of slave owners for their own gain. One of the novel's main characters Mr. Moreton, a wealthy slave owner, sets about to find the white man who had sold liquor to his slaves. Moreton complains of the increased prevalence of “groggeries” among the lower elements of society, and “the rapid demoralization of our servants as a consequence.” He could not send his slaves into town because they would invariably be corrupted by the poor white men who sold liquor. “These miserable wretches,” Moreton exclaims, “take advantage of our laws, and their white skins, to prey upon us, excite our servants to steal, spoil their manners, and destroy all discipline.”<sup>73</sup> While here Thorpe's message was one of the degrading effects of slavery as an institution, he still demonized poor whites as a cause of the degeneration of social morality. Further he

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<sup>72</sup> Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, *Georgia Scenes*, 68-69.

<sup>73</sup> [Thomas B. Thorpe], *The Master's House; A Tale of Southern Life* (New York: T. L. McElrath, 1854), 278-279.

acknowledges the importance of white privilege to delineating social barriers, and finds it abused by these undeserving poor whites.

These depictions took place in the context of a southern social culture that was predicated on ideals of aristocratic honor and ethics. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown has argued “apart from a few lonely dissenters, southern whites believed—as most people do—that they conducted their lives by the highest ethical standards.” Their way of life, they thought, was consistent with the natural order of things. A system of ethics with a deep history that was “inseparable from hierarchy and entitlement” and “could legitimate injustice-- racial or class.” While opinions were diverse this system was generally in contest with moral assumptions of the North, who had long diverged from the history of plantation slavery.<sup>74</sup> This was a large part of the reason that the existence of widespread poverty in the South was so unsettling to elite southerners who had to explain and justify southern social and economic systems. Cultural and social marginalization was necessary for the process of explaining the scourge of “poor white trash” in southern white society. Their works either implied or explicitly explained that poor landless whites were not part of the better sections of southern society, they chose to remain at the fringe of society and rebuked the ethics of aristocratic honor, again they were portrayed as the victims of their own choices and actions.

Contained within the popular Cavalier mythology was a biological argument for southern elite superiority. They saw themselves as descendants of the Normans who were again battling for the future of their nation against a culturally and biologically inferior adversary, in this case the North. The southern Cavaliers were obsessed with literature set in medieval times, and Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* was widely read amongst elite southerners.<sup>75</sup> But this cavalier mythology

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<sup>74</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 3-4, 23-24.

<sup>75</sup> James M. McPherson, *Is Blood Thicker Than Water?: Crises of Nationalism in the Modern World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 27-69; William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*.

did not just separate themselves from the North, it is evident that elite southern aristocrats saw themselves as superior and separate from lower class white southerners as well. Those referred to as non-slaveholders in general were marked by their name as not fully “southerners.” As Walter Johnson has observed the non-slaveholder moniker “marked them as somehow incomplete—men defined by what they were not, rather than what they were.”<sup>76</sup> While this imbalance helped to wed the yeomen class to planter culture, by aspiring to the fantasy of one day joining the aristocratic class, landless whites generally did not buy into these grand illusions.<sup>77</sup>

An 1843 short story, “The Cottage Girl,” gives insight into how poor landless whites fit into the elite southern social world. The story involves the daughter of a poor white man, “honest Kit,” who was “an example of the comfort and happiness the poor might obtain, if they would exercise industry and frugality.” Kit’s daughter was “not born to the higher walks of life.... yet, she possessed that which no embellishment could enhance, or taste improve. She possessed that native simplicity of manner.” The family is shown to have been favored amongst the upper-crust of their town, and in some cases preferred to ruder slaveowners. Because “honest Kit’s” daughter was raised with the manners of planter society, and her father chosen to exercise “industry and frugality,” she is eventually rewarded with the honor of marrying a wealthy landowner. She bought into the elite southern ethos of honor and manners and was thus was able to cross the cultural line that demarked the respective worlds of respectable southerners and of “poor white trash.”<sup>78</sup> In this example of elite southern mythmaking, Kit and his daughter rebuked the stereotype of the poor landless white they were now welcome members of the social world of the

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<sup>76</sup> Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 373.

<sup>77</sup> Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*.

<sup>78</sup> “The Cottage Girl,” *The Southern Literary Messenger* vol. 9 (Richmond: B. B. Minor, 1843), 275-280.

South. This story helps to illustrate the importance that the negative assumptions imposed on landless southern whites had on relegating them to the social margins of their communities.

John Pendleton Kennedy's very popular novel, *Swallow Barn*, similarly stresses the importance of chivalric honor to the aristocratic south. The novel's central character, Mark Littleton, a New Yorker visiting a Virginia plantation in order to enjoy the life of a southern aristocrat. Littleton attempts to court a young southern belle, Bel Tracy. He must bend to her aristocratic expectations, and compete with a slew of chivalrous male suitors. Kennedy paints a picture of a stereotypical southern belle, wrapped up in chivalric fantasies and "romantic fancies, such as country ladies who want excitement and read novels are apt to engender." Bel Tracy is an unusual smart, curious and capable woman who holds her male suitors to high standards of chivalry. She trains a falcon as a pet, but ultimately relies on the narrator to go on an adventure to find the bird that she could not contain. In the process Mark proves himself to Bel, finally living up to the standards of antebellum southern honor culture.<sup>79</sup> *Swallow Barn*, published in 1832, is an early example of a developed ideal of southern chivalry and honor in the Cavalier vein. Kennedy was aware of the cultural role of his medium and his genre, working to spread the chivalric southern Cavalier mythology and ethic, serving as a guide for the southern elite to define what "the South" was. Authors such as Kennedy would be central to the invention of the antebellum ideal of southern honor culture that would become more ubiquitous as the three decades before the Civil War progressed. As Taylor has observed, in opposition to the values of the North, southerners had "as a desperate solution—to invent others." They saw themselves as

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<sup>79</sup> John P. Kennedy, *Swallow Barn, or A Sojourn in the Old Dominion vol. 1* (Philadelphia: Carey & Lea, 1832), 219-228, 267-280.

different than the North and “increasingly, they tended to reshape this acknowledged difference into a claim of superiority.”<sup>80</sup>

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* provided a less genteel view of southern social culture, portraying slaveowners as vicious and a southern populace implicit in brutality against the enslaved and the breakup of the slave family. Olmsted observed, that even in the South *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was widely read, it was “sold openly on a Mississippi steamboat,” and a Columbia, South Carolina, bookseller “complained that he could not keep up with demand for it.”<sup>81</sup> Stowe’s depictions of barbarous slave owners challenged the paternalist ethos that undergirded the southern ideal of the plantation master, prompting a defense of southern honor from elite southern writers. As Thomas Hagood points out, Stowe’s gender also bolstered her attack on southern honor, and made it more acutely felt by elite southerners who commented on the book. Stowe’s rhetorical aims broke the bounds of “nineteenth-century gender decorum and the American patriarchal order.” Southern reviewer John R. Thompson criticized Stowe and her meddling “with things which her concern her not.” Her work audaciously stood outside the gender ideal ascribed to her as a female author and Thompson saw her engagement in the politics of slavery to be an affront which sought to “place woman on a footing of political equality with man.”<sup>82</sup> Stowe not only threatened southern honor through her depiction of southern slavery, but also with her choice to voice her politics in the public sphere. Stowe exploited the necessarily masculine ethos of patriarchal chivalry in order to challenge the social order of southern planter culture, and with it the paternalist patriarchal worldview that undergirded it. This challenge was the reason *Uncle*

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<sup>80</sup> William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, xviii.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas Chase Hagood, “‘Oh, what a slanderous book’: Reading ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ in the Antebellum South,” *Southern Quarterly* 49 no. 4 (2012), 72, Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, 188, 619.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 630-640.

*Tom's Cabin* was so important to southern elites whose job it was to justify and create the social culture of the slave south, providing the impetus for a sustained response from the south's elite novelists and social commentators.

Stowe continued to challenge honor and masculinity of southern patriarchs in her 1856 novel *Dred*; as well as engaging this time with the plight of the poor southern white. She had already experienced how acutely the southern elite felt the kinds of attacks on their character that were present in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and in *Dred* she welded the plantation novel in order to attack planter masculinity. A typical southern gentleman depicted in *Dred* is described as “tall, slender, with a sort of loose-jointedness and carelessness of dress.” He was on the verge of “clownishness” and displayed a “hypochondriac temperament.”<sup>83</sup> As Taylor has observed, Stowe's representatives of the southern planter elite in *Dred*, were described with “an obvious lack of vitality and masculinity, the very qualities which the legend most insists upon.”<sup>84</sup> In addition Stowe used depiction of degraded whites to show how the slave labor system violated the paternalistic ethos. The chivalric honor code included a paternalistic outlook that saw the poor as dependents who relied on the philanthropy of southern gentlemen and ladies. Pointing out the true failings of the slave labor system in the South, and its potential role in creating poverty for whites, challenged aristocratic southerners' ability to live up to their paternalistic aspirations.

Allison Hurst argues that Stowe was concerned with portraying poor southern laborers as an uncontrollable class created by the slave labor system. Stowe knew showing poor whites as victims of slavery would cut to the heart of the arguments that justified slavery to non-

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<sup>83</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* vol. II (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company. 1856), 18-19.

<sup>84</sup> William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, 139.

slaveholding whites. In *Dred*, aristocratic southerners show little sympathy for their impoverished neighbors. One character exclaims that “there ought to be a law passed to make ‘em all slaves,” only then could they be properly taken care of. In Stowe’s portrayal elite southerners saw poor whites as barely better than slaves. She charged the slave aristocracy with being unable to control a class who was created by their labor system, juxtaposing it with the northern free labor system which was able to keep its laboring class in check. Poor landless whites befuddle *Dred*’s patriarchal aristocrats. Stowe goes as far as to show one plantation owner as wanting to kill local poor whites that squatted on his land. “It’s perfectly insufferable, what we proprietors have to bear from this tribe of creatures,” he proclaims, in fact “there out to be hunting-parties got up to chase them down, and exterminate ‘em, just as we do rats. It would be a kindness to them; the only thing you can do for them is kill them.” The character goes on to address the paternalistic ideal, which at the time would have called for philanthropy for the poor, by showing his true character and declaring that “as for charity... you might as well throw victuals into the hollow logs as to try to feed ‘em.”<sup>85</sup> *Dred*’s portrayal of an aristocratic class made impotent by the presence of poverty, reflects Stowe’s understanding of the importance of southern honor culture to the aristocratic south, and helps to explain why her appeals to underlying moral ideals would be so effective in making her antislavery message cut to the heart of the elite south and the slaveowners who populated it.

As Louis Rubin has explained, southern writers in the antebellum period were obsessed with historical context. Often their goals were explanatory in aim, seeking to illustrate to the growing southern readership what “the South” was. Before the 1820s and 1830s, southerners

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<sup>85</sup> Allison L. Hurst, "Beyond the Pale: Poor Whites as Uncontrolled Social Contagion in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 63 no. 3 (2010), 637-640, quotations from Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred*, 105, 190.



often viewed themselves less as “southerners” than as citizens of their respective states. They did not view literature as a guide to their social and cultural identity as southerners. But as sectional conflict rose in the 1830s and 1840s, Rubin observes, “so did the consciousness of being Southern.” The support of slavery was the underlying ideal that divided northerners and southerners, and in the growing literature that described what it meant to be a southerner, defense and explanation of a society built on the ethos of plantation slavery became necessary. As John C. Calhoun wrote in 1847, “we want above all other things, a Southern literature, from school books up to the works of the highest order.” Elite southerners perceived the cultural and social need for a distinctively southern defense of slavery and the distinct way of life that its proprietors aspired to. In response to this impetus, as Lewis Simpson has observed, southern “literary pastoralism became devoted wholly to the defense of slavery instead of the defense of poetry.” Implicit in this defense of southern slavery was the defense of slave masters and the social culture of the South. This necessitated a portrait of landless whites as innately inferior, in order to protect the patriarchal and paternalist honor code of the aristocratic elite.<sup>86</sup>

In the mid- to late-1850s southern plantation novels set out to refute Stowe’s portrait of the slave south. This string of books, often termed “anti-Tom” novels, used the romantic genre of the plantation novel to defend slaveowners from attacks on their honor. Authors such as Charles Jacob Peterson, William Smith and Caroline Rush, immediately following the release of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, went to great lengths to describe a South full of faithful slaves who needed their master’s care. They also described what they called “white slavery,” which they claim occurred

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<sup>86</sup> Louis D. Rubin Jr., *The Edge of the Swamp: A Study in the Literature and Society of the Old South* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 1-4, 8-9, 12-22, Calhoun quote on 12; Lewis P. Simpson, “The Southern Writer and the Great Literary Secession,” in *The man of Letters in New England and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 288-289.

in the factories of the materialistically driven industrial North. The characters in these stories were often lured away from the South with the promise of material success in the North. Inevitably these characters were met with hardship, exploitation and often death.<sup>87</sup> Depictions of the South extolled the honorable traits of its aristocratic slaveowners, while comparing them to exploitative owners of northern factories, whom if these stories were to be believed, were almost all abolitionists. These authors used this juxtaposition in order to defend slavery as well as the relative honor of the society that it produced. Honor was above all the concern of these authors, and reflects the concern that southern literature in general had in portraying southern gentlemen as being superior to other white men.

Poor white characters are noticeably absent in these later works. The purpose of the plantation novels of the 1850s was to protect the image of the slaveowner and slavery as an economic and social system. Ignoring poverty at home while deploring the degradation that met poor white people in the capitalist North served the political purpose of these works. The political need to show the positive effects of slavery on society was a conscious choice made by these authors. When a poor white person was portrayed, it was a northern traveler, someone outside of established southern community, and was often used as a juxtaposition for the high quality of life of the southern slave. In one early anti-Tom novel, *Life at the South, or, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" as it is*, "Uncle Tom" encounters a poor white man while traveling North towards freedom. Tom proclaims "you poor white folks have all our sympathies." The white man must work hard to get ahead, so "no real full-blooded nigger will overlook you, nor tread upon you;

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<sup>87</sup> For illustrative examples see J. Thornton Randolph [Charles Jacobs Peterson], *The Cabin and Parlor; or, Slaves and Masters* (Philadelphia, T. B. Peterson, 1852), W. L. G. Smith, *Life at the South: or "Uncle Tom's Cabin" as it is* (Buffalo: Geoffrey H. Derby & Co., 1852) and [Caroline E. Rush], *North and South, or, Slavery and its Contrasts* (Philadelphia: Crissy & Markley, 1852).

my kind will always treat you right, depend on't.... your turn will come some day or other.”<sup>88</sup>

Instead of giving deference to the man, Tom commiserates with him, treating him, in some respects, as an inferior.

Most elite southerners chose to see the presence of poor landless whites as an aberration and not a product of the system of plantation slavery that dominated southern culture. These people were simply the product of innate physical and mental deficiencies. They were not seen as part of the “South” as it was mythologized in contemporary works, they were often even seen as below black characters as they often rebuked the authority of the aristocracy and acted in ways that broke the ethic of southern gentility. Characterizations of landless whites across all modes of commentary were commonly accompanied by comparisons to slaves. Matt Wray explains how many of these elite southern writers “tended to view America’s poor white trash as undeserving of democratic privileges and unable to bear the rights and responsibilities of other white American citizens.” Stereotyping and comparisons to the enslaved gave the South’s landless whites a kind of not quite white social status. Whether intentional or not this fit well with antebellum elite southerners’ racist justifications for slavery. To many, “poor white degeneracy” was the product of “tainted blood,” a biological inferiority that would have existed regardless of the type of social and economic systems they lived under.<sup>89</sup>

This racial argument was reflected in descriptions that emphasized physical deformity and poor physical condition. John Pendleton Kennedy in his popular 1835 novel *Horse-Shoe Robinson* provides a particularly detailed account of a landless white man from Virginia. The man is described in character as “swarthy,” “uncouth” and “cunning,” and physically as

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<sup>88</sup> W. L. G. Smith, *Life at the South*, 350.

<sup>89</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White*, 49.

“ungraceful,” “slovenly,” “sinewy,” misshapen and bent.<sup>90</sup> Not only does Kennedy emphasize the man’s degraded physical characteristics, he also emphasizes several of the stereotypical tropes of poor white characterization at the time, such as lack of manners and a distrustful attitude. Similarly, Longstreet’s Ransy Sniffles embodied this characteristics of racial and cultural inferiority. Ransy “had fed copiously upon red clay and blackberries,” which had given him a “complexion that a corpse would have disdained to own.... his shoulders were fleshless and elevated; his head large and flat; his neck slim and translucent, and his arms, hands, fingers, and feet were lengthened out of all proportion to the rest of his frame.”<sup>91</sup> These authors used stereotypical descriptions as a characterizing shortcut, engaging pre-conceived notions of poor white character already prominent in the mind of the southern elite.

Hundley described poor white southerners as “lank, lean, angular, and bony, with flaming red, or flaxen, or sandy, or carrot-colored hair, sallow complexion, awkward manners, and a natural stupidity or dullness of intellect that almost surpasses belief.” He also laid out the theory behind conceptions of the ideal “Southern Gentlemen,” which he denotes as a distinct term, distinguished from conventional understandings of the term “gentleman.” This distinction did not come simply from being from the South. Many northerners when they arrived in the South would “manifest great surprise because they meet there, as at home, many ill-bred and vulgar persons.” A “true” Southern Gentleman came from good genetic stock, and is “usually of aristocratic parentage.” Key to be a Southern Gentlemen was European ancestry. “In Virginia,” Hundley claims, “the ancestors of the Southern Gentleman were chiefly English Cavaliers, after whom succeeded the French Huguenots and Scotch Jacobites,” in Maryland “his ancestors were in the

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<sup>90</sup> John P. Kennedy, *Horse-Shoe Robinson: A Tale of the Tory Ascendancy* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1854), 156.

<sup>91</sup> Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, *Georgia Scenes*, 67.

main Irish Catholics,” and in South Carolina they were Huguenots who had “drained France of her most generous blood to found in the Western Hemisphere a race of heroes and patriots.” This ancestry manifested itself in physical condition: “the Southern Gentleman is usually possessed of an equally faultless physical development. His average height is about six feet, yet he is rarely gawky in his movements, or in the least clumsily put together; and his entire physique conveys to the mind an impression of firmness united to flexibility.”<sup>92</sup> These aristocratic southerners were presented in ways that contrasted the meek and disfigured form of the southern poor white.

Their not quite white status marginalized landless whites from the rest of white society. So much so that even European travellers described them in ways that illustrated their position at the fringe of “whiteness.” Thomas Hamilton commenting on laboring families of the Mississippi river valley described “worn and sallow men,” with “pallid children, and their haggard mother.” “Outcasts they literally are,” he claimed, some were “men of broken characters, hopes, and fortunes, who fly not from justice, but contempt.” One poor man he encountered “had been handsome,” and “his manners were remarkably pleasing; but my fellow passengers assured me that he was one who could stab while he smiled.”<sup>93</sup> Frances Trollope commented that the “squalid look of the miserable wives and children of these men was dreadful... their complexion of a blueish white... and the poor little ones wear exactly the same ghastly hue.” The Englishman proclaimed that he had “never witnessed human nature reduced so low as it appeared in the wood-cutters’ huts on the unwholesome banks of the Mississippi.”<sup>94</sup> As Walter Johnson has observed these men “represented a sort of racial residuum, white men left behind by

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<sup>92</sup> Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, 263, 21-28.

<sup>93</sup> Thomas Hamilton. *Men and Manners in America* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1838), 187-188.

<sup>94</sup> Frances Milton Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1901. Orig. pub. 1832), 28-29.

the progress of their race.” These landless whites were victims of a process where class distinctions translated into a kind of racial distinction.<sup>95</sup> Daniel Robinson Hundley applied these prejudices to his descriptions of the southern lower class. He wondered if a “Southern Gentlemen” who was “an athletic, healthy human being, standing six feet,” had ever been the offspring of a poor white “scrub” who was “runtish... wheezy, asthmatic, and consumptive.”<sup>96</sup> These distinctions were so pervasive that it spread from the socially and biologically minded southern elite to the European and northern travellers who stayed with them and learned of southern social relations through them. Racialized characterization of southern poor whites were so prevalent in this period that they even invaded the writing of northerners.

The genesis and use of the term “poor white trash” helps illuminate the racial dimensions of the landless white’s place in white society. The earliest recorded use of the term comes from the 1835 account of British actress Fanny Kemble’s trip to the United States. During dinner with a prominent planter couple one of her host’s commented that “there are no servants but blacks” as “all species of servitude whatever is looked upon as a degradation.” Even “the slaves themselves entertain the very highest contempt for white servants, whom they designate as ‘poor white trash.’”<sup>97</sup> The phrases invention was commonly attributed to slaves, though this was likely an elite myth propagated to bolster their claim that even slaves looked down on poor landless whites.<sup>98</sup> Slave contempt for poor whites is reflected in many contemporaneous accounts of social relations, as elite southerners worked to marginalize poor landless whites. This was not just meant to describe their relative value as workers but also their intelligence, as illustrated by

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<sup>95</sup> Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 71.

<sup>96</sup> Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, 252.

<sup>97</sup> Fanny Kemble, *Journal of a Residence in America*, (Paris: Galignani & Co., 1835), 242.

<sup>98</sup> For example see Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, edited by William J. Cooper (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 257.

one slaveowner who claimed that there “wasn’t a negro in the country with so little sense as to be fooled into trouble” by one particularly troublesome poor white.<sup>99</sup> As Wray has pointed out stereotyping of poor whites, whether intentional or not, served the purpose of placing them in a dichotomy that portrayed them as more “black” than “white.” The very term “poor white trash” got its rhetorical power by suggesting the impurity of someone's whiteness.<sup>100</sup> Whiteness constituted the most distinct class barrier of the southern social world, and elite southerners felt the need to protect its purity in order to protect the legitimacy of their honor world ideal, which placed racial authority at its center.

Olmsted, describing landless white southerners in the North Carolina turpentine industry, observed that the slaves working in the more industrial distillation process, alongside white men, “unusually intelligent and cheerful.” Indeed, they were “superior in every moral and intellectual respect to the great mass of the white people inhabiting the turpentine forest.”<sup>101</sup> Observations such as Olmsted's bolstered elite arguments about the innate character of impoverished white southerners. A long line of southern elite understanding of the condition and character of landless southerners was internalized by the literate North and South, which subsequently were deployed by proslavery writers in the decades before the Civil War. They argued that if the slave labor system failed to hold poor whites out of poverty it was a product of their own low moral character. Increasingly through this period this low moral character was seen as of a biological, and quasi-racial, origin than the result of environmental factors.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Linton Stephens to Alexander H. Stephens, 3 February 1860, quoted in William J. Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society*, 64-65.

<sup>100</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White*, 47.

<sup>101</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, 382-388.

<sup>102</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White*, 48.

While these social differences between true “whites” and their landless counterparts were viewed as the product of low morals and even biological differences, historians have often seen the differences between lower class non-slaveowners and those who bought into planter culture to be the product of long standing ethnocultural differences. Grady McWhiney traced the heritage of those referred to as “crackers” in southern society back to their roots in the Celtic regions of Europe. These people were less concerned with the entrepreneurial ethos of earlier Anglo settlers of the South, and the stereotype of the poor work ethic of “crackers” sprang from these cultural differences. Because of the domination of planter culture “cracker culture” began to take on negative connotations.<sup>103</sup> James Denham in his study of the Florida “cracker” found that crackerism was a driving force in southern ideals of “individualism, animosity toward taxation,” and a “latent distrust of government.”<sup>104</sup>

The characteristics of the distrustful and lazy landless white, was one born out of a particular cultural ideology. As Carl Osthaus has observed, those seen as not exhibiting the ideology of “protestant work ethic” often were too busy just maintaining their jobs, farms and families. The plain folk “never celebrated the mythical leisure ethic of the Old South because they were too busy working to put food on the table.”<sup>105</sup> Walter Johnson as well has described a process by which the landless whites’ experience in the developing Mississippi valley worked to marginalize them as relics of a past world and as “not quite white.” Their adherence to different cultural norms than the dominate planter ideal, and experience as menial laborers and backwoods “hicks” marginalized them as an Old World type of people. This lead to a resentment that

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<sup>103</sup> Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*.

<sup>104</sup> James M. Denham, “The Florida Cracker Before the Civil War,” 468.

<sup>105</sup> Carl R. Osthaus, “The Work Ethic of the Plain Folk: Labor and Religion in the Old South,” 745.



resulted in a characterization that they were not true southerners, and thusly not full members of southern society.<sup>106</sup>

Above all, though, marginalization of landless whites was a product of the protection of slavery. The paternalistic ethos, along with the Cavalier mythos, derived from efforts to protect slave owners from attacks on their character and thusly the moral legitimacy of slavery. An article published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* just a few years before the Civil War laid out the argument that justified the elite south's moral ambivalence to the plight of poor southern whites. In response to recent European embrace of the ideal of "universal benevolence" towards all men, the author, in defense of southern society, claims that real benevolence requires a "careful study of the various natures, habits and necessities of different men" and an application of whatever "judicious" remedies were required by the nature of their moral condition. He quotes an English sermon which argues that any those who do not take into account a person's innate ability into account are falling for the "dazzling phantasmagoria of misguided philanthropy.... wasting their energies and expending their means in barren theories and vain efforts to reach some unattainable, and, in the nature of things, impossible end." Here he is not simply talking about the difference between black and white, but about the difference between Cavalier and "cracker." In the process making a claim about the superiority of certain types of white people, presumably in this case aristocratic southerners.

In addition the author offers that "Any system of universal benevolence, which refuses to recognize the obvious differences in the character of nations and individuals, and is based upon the preposterous theory that all men are equally capacitated for the enjoyment of all blessings... is but a fantastic vision of the utopian dreamer... [that] may be productive of the most disastrous

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<sup>106</sup> Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 71-72.

consequences.”<sup>107</sup> While these arguments served the obvious purpose of justifying racial slavery, they also helped to justify the poverty that resulted from the slave labor system. By 1857 this kind of political editorializing felt right at home in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, a publication whom specialized in southern literary romanticism, and employed plantation novel authors such as William Gilmore Simms. Throughout the sectional crisis, such popular culture served as a bulwark against attacks on southern Cavalier honor and provided an intellectual defense to the aristocratic social culture of the South and the slave labor system that supported it.

In the late-antebellum period the institutions of southern intellectual culture moved to shore up slavery from increased attacks from northern critics. A cultural ethic, derived from the needs of elite aristocratic southern slaveowners resulted in a degradation of the status of landless white southerners. Old stereotypes merged with new cultural and political concerns to relegate landless whites to the status of dependent and not quite white. Whiteness was key to perceptions of what it meant to be a southerner, and perhaps an American, and thusly landless whites ultimately occupied a social standing that did not recognize them even as southerners. This social status would have significant ramifications for how elite southerners viewed their landless neighbors, creating a fundamental distrust, and raising questions about their loyalty to the social order and to the South and slavery.

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<sup>107</sup> “The Edinburgh Review on the Political Crisis in the U.S. October, 1856,” *The Southern Literary Messenger* 14 no. 3 (Richmond: Macfarlane, Fergusson & Co., 1857), 23-24.

## CHAPTER II

### WHITE UNDER BLACK:

#### SLAVE-POOR WHITE INTERACTION IN THE MIND OF THE POST-TURNER SOUTH

The frequent interaction of poor whites and slaves, both in work and in leisure, blurred the lines of southern racial hierarchy. Racial boundaries were important to aristocratic understandings of southern honor culture and who constituted a real “southerners;” whiteness was an essential element to southern definitions of a “Southern Gentlemen.” Illicit trade and social interaction between poor whites and slaves, was common and slaveholders were aware of it. References to this interaction litter the elite literature on southern social culture. There are a variety of reasons these types of interactions would have troubled elite southerners, and it is clear that they constituted a legitimate fear often at the forefront of slave owners’ minds. Elite southerners compared poor whites to slaves, and often found slaves preferable in character, morals, and work ethic. These comparisons generally resulted from the fact that black and white laborers often worked side by side doing the same jobs. This offered a direct contrast between the two groups, at the same time it fostered an understanding of poor white “otherness” within mainstream southern society. Comparisons and interactions led elite southerners to make claims of not only cultural superiority, but also biological and moral superiority. It also led slave owners to emphasize the extent of slave disdain for poor whites—along with their love of paternalist whites—in order to bolster their credibility within southern honor culture. Fear of interaction,

particularly when it came to the planning of slave insurrections, led elite southerners to seek further control over their slaves and over landless whites. Dealing with landless whites became wrapped up in the politics of social control and the master-slave relationship, just as the South was increasingly adopting a proslavery ideology that stressed these factors as behind the need for a more systematic ideology of slavery and labor.

Interacting with slaves marked poor white men as being outside the mainstream culture of southern society. As historian of slave-poor white interaction Jeff Forret explains, “when poor whites set aside their racial prejudices to cooperate with slaves and treat them as near equals, they inherently called attention to their tenuous ties to the southern slave regime.”<sup>108</sup> Slave-poor white interactions occurred in a wide variety of forms and contexts. Suggesting that race might not have been a powerful enough force to completely overcome class boundaries and unite all whites. While interracial antagonism certainly existed, it is clear that it was not so strong that it prevented relations, even amicable ones. Timothy Lockley has argued that “many slaves and poor whites socialized or traded, ran off or made love together,” demonstrating “that race could not always have been the decisive factor in determining the course of tone of the interactions.”<sup>109</sup> The rebuking of the boundaries of race, was central to slave owner unease with the presence of landless whites within southern society.

Landless whites, and of course slaves, were marginalized from mainstream southern honor culture. Due to their inability to participate in customary aristocratic cultural traditions, landless whites had to adapt their own forms of cultural formality, these were often of a biracial nature. This social world mimicked the trappings of honor culture, where whites and blacks

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<sup>108</sup> Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins*, 17.

<sup>109</sup> Timothy J. Lockley, “Partners in Crime: African Americans and Non-Slaveholding Whites in Antebellum Georgia,” in *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, ed. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz (New York: Routledge, 1997), 65, 69.

competed in often violent activities to prove their masculine honor. Interaction with blacks further broke the bounds of respectable white society in key ways, by blurring the racial boundaries of the South, as well as the boundaries of the social ethic of manners and respectable interactions. Landless whites also lashed out at elite southerners through humor, slights and disrespect, in efforts to demonstrate a masculinity denied to landless whites within mainstream honor culture. This contributed to increased antagonism between the two classes. These factors together bolstered a view of the laboring class of southerners which often placed slaves above poor whites. This fear was derived from the perception that landless whites were resentful of planter rule and could potentially pose a threat to society through involvement in interracial crime and slave insurrections.

Anxiety over slave-poor white interaction fed into fears of slave rebellion, a fear that dominated planter psychology in the three decades before the Civil War. Involvement of poor whites in the scheming of slave insurrections, at least in the mind of elite southerners, was thought to be a common occurrence. Feeding off of the racist paternalist image of the incompetent and grateful slaves, elite southerners assumed that any rebellion by slaves had to be the result of meddling whites. After the Nat Turner rebellion in 1831, fear of slave insurrections would come to the forefront of both antislavery and proslavery thought. This sometimes placed defenders of slavery against the poor white class, who could disturb the otherwise peaceful plantations of the South, and potentially trigger antislavery backlash, such as that which occurred in the Virginia legislature in 1831. Anxieties from social and cultural distrust, mixed with fear of violent internal disruption, creating an acute concern that landless whites constituted a potential internal danger. Racist assumptions about the need for whites to provide the knowledge and means for rebellion gave these anxieties a sense of urgency. This concern hastened the

development of a systematic proslavery ideology, an ideology driven by a desire to control slaves in the face of widespread illicit interaction with untrustworthy poor whites.

Stephanie McCurry has suggested that in many ways southern democracy, and the ideology of “yeoman republicanism,” was not in fact predicated on the equality of whites but on the principle of exclusion of “dependent” classes. This included not just women and slaves, but also lower-class whites.<sup>110</sup> The stereotyping and stigmatizing of landless whites reflects this framework of southern republicanism. Whiteness as an ideal of character was important to southern social life, in fact, as historian Nell Irvin Painter has observed, “‘Southerner’ meant white southerner, ‘American’ required whiteness, but mere whiteness might not suffice in society.”<sup>111</sup> While whiteness did connote a superior social status, whiteness in and of itself did not secure a status of political independence and trust. The stigma of their not quite white status must have made poor whites anxious about their place within the southern social hierarchy. This stigma further retarded the social progress of a people who faced stiff obstacles to any kind of social mobility. This was especially true in the late antebellum period as the rise of commercial agriculture and the boundaries of the growing credit system saw a decline in the economic fortunes of not just landless whites but non-slaveholders in general. The system of tenant farming, which a large number of landless whites participated in, also served as a barrier to social and economic progress.<sup>112</sup>

Along with this not quite white social status, came evaluative statements about the relative worth of landless whites and enslaved blacks in elite publications. Olmsted, commenting on the observations of one prominent slave owner, claimed the man could never see white laborers

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<sup>110</sup> Stephanie McCurry, “The Two Faces of Republicanism: Gender and Proslavery Politics in Antebellum South Carolina,” *The Journal of American History* 78 no. 4 (1992), 1245-1264.

<sup>111</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W.Norton, 2010), 201-202.

<sup>112</sup> Charles C. Bolton, *Whites of the Antebellum South*, 15-23, 96-102.

competing with black people. “You never could depend on white men,” the planter argued, “slaves were the only reliable laborers—you could command them and make them do what was right.” Indeed, poor white men were “worse off in almost all respects than” slaves, they were “extremely ignorant and immoral, as well as indolent and unambitious.”<sup>113</sup> Prominent planter and politician James Henry Hammond, also argued that “hirelings” were in morals not a “whit superior to a negro.”<sup>114</sup> The fact that landless whites and enslaved blacks often worked side by side, brought the relative position of landless whites in white society into stark contrast with the rigidly structured racial boundaries of mainstream southern society. Brantley York, a landless white man, recalled later in life when “with the negroes,” he was “sent out before sunrise to pull corn.” Beyond simply working alongside enslaved people York and other laborer whites “even had to eat beside them, being denied a spot at the employer’s table.”<sup>115</sup> An account from an escaped black laborer attests to this division in white society. William Brown wrote of one hired poor white man who planters would employ “without hesitation, to hunt down their negroes,” but who would not be received “into their houses as a visitor any sooner than they would one of their own slaves.”<sup>116</sup> As Cecil-Fronsman has put it “misfortune” could reduce a white person in the South “to the most degraded position in his society.”<sup>117</sup>

This problem is highlighted by the academic traveler Robert Russell, who noted the depreciated value of white labor in the South. Due to a dearth of employment opportunities, poor

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<sup>113</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, 84.

<sup>114</sup> James H. Hammond to William Gilmore Simms, 19 November, 1854, quoted in William J. Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society*, 67.

<sup>115</sup> Brantley York, *The Autobiography of Brantley York*. Durham (NC: The Seeman Printery, 1910), 13-14.

<sup>116</sup> William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home: or, The South and Its People* (Boston: A.G. Brown & Co., 1880), 84.

<sup>117</sup> Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites*, 16.

whites “will work for even less wages than the hire and maintenance of a slave.”<sup>118</sup> Comparison with slaves hurt poor whites within the social culture of the South, by breaking the racial boundaries that white supremacy was supposed to protect. Even those who fell outside of the protected white class perceived the division created by southern honor culture. Ex-slave Henry Bibb commented that aristocratic southerners looked “with utter contempt upon a poor laboring man” whether he was “moral or immoral, honest or dishonest.”<sup>119</sup> Above all else these men were labor, and were looked at as such regardless of skin color.

The elite southern worldview placed race and biology at the center of their system of social organization. Southern political ideals took on the shape of the Cavalier mythos, where biological characteristics, which were seen to be determinate of a man’s character and morals, defined someone's respective place in the social hierarchy. Daniel Robinson Hundley’s study of southern social relations claims that originally the South was populated by the best blood of Europe, “in Virginia the ancestors of the Southern Gentlemen were chiefly English cavaliers,” he explained, “in Maryland, his ancestors were in the main Irish Catholics... in South-Carolina, they were Huguenots—at least the better class of them—those dauntless chevaliers, who, fleeing from the massacre of St. Bartholomew and the bloody persecutions of priests and tyrants, drained France of her most generous blood to found in the Western Hemisphere a race of heroes and patriots.” But the intermingling of classes had led to the “gradual decay of some of the old families.”<sup>120</sup> Immigrants, and the descendants of “peasant” stock, who had entered the country largely as indentured servants, had muddied the blood of southern gentleman.

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<sup>118</sup> Robert Russell, *North America and its Agriculture and Climate* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1857), 296.

<sup>119</sup> Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 25.

<sup>120</sup> Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, 27-28.



Elite southern slave owners sought to exclude poor whites from their social world. The ways that poor whites lived their lives did not live up to elite standards of honor and chivalry, and interaction with slaves relegated them outside of the confines of respectable “white” behavior.<sup>121</sup> Within the world of southern masculine culture only men of honor shared the privilege of freedom and equality. As Elliot Gorn has observed, in his study of backcountry brawling, “those denied honor were implicitly less than equal—perilously close to a slave-like condition.” This elite understanding relegated poor whites, like slaves, to a subordinate standing in the social hierarchy. Despite the importance of whiteness to the southern social world, poor whites, in the eyes of the southern gentry, were not social equals, and often sat at a level more similar to slaves than to aristocratic Southern Gentlemen.<sup>122</sup>

These poor white men, because of their biological lineage, were seen to be outside of the contours of mainstream southern honor culture, and appeared as the opposite in cultural representations to the chivalrous Cavalier Southern Gentlemen. In the novel *George Balcombe*, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker illustrates the feeling of ancestral superiority that pervaded southern cultural aspirations. Of Balcombe, Tucker’s “Southern Gentlemen” protagonist, William Taylor explains: “He firmly believes in the social hierarchy and the importance of good blood.”<sup>123</sup> Speaking of his ancestry Balcombe exclaims: “Is it not a higher honour to be sprung from a race of men without fear and without reproach—the ancient cavaliers of Virginia?”<sup>124</sup> Hundley spoke fondly of the “Southern Gentleman” and his superior physical characteristics. Due to his

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<sup>121</sup> Jeff Forret, “Slave-Poor White Violence in the Antebellum Carolinas,” 42.

<sup>122</sup> Elliot J. Gorn, “‘Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch’: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry,” *The American Historical Review* 90 no. 7 (1985), 41.

<sup>123</sup> William R. Taylor, *Cavalier & Yankee*, 301.

<sup>124</sup> George Tucker, *The Valley of Shenandoah: or, Memoirs of the Graysons*, (New York: Orville A. Roorbach, 1828), 61.

“aristocratic parentage” and “heroic” ancestry the “Southern Gentlemen is usually possessed of an equally faultless physical development.” “His average height is about six feet” Hundley explained, “yet he is rarely gawky in his movements, or in the least clumsily put together; and his entire physique conveys to the mind an impression of firmness united to flexibility.”<sup>125</sup> These “Southern Gentleman” stood in marked contrast to the weak and decrepit descriptions of poor whites that pervaded elite southern writing.

The vanguards of southern elite literary culture also felt the need to show black perceptions of character deficiencies in poor white people, and fostered an image of animosity between black and white laborers. In one narrative by John Pendleton Kennedy, an old slave is shown to have an aristocratic “disdain and intolerance for democracy,” as “poor white people have not the slightest chance of his good opinion.” The man felt pride in “the pedigree and history of his master’s family,” which held “an epic dignity in his imagination.”<sup>126</sup> In Caroline Lee Hentz’s plantation novel, *The Planter’s Northern Bride*, one slave exclaims to her mistress that she despises “the free niggers as much as I do poor white folks.”<sup>127</sup> Slaves were portrayed as loyal, they were grateful of their slave status, and despised poor whites for their disloyalty to their white superiors.

Beyond simple animosity, elite southern writers worked to foster a sense of superiority amongst slaves against landless whites. They often worked alongside each other and had some kind of camaraderie in the underground world of backwoods socializing, and southern slave owners in particular saw the potential for a biracial alliance that could threaten their authority

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<sup>125</sup> Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, 28.

<sup>126</sup> John Pendleton Kennedy, “A Legend of the Chesapeake,” *The Southern Literary Messenger* vol. 14 (Richmond: Macfarlane, Fergusson & Co., 1857), 225.

<sup>127</sup> Caroline Lee Hentz, *The Planter’s Northern Bride* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson and Brothers, 1854), 249-250.

over their slaves. They often forbade any kind of contact between slaves and poor whites. This served a variety of purposes including preventing the corruptions of slaves, eliminating illicit trade, and, perhaps most significantly, preventing inducement towards rebellion. One former slave recalled that there were “poor whites, all around us, but Master didn’t allow them on his place.” Despite the large amount of landless whites that worked within the plantation system, another slave commented that the “rich slave owners didn’ ‘low ‘em to come on dere plantations.” These rules did little to prohibit slave-poor white interaction though as they “slipped in dere at night when de master didn’ know it.”<sup>128</sup>

An event relayed in a North Carolina newspaper in 1847 may suggest that slaves did in fact perceive landless whites to be of lower social stature than themselves. A landless white man named Ira Westbrook had hired a slave to work for him. Reportedly, “the negro was insolent and impudent in his language,” and when threatened by a whipping declared “that he would not be whipped by any such man.” The conflict reached the paper as Westbrook ended up shooting the slave, but dodged charges as the court determined the slave was in a state of rebellion at the time.<sup>129</sup> Attacks on poor white authority by slaves, was an attack against their very honor and status as white men. Attempts by men like Westbrook to assert their authority over slaves were attempts to defend their very status as white men, as slaves often perceived poor whites as even their social inferior, perhaps based on lessons learned from interaction with their elite masters.<sup>130</sup>

Popular southern literature also reflected the understanding that slaves often looked down upon poor whites. Charles Jacob Peterson’s 1852 anti-Tom novel, *The Cabin and Parlor*, relays the fictional testimony of a slave whose mistress had become destitute. He claims he will stay

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<sup>128</sup> Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins*, 26-39, quotations from 26-27.

<sup>129</sup> Raleigh Register, April 2, 1847, quoted in Jeff Forret, "Slave-Poor White Violence in the Antebellum Carolinas," 151-152.

<sup>130</sup> Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites*, 76-77.

with the women because finding a good master was a very hard thing, but still his lot was nothing compared to what “Miss Isabel hab ter go through wid,” as “poor white folks hab a wus life dan de wus slave.” She was now, he claimed, poorer than any slave, “she no long hab even a house to lib in; she hab no one to wait on her; she hab to work for herself, wid her own lily hands.”<sup>131</sup> Here a slave is portrayed as buying into the paternalist ethos, and is used as a rhetorical tool to illustrate a particular view of the southern social world and hierarchy.

Elite southern writers also portrayed poor white hatred for slaves. Hundley, in his work on southern social relations, claimed that “the Poor Whites of the South seldom come in contact with slaves at all, and thousands of them never saw a negro; still, almost to a man, they are pro-slavery in sentiment.” Unlike yeomen non-slaveholders, who were proslavery because they understood the harm that emancipation would have on white supremacy, “the Poor White Trash are pro-slavery from downright envy and hatred of the black man.” He blamed this animosity on a history of labor competition between slaves and the ancestors of poor whites.<sup>132</sup> Clearly Hundley misunderstood the reality of widespread slave-poor white interaction in the antebellum South, and his work served to prop up long standing prejudices that elites had for those who performed society’s menial labor.<sup>133</sup>

The idea that slaves and poor whites were on a similar playing field socially reflected the elite southern worldview that poor whites were a product of innate biological deficiencies. Political and social theorist William Harper claimed that “the Creator did not intend that every individual human being should be highly cultivated, morally and intellectually,” and laid this principle at the feet of a worldview that saw slavery not as degrading to whites, but as the only

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<sup>131</sup> [Charles Jacobs Peterson], *The Cabin and Parlor; or, Slaves and Masters*, 43.

<sup>132</sup> Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, 273-274.

<sup>133</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 46.

way for a class of great white leaders to emerge. “It is by the existence of Slavery, exempting so large a portion of our citizens from the necessity of bodily labor,” that southerners, or at least slave owners, were able to engage in intellectual pursuits. Landless whites, like slaves, were left behind by this worldview as they did not have the mental capacity to live up to this ideal.<sup>134</sup> By this estimation, landless whites were hardly part of the elite world of southern whiteness, instead they inhabited a social space similar to that of slave, simply servicing the needs of elites who had the capital to amass slaves and pursue leisurely and intellectual pursuits. This marginalization of poor whites illustrates how elite cultural understandings reflected social realities.

An aversion to interacting with landless whites pervaded the honor culture of the southern elite. There was an element of violent competition that also pervaded elite southern honor culture. By the nineteenth century elite whites had separated themselves from the rowdy brawl style violence that had been widespread in eighteenth century, adopting duels as a more genteel form of honor violence. This accomplished further social separation from the “unrefined, uncultured masses.” The code of honor inherent in ceremonial dueling “proved a man’s ability to shed blood while remaining emotionally detached.”<sup>135</sup> The southern elite viewed themselves as more honorable than landless whites, and sought to separate themselves from the emotionally driven backwoods brawling that took place amongst lower class southern whites. Contemporary observer Louis Fitzgerald Tasistro, saw dueling as the “most efficient check on the propensity of man to slander and vilify his fellowman.” Southern Gentlemen used it as social check, but the poor were excluded. Further, Southern Gentleman often used the legal system to contend

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<sup>134</sup> William Harper, “Harper’s Memoir on Slavery,” in *The Proslavery Argument: As Maintained By the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1853), 35.

<sup>135</sup> Jeff Forret, “Slave-Poor White Violence in the Antebellum Carolinas,” 142-144; Elliott J. Gorn, “‘Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch’: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry,” 22.

personal defamations. “All the world knows how difficult it is for the poor to contend against the rich in matters of law,” Tasistro claimed, giving wealthy southerners another advantage in matters of honor. “This suing for defamation is the vilest farce that ever was enacted,” as the “expenses, heart-burnings, delays, and bitter vexations which must be encountered before a case of slander can fairly come to trial, are inconceivably great.” Wealthy men could “scare the victim of malevolence from the field of contest” by sending “at once a handsome retainer to some of those special pleaders whose only tact consists in making the worse appear the better.” This allowed the wealthy a dishonorable advantage against lower class whites in the system of southern honor culture.<sup>136</sup>

Landless whites were pushed out of the mainstream of white social interaction, forcing them to create their own underground social world built on ideals of masculinity and honor. This world was often biracial in character and mimicked the trappings of elite aristocratic southern culture, where whites and blacks competed in often violent activities to prove their masculine honor. As Gorn has observed, these people “were caught in a social contradiction. Society taught all white men to consider themselves equals, encouraged them to compete for power and status, yet threatened them from below with the specter of servitude and from above with insistence on obedience to rank and authority.” They were excluded from mainstream ways of proving their honor, so they adopted a system of “rough-and-tumble” social combat that was much less dispassionate, more hands on and intimately violent. Unlike an emotionally removed duelist, those who participated in this tradition “screamed defiance to the world,” these bouts allowed

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<sup>136</sup> Louis Fitzgerald Tasistro, *Random Shots and Southern Breezes vol. 1* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1842), 38-40.

them to “shout their equality at each other,” and the brutality of actions such as eye-gouging allowed them to dispel the “stigma of servility.”<sup>137</sup>

Landless whites lashed out at elite southerners through humor, slights and disrespect, in an effort to demonstrate a masculinity denied to poor whites within mainstream honor culture. Humor constituted a type of scrutiny that elites often found to be particularly unsettling to their fragile sense of honor and masculinity. This contributed to increased distrust and fear of poor whites. One southern bishop wrote of poor white humor that “some of these crackers have a good deal of humor and have a happy faculty of making doggerel poetry.” Poor whites would sing insulting rhymes and songs to challenge their elite southern “tormentors,” such as lawyers and elite planters.<sup>138</sup> This taunting constituted a rare opportunity for poor whites to challenge the honor of Southern Gentlemen.

As Jennifer Hughes explains of southern frontier humor and the culture of lower class joke telling and laughter, humor “promotes the idea that submission to laughter is empowering, no matter who laughs... the fact that anybody—black, white, old, young, male, or female—could be possessed by laughter opened up the possibility that anybody might possess the virtues entitled him or her to social power.”<sup>139</sup> Edward Baptist argues that public slights and humorous insults constituted a legitimate threat to the sense of honor that slave owners relied upon for social legitimacy. In humor, Baptist argues, lower class whites “found the opportunity to criticize planters, assert their own masculinity, and create a common identity for themselves.” Further, it let elite southerners know, “from everyday experience, that non-planter whites opposed them on

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<sup>137</sup> Elliott J. Gorn, “‘Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch’: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry,” 41.

<sup>138</sup> Lester B. Shippee ed., *Bishop Whipple's Southern Diary 1843-1844* (New York: DA Capo Press, 1968), 26.

<sup>139</sup> Jennifer A. Hughes, “Hysterical Power: Frontier Humor and Genres of Cultural Conquest,” 58.

many issues and resented the upper-class and its claims to preeminence.” Elite southerners resented this social reversal. In places like courts of law, poor white southerners would mock elites by treating their authority as an opportunity for a joke. In these encounters elite southerners were often bested by witty poor whites, a challenge to their social status that infuriated them. This humor “hardly threatened class insurrection,” Baptist explains, but it did dispel the illusions of mastery that were so necessary, and so dear, to planter masculinity.”<sup>140</sup> This form of sly, passive aggressive class conflict, further divided poor whites from other whites, heightening tensions and the social anxieties of the elite.

Poor southern whites have generally been seen as adversaries of blacks, but Jeff Forret contends that while “many poor whites did loathe slaves,” it was actually “travelers to the South and slaveholders alike who fed the myth of all poor whites’ unequivocal hatred of them.” Forret cites Olmsted who commented that poor whites “seem... more than any other portion of the community to hate and despise the negroes,” and James Stirling, who claimed that poor whites had all the “prejudices of slave-holders in the most exaggerated form.”<sup>141</sup> This characterization of poor white hatred for enslaved blacks seems to have been a product of this slaveholder unease with their interaction. They made efforts to convince visitors that relations between poor whites and slaves were not amicable, fostering a sense of competition between the two. Olmsted recalled that one slave owner “did not see how white laborers were ever going to come into competition with negroes,” as “you never could depend on white men.” Olmsted, in his travels amongst the southern elite, was left with the impression that “poor white people... are worse off

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<sup>140</sup> Edward E. Baptist, “Accidental Ethnography in an Antebellum Southern Newspaper: Snell’s Homecoming Festival,” 1337, 1357, 1371.

<sup>141</sup> Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins*, 21; quotes from Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, 85 and James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1857), 86.



in almost all respects than slaves. They are said to be extremely ignorant and immoral, as well as indolent and unambitious.”<sup>142</sup> The need to present slaves and poor whites as enemies in competition with each other, was at least partially the result of anxiety over slave-poor white interaction.

Historians have argued that interaction, both social and economic, between poor white southerners and slaves, stood as a challenge to the slaveholder’s cultural and racial hegemony. “By exchanging commodities with slaves,” Forret argues, “poor whites contested their subordination as lower-class members of white society.” Slaves and poor whites interacted in an underground culture defined by biracial crime, sex, gambling, drinking and violent acts of masculine assertion. The prospect of a developing cross-racial lower-class identity frightened elite southerners who saw it as a threat to the existing social order.<sup>143</sup> Interaction threatened the paternalistic ideals of the southern slave owner. “When the negroes were sold” to the South, by “the Puritans of both New and Old England,” elite southerner Daniel Robinson Hundley argued, “they were nothing but naked, gibbering savages, heathenish and beastly.” But with over a hundred years of paternalistic care, they had become “intelligent human beings.” This was in contrast to countries such as Jamaica, where the “intelligent guidance of the master have been taken away” and black slaves had reverted to their barbarous ways, “dragging with them also the white races with whom they have been permitted to associate on equal terms.”<sup>144</sup> Interracial interaction, especially with mischievous poor whites, threatened the ideals that the southern slave

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<sup>142</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, 84.

<sup>143</sup> Jeff Forret, “Slaves, Poor Whites, and the Underground Economy of the Rural Carolinas,” 822; Alex Lichtenstein, “‘That Disposition to Theft, with Which They Have Been Branded’: Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law,” *Journal of Social History* 21 no. 3 (1988), 415-17, 426-27.

<sup>144</sup> Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, 62.

regime was based upon, with its potential to drag down not only impressionable slaves, but also the whites whom they associated with.

Illicit forms of slave-poor white interaction were particularly troublesome to slave owners. Whiskey was sold to slaves, often in exchange for stolen goods.<sup>145</sup> They also met within the masculine and violent culture of “Grog Shops,” which were viewed as public nuisances. They fought, drank and played games together.<sup>146</sup> They could even be seen openly socializing in public places such as churches.<sup>147</sup> Elite southerners responded to illicit actions with great seriousness. In wake of an 1835 Mississippi insurrectionary panic involving poor whites, leaders sought to “make examples of all refractory slaves of every degree & inflicting the severest punishment upon the white incendiaries who encouraged and incite them to crime.”<sup>148</sup> Community censure of poor whites also served as a powerful deterrent against interaction with slaves. To be caught in illicit, and even social, activity with a slave would result in social humiliation and ostracization from southern communities. In a social world predicated on honorable reputations, this scorn could be particularly consequential to white men trying to climb the local social and economic ladder. Some men even took those who accused them of illicit interaction with slaves to court, in attempts to reclaim their honor and reputation.<sup>149</sup>

Historians have argued that despite increasing penalties for illicit interaction with slaves, biracial crime was on the rise in the antebellum period, and political leaders sought to deal with this threat. Indictments of whites unlawfully trading for slaves, while uncommon, increased exponentially in the two decades before the Civil War. This was the result of stiffening laws

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<sup>145</sup> Avery O. Craven, “Poor Whites and Negroes in the Antebellum South,” 14-25.

<sup>146</sup> Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins*, 53-57.

<sup>147</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 454.

<sup>148</sup> David Hubbard to John Bolton, Aug. 23, 1835, New York and Mississippi Land Company Papers, quoted in Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South*, 109.

<sup>149</sup> Jeff Forret, “Slaves, Poor Whites, and the Underground Economy of the Rural Carolinas,” 817.

regulating slave contact with whites, but also, as Forret points out, the result of “growing tensions with northern abolitionists [that] sensitized slaveholders to potentially disloyal behaviors of whites in their own midst.” Additionally, increasing economic inequality in the 1840s and 1850s “likely made them more desperate for the goods that slaves had either produced or stolen.”<sup>150</sup> Timothy James Lockley argues that poor whites went from being “passive recipients of stolen goods” to increasingly becoming more “active participants in criminal activity with slaves.”<sup>151</sup> Desperate times led, in this period, to increased crossing of racial boundaries in order to commit crimes of economic need.

At the heart of elite concerns over slave-poor white interaction and trade, was concern over control of slaves and the protection of slavery as an institution. They claimed that unrest was the result of meddling whites, often abolitionists, but mostly rebellious poor whites, who threatened public safety and the very social fabric of the South. Illicit interactions were framed as abolitionist attempts to weaken slave system itself. One North Carolinian petitioner explained to his state legislature that a “numerous class of the worst sort of Abolitionists,” had infiltrated the south, and would “clandestinely trade with slaves and receive stolen goods in payment for ardent spirits and other articles, thereby corrupting and destroying the value of servants.” As Forret has observed, “countless planters agreed with one South Carolina master who recorded that the ‘mean democratic white men’ who kept slaves stocked in liquor ‘are no better than abolitionists’... the ‘swarm’ of whites who traded with slaves marked ‘an internal enemy’ who sold liquor to ‘debase the slave, and in this manner our very slave system is being... weakened.’” When poor whites and slaves came together it challenged the very foundations that slave society

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 805-806.

<sup>151</sup> Timothy James Lockley, “Race Relations in Slave Society,” in *The Routledge History of Slavery*, eds. Gad Heuman and Trevor Burnard (New York: Routledge, 2011).

were based upon. If this interaction were allowed to continue and grow, slave owners argued, it would disrupt the social tranquility that they thought defined southern slave society.<sup>152</sup>

Slave owner fear of poor white and slave interaction was most acute when it came to the potential for collaboration on slave insurrections. Most historians have focused on slave insurrection only as a product of slave resistance, but as historian Laurence Shore has argued, “the threat of black insurrection generated another threat, one that cut to the heart of white society: the possibility that all whites would not stand together.”<sup>153</sup> Fear of poor white involvement in slave insurrections stretches as far back as the 1741 New York conspiracy scare, where twenty poor white men, along with almost two hundred slaves, were tried in court for involvement in a series of arsons. As Jill Lepore explains, most of these men “worked alongside slaves” and “they also drank in the same taverns. Crime was interracial, too.” Fear of these men’s involvement “came from an understanding that they were involved in an underground world of biracial crime.”<sup>154</sup> These anxieties stretched through the Denmark Vesey panic in Charleston in 1822, where one southerner commented on her fears that it might have “been traced to the whites for this day one or two white men have been taken up and the proofs are so strong as to hang them.” An “abundance of episodes of this type,” Shore claims, “led many white in slaveholding communities to lose confidence in their ability to maintain solidarity among themselves.”<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Jeff Forret, “Slaves, Poor Whites, and the Underground Economy of the Rural Carolinas,” 821-822.

<sup>153</sup> Laurence Shore, “Making Mississippi Safe for Slavery: The Insurrectionary Panic of 1835,” in *Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies*, edited by Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr., 173-206 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 96-97.

<sup>154</sup> Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 180-181.

<sup>155</sup> Laurence Shore, “Making Mississippi Safe for Slavery,” 97.

The 1831 Nat Turner insurrection was the most psychologically important slave revolt in the nineteenth century, even resulting in a Virginia legislative debate on the abolition of slavery. The Southampton County, Virginia, insurrection, and the debates that followed, bring up questions regarding the importance of slave insurrection to southern politics and psychology, as well as anxieties related to challenges to planter rule. To some, the events in Southampton marked a turning point between the early southern beliefs of Slavery as a necessary evil and the positive good argument that became prominent in the lead up to the Civil War, as the potential threat that insurrections such as these challenged the idea that slavery was good for slaves and good for the stability of the South. Fifty-five whites were murdered by Turner's followers, it was the first slave rebellion to result in significant death and destruction in the United States. Thomas Roderick Dew, in his review of the Virginia legislative debates, highlights the extraordinary circumstances of these event. "In the Southern slaveholding country, the question of emancipation has never been seriously discussed in any of our legislatures," he claims, that is "until the whole subject, under the most exciting circumstance, was, during the last winter, brought up for discussion in the Virginia Legislature." In that year, "plans of partial or total abolition were earnestly pressed upon the attention of that body," the result of fears created by the potential for future insurrections.<sup>156</sup>

Dew, in his defense of southern slavery, flipped the arguments of southern antislavery advocates by claiming that social stability and safety could best be achieved, not by abolishing slavery, but by strengthening it. Abolition he claimed, could in fact lead to more insurrection, as "we must recollect, from the nature of things, no plan of abolition could act suddenly on the

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<sup>156</sup> Thomas Roderick Dew, "Review of the debate in the Virginia Legislature, 1831-32," in *The Proslavery Argument: As Maintained By the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1853), 289.

whole mass of slave population in the state.” The process in itself would open up a period of chaos, where uncontrolled ex-slaves would be turned upon southern society. While the speeches of antislavery advocates may have been rhetorically beautiful, Dew contended that “no enlarged, wise, and practical plan of operation was proposed” by these men. Their arguments “were of a wild and intemperate character,” which were “subversive of the rights of property,” and perhaps more importantly “the order and tranquility of society.” Dew appealed to elite fears of social discord and chaos, claiming that if abolition “ever shall be followed out in practice,” it would result in “inevitable and ruinous consequences.”<sup>157</sup>

As Drew Gilpin Faust points out in her study of the post-Turner ideology of slavery, until fairly recently “most historians continued to associate the defense of slavery with a movement of the South away from Jeffersonian liberalism in the late 1820s and 1830s.” After 1830, because of events like Nat Turner and the publication of William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator*, “the South rapidly abandoned its Revolutionary American heritage and took up the almost polar opposite position of proslavery reactionism.” Beginning with Dew’s widely published tract, proslavery ideology in the South became increasingly systematic and self-conscious, becoming “a formal ideology with its resulting social movement.”<sup>158</sup> Events such as the Southampton insurrection forced elite southerners to come to the defense of slavery. Social discord threatened slavery, and the southern elite were forced to develop a systematic defense of slavery which articulated its importance to pressing issues such as the potential for insurrection, violence and social discord.

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 290-292.

<sup>158</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 183-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 2-4.

Before the 1830s, proslavery sentiment only occasionally reared its head amongst elite southerners.<sup>159</sup> Southern political leaders in early America, such as Thomas Jefferson, rested their opposition to slavery on the assumption that slavery as an institution was inevitably doomed. Despite this belief slavery was hardly on the way out in the early nineteenth century. As historian Robert McColley explains, “the historical record demonstrates that the plantation system not only survived but dramatically extended itself in the early national period... the successful planters who profitably used their slaves were always numerous enough to preserve the system, and if an occasional Virginian abandoned the slave system far more adopted it: the total number of slaveowners was always increasing.”<sup>160</sup> Dew acknowledged the ingrained nature of slavery in the social and economic life of the South, and laid out a systematic defense of slavery on these grounds.

As historian Erik Root claims, Dew was essential in the popular “exodus from Jefferson to Calhoun in 1832.” He created a bridge between Jefferson’s moral anti-slavery beliefs to a positive good argument of slavery. Laying the seeds for the rejection of universal human equality as stated in the Declaration of Independence, for racial theories of black inferiority and thus the positive good of white paternalistic slaveholding.<sup>161</sup> The arguments Dew presented would continue to be built on throughout the antebellum period, while being amplified and radicalized. Less than a decade later William Harper would contend that Dew had “shown that the institution of slavery is a principal cause of civilization.” Dew never went this far in his *Abolition of Negro Slavery*, and in under a decade proslavery thought had gone from a defense of prudential

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<sup>159</sup> Larry E Tise, *Proslavery: a History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 33-34.

<sup>160</sup> Robert McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 21.

<sup>161</sup> Erik S. Root, *All Honor to Jefferson?: The Virginia Slavery Debates and the Positive Good Thesis* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 175-176.

economic grounds, to being the very basis of civilization for “without it there can be no accumulation of property, no providence for the future, no taste for comforts or elegancies, which are the characteristics and essentials of civilization.”<sup>162</sup> And as William Freehling points out in his tome on the coming of disunion, “most of the South’s greatest proslavery writers published not during some fancied Great Reaction in the mid-1830s but twenty years later, uncomfortably close to the time of southern rebellion.”<sup>163</sup>

Reactions to the Southampton insurrection in the press reveal some insights into popular views of the meaning and implication of slave revolts, suggesting that a strain of thought already existed in the minds of southerners as to the root causes of such events. While some certainly seem to reflect the sentiment that drove the introduction of abolition into the Virginia legislature that would occur shortly thereafter—that insurrection was the result of the inherent evils of the institution—most southerners tended to view outside forces to be the overriding causes of the insurrection. In one of the immediate accounts of the insurrection, the *Richmond Compiler* commented on rumors that the slaves who had participated in the “massacre” were “deceived by some artful knaves.” Originally white men were suspected of spurring the insurrection, but once Turner was identified as the leader, newspapers began to comment on the unique nature of Turner as a slave who “had been taught to read and write, and permitted to go about preaching in the country.”<sup>164</sup> Turner was not presented as a contented slave, but as an outsider, a meddler not unlike the abolitionists and mischievous poor whites who worked to ferment division between the master and his slave.

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<sup>162</sup> William Harper, “William Harper’s Memoir on Slavery,” 3-4.

<sup>163</sup> William Freehling, *The Road to Disunion Vol. 1*, ix.

<sup>164</sup> Kenneth S Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 62, 68



Lack of control, and Turner's supposedly unique intelligence, was blamed as the cause of the insurrection. Several publications followed this line of thought, stressing the exceptional place that Turner held in slave society, claiming "he was artful, impudent and vindictive, without any cause of provocation, that could be assigned." Nat Turner was characterized in ways that, in southern social culture, were seen as more white than black. He was not the typical docile slave, content under paternalistic rule, but a biological anomaly, unusually intelligent and mischievous. Thomas Gray, the man who would later construct the publication of the confessions of Nat Turner, placed blame on the feet of meddling white men, claiming "its cause must be attributed to the misguided zeal of good men, preaching up equality; and to ignorant blacks, who again retail the same doctrine, with such comments, as their heated imaginations may supply, to their respective circles of acquaintance." In this instance he blames abolitionists and not the tyranny of slavery for the outlook of Nat Turner, calling the rebellion a "work of fanaticism."<sup>165</sup>

The reaction to the insurrection saw no introspection by southern media into the role that human enslavement might have had in provoking the events, instead opting to blame forces outside of their control. "These events have burst unexpectedly upon us... No one had dreamed of any such event happening in any part of Virginia," reported *The Richmond Enquirer* in the early stages of reaction; clearly this was not true.<sup>166</sup> In the face of potential abolitionist debates the *Enquirer* would almost prophetically call for a systematic defense of slavery: "It might be shown, that the slave labor which it is proposed to abolish, could never be supplied by that of any portion of our present white population... I hope, that some abler pen than mine may be induced to come out in defense, of what I consider, not only important to the dearest interest, but to the

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>166</sup> Henry Irving Tragle, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), 47.

very being and existence of our State.”<sup>167</sup> Fear of social unrest at the hands of rebellious slaves helped to drive the development of proslavery thought in the wake of Nat Turner.

Involvement of poor whites in the scheming of slave insurrections, at least in the mind of elite southerners, was thought to be a common occurrence. Feeding off of the racist paternalist image of the incompetent but grateful slaves, elite southerners assumed that any rebellion by slaves had to be the result of meddling whites. After Nat Turner, fear of slave insurrections would come to the forefront of both antislavery and proslavery thought. This placed defenders of slavery against a class of poor whites that would disturb the otherwise peaceful plantations of the South, and potentially trigger antislavery backlash, such as that that occurred in the Virginia legislature following the Nat Turner insurrection.

Alexis de Tocqueville, while traveling the South in the early to mid-1830s, perceived the acute unease that Americans had for the prospect of insurrection. He described the South as being on the brink of warfare, pointing out that in some areas enslaved blacks outnumbered whites. If a mass insurrection happened, and race war began, whites would be outnumbered by blacks and suffer a similar fate “to that of the moors of Spain.” In both the North and South the “danger of conflict between the white and the black inhabitants of the southern states of the union—a danger which, however remote it may be, is inevitable—perpetually haunts the imagination of Americans.” Though the character of the specter of slave insurrection elicited different reactions in these regions, according to de Tocqueville, northerners “make it a common topic of conversation” and while they have no had no direct fear of injury they still “vainly endeavor to devise some means of obviating the misfortunes which they foresee.” Ominously in the South “the subject is not discussed; the planter does not allude to the future in conversing

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 149.

with strangers; the citizen does not communicate his apprehension of his friends; he seeks to conceal them from himself; but there is something more alarming in the tacit forebodings of the south, than in the clamorous fears of the northern states.”<sup>168</sup>

After 1831 paranoia over potential slave revolts in the South reached its peak, and southerners could not help but be suspicious of their white underclass. The Mississippi insurrection of 1835 was seen to have been spurred by the legendary poor white bandit John Murrell, and during an insurrection scare in Pontotoc County, Mississippi in 1838, one newspaper editor commented that “the instigator of this movement we learn was a white man, *as is usual in all occurrences of this kind.*”<sup>169</sup> There are some documented instance of whites being directly involved, or at least being suspected of being involved, in the planning and supplying of slave insurrection in the South. During an insurrection scare in 1802 a slave was said to have confessed that “some white men had promised to help him in procuring arms and ammunition.” Another scare in 1816 was said to have been planned in the home of a poor white man. A letter to the Virginia governor describes “that the slaves in this part of the country had been invited to go to the house of... a man generally thought to be in desperate circumstances,” there “under the pretense of purchasing whiskey... they were to consult with him about the means of obtaining their freedom by force of arms.”<sup>170</sup> A letter from a slave outlining a plan for insurrection implicates two white men, Jim Richards and William Taylor, in the planning and supplying of a planned insurrection, was discovered in North Carolina in 1845. In the supposed insurrectionary

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<sup>168</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy In America*, 407.

<sup>169</sup> Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 71-72; *Pontotoc Intelligencer and General Advertiser for New Counties*, September 4, 1838, quoted in Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South*, 110 (emphasis added).

<sup>170</sup> Archives of Virginia, Executive Papers, May 5, 1802 and Archives of Virginia, Executive Papers, February 25 1816, both quoted in James Hugo Johnston, “The Participation of White Men in Virginia Negro Insurrections,” *Journal of Negro History* 16 (April 1931), 162, 167.

plan the slave wrote: “jim richards will be captin if we dont com to town no more before. william taylor ses he will be a captin far us. you must tye all the whites the first thing when [you] get in to lexington and mister penry ses he will let us have all his powder and shot for haf the mony.”<sup>171</sup>

While these instances were likely rare, and perhaps only the product of slaveowner paranoia, fear of landless whites in this context was clearly prominent<sup>172</sup> Beyond a simple fear of insurrections, belief in the inevitability of poor white involvement in the planning of slave insurrections buttressed the racist assumptions that the slaveholder justification of slavery rested upon. Slaves could not have planned these events themselves, for they cared for their masters and knew they were better off under his paternalistic rule.

Southern sociologist Henry Hughes argued that slaves under paternalistic care were of no danger of rebellion. They depended on knowledge from whites, and as long as those they interacted with followed the rules of paternalistic chivalric honor culture, the South was in little danger of social unrest. While advocating reopening the slave trade, and contending with arguments that increases in slave population could prove dangerous to southern social stability, Hughes argued that “the slave trade may endanger the South,” only if

Southerners are meacocks instead of men. It may, if we are pusillanimous instead of magnanimous; if we are craven instead of chivalrous; if we are miscreants instead of masters. It may, if there is milk in our livers, whey in our blood, stone in our hearts, dough in our cheeks, and lead in our heads. But if we are a bold, high-toned, honorable, energetic, sensible and beneficent people, the reopening of the African slave trade will not jeopardize our State and sectional security.

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<sup>171</sup> Unsigned Letter, October 6, 1845, *Records of Slaves and Free Persons of Color*, Davidson County Records, NCDAH, quoted in Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the South*, 50.

<sup>172</sup> Laurence Shore, “Making Mississippi Safe for Slavery,” 97.

White men needed to act within the boundaries of southern honor culture for the South to truly become a peaceful slave society. Southern Gentlemen would serve as the defender of social order and serve as a paternalistic guide to his enslaved laborers.

“In order to overpower the whites,” Hughes argued, slaves must have three things, the desire, the knowledge, and the ability required to rebel. Because southern capitalists, or slaveowners, by necessity, must provide basic subsistence for its laborers—unlike northern capitalists who held no sense of responsibility to their respective laborers—southerners had nothing to fear from a rebellion on the basis of bodily comfort. Slaves are their capital, and they are compelled to maintain their capital to its highest order. Other places with rebellious laborers, such as the urban North, rebel in want of “bodily comfort,” this makes the South the most stable society because its laboring class, enslaved blacks, are “the most comfortable.” Regardless, even if southern slaves did not live in comfort, Hughes explained, “they would not have the knowledge” necessary to stage a rebellion. “A plan known to the black and not to the whites, is inconceivable,” as “the white race monopolizes the means of information.”<sup>173</sup> This point goes to the core of why elite southerners found slave-poor white interactions to be so threatening. Without inducement from meddling whites, usually poor whites, slaves would have neither the inclination nor knowledge to pull off a successful rebellion.

Further, Hughes, like other elite writers, saw poor southern whites as the product of bad blood, connected the potential for poor white involvement in slave insurrections to the sectional conflict between North and South. Sometimes, Hughes argued, peasant blood was mixed with the blood of Cavaliers, this produced a person of unusual intelligence for his position. This

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<sup>173</sup> Henry Hughes, “Reopening the Slave Trade: A Series by ‘St. Henry,’” in *Selected Writings of Henry Hughes*, edited by Stanford M. Lyman, 73-101, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 93, 96-98.

person became jealous at the success of aristocratic slave owners and turned to antislavery. This man would “harbor in his bosom resentment against those whom fortune favored more than himself in the outset of life,” and out of spite against those elite slave owners who sat at a higher social status he would “delude himself into the belief, the social position of his father as well as that of his mother’s family connection is due mainly to the institution of slavery.” These lower-class non-slaveholding men, who by biological luck had obtained unusual intelligence, would stir up “servile insurrection, hoping to see the roofs of his supposed enemies blazing at midnight... while the emancipated blacks are dancing savagely around the ruins in the delirium of a brutal joy.”<sup>174</sup> Elite southerners felt the psychological need to explain internal social discord as the result of external agitation. This spread to popular literature as well, where slave rebellions were orchestrated either by abolitionists who had infiltrated the South, or by poor non-slaveholders who had been swayed by abolitionist propaganda. A subgenre of plantation novels emerged in the post-Turner South, which often had northern travelers come to the South, realize slaves were better off than northern white laborers, and discover that abolitionists sought to disrupt an otherwise peaceful South by inducing slave rebellion.<sup>175</sup>

John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry in 1859 seemed to back up the fear southerners had for northerners meddling in slave rebellion. George Fitzhugh, in the wake of the raid, declared that even the “most conservative must see, and if honest will admit, that the settlement of Northerners among us is fraught with danger. Not one in twenty of such settlers might tamper with our slaves and incite to insurrection, but one man can fire a magazine, and no one can foresee where the match will be applied, or what will be the extent and consequences of the

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<sup>174</sup> Henry Hughes, *Treatise on Sociology, Theoretical and Practical* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Gambo & Co., 1854), 274-275.

<sup>175</sup> For example see Caroline Lee Hentz, *The Planter’s Northern Bride*.

explosion.”<sup>176</sup> Southerners did not fear that the slaves themselves would ferment rebellion, they thought that most rebellions were put into motion through the direct influence of whites who were either mischievous vengeful poor whites or northern abolitionists who had infiltrated southern society. Additionally, it seems that elite southerners had a palpable fear that northern antislavery literature would persuade non-slaveholders to resist the institution.

The late-antebellum period saw increased efforts to influence poor whites and bring them into the proslavery fold. This was an attempt to compete with northern efforts to induce non-slaveholders, and especially poor whites towards antislavery. When they entertained the prospect of helping their impoverished neighbors it was usually in an effort to contain their worst characteristics and protect social order. Industrialization was often presented as a kind of “philanthropy” for poor white southerners. Meant not only to combat idleness and poverty, but to also separate them from contexts where interaction with slaves was common. One elite southerner admitted that “it is not to be disguised that a degree of poverty and destitution exists in the Southern States, among a certain class of people.” This state could be rectified by employment in factories as “the poor white man will endure the evils of pinching poverty rather than engage in [the] servile labor” that was now available to them.<sup>177</sup>

Another southern observer argued that slaves should be kept out of skilled work as it engendered animosity between white laborers and the slave labor system. “If we ever expect to be independent of the North,” he claimed, “it is absolutely necessary that we should elevate the standard of the mechanic arts; and to do this, negro competition and negro ascendancy must be prohibited.” Placing slaves in competition with whites would drag the whites down, which was

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<sup>176</sup> George Fitzhugh, “Disunion Within the Union,” *De Bow’s Review* vol. 28 (New Orleans: 1860), 1.

<sup>177</sup> Charles T. James, “Cotton and Cotton Manufacturers at the South,” *De Bow’s Review* vol. 8 (New Orleans: 1850), 558.

“well calculated to breed a discontent and hatred on the part of the white mechanic, and makes him an enemy to an institution which should be the means of promoting the interests of the very pursuit in which he is engaged. This policy also creates a spirit of antagonism between the rich and poor, from the fact that the rich thus array capital against labor—elevate the negro at the expense of the poor white mechanic.”<sup>178</sup> Industrialization served as a way to get poor whites away from slaves, at the same time it reduced their idle laziness that was a result of resentment of having to do slave work. Intervention was required from southern elite paternalists to prevent social interaction between slaves and poor whites, as well as to protect the social order from the mischievousness that resulted from the idle lifestyles of the poor.

Elite unease over landless whites was a product of their culture or a perception of the not quite white status as well as their interaction with slaves, creating a fundamental distrust of the poor white class. A series of historical novels written by William Gilmore Simms reflects the deep strain of distrust that permeated understandings of poor landless whites in the South. In the novels a band of “crackers” during the Revolutionary War align themselves with British troops. This “rude, irregular, untrained and lawless” gang of “swarthy outlaws” targeted planters who were loyal to the revolutionaries and aided the British war effort.<sup>179</sup> A deep distrust of landless whites also ran through politics. In the height of sectional crisis South Carolinian politician Daniel Hamilton commented that “forming a Southern Confederacy can only be effected calmly, quietly,” for if it came down to either “Abolition or War” the 300,000 slaveowners could not rely

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<sup>178</sup> “Functions of the Slave,” *De Bow’s Review* vol. 26 (New Orleans, 1859), 477-478.

<sup>179</sup> W. Gilmore Simms, *Eutaw* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1882), 10; see also W. Gilmore Simms, *The Forayers or The Raid of the Dog-Days* (New York: Redfield, 1856).



on the three million non-slaveholders, exclaiming “I mistrust our own people more than I fear all of the efforts of Abolitionists.”<sup>180</sup>

This political threat was exacerbated by another source of distrust, landless white interaction with slaves. As Olmsted has illustrated, fear of black and white interaction was common in the antebellum south, and poor whites were “said to ‘corrupt’ the negroes, and encourage them to steal,” they would “pay them with liquor” and “constantly associate licentiously with them.”<sup>181</sup> This sentiment was echoed by South Carolina Governor James Henry Hammond, who proclaimed that poor whites often maintained subsistence by “trading with slaves, and seducing them to plunder for their benefit.”<sup>182</sup> Illicit interaction between poor whites and enslaved blacks often caused controversy within local communities. Henry Bibb wrote of a “poor white girl” who taught Sunday school to the enslaved of his community. “News soon got to our owners that she was teaching us to read,” this “caused great excitement in the neighborhood,” and patrols were put together to break up the next meeting.<sup>183</sup> These interactions were taken seriously by slave owners, the result of anxieties related to the ability of landless whites to disrupt the southern slavery based social order.

Racial, class and even political conflict, were all part of the fear that drove how elites contended with the southern class of landless poor whites. In the sectional and political tumult of the 1850s, this fear was augmented by growing political and cultural conflict with the North. Elite southerners feared that indeed the slave labor system was turning lower class whites against the institution, and slave-poor white interaction, especially related to the danger of slave

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<sup>180</sup> Daniel Hamilton to W. P. Miles, February 2, 1860, quoted in Stephen A. Channing, *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), 255-256.

<sup>181</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, 84.

<sup>182</sup> HammonHammond quoted in George M. Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South*, 3.

<sup>183</sup> Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 21.

insurrection, propped up legitimated fears about the future loyalty of whites whose lives were not enhanced by or dependent on the slave labor system. In a social world where poor whites and slaves interacted together, often amicably, white supremacy must have seemed a fragile protection against the potential threat that this collusion could pose to southern society.

**CHAPTER III**  
**POVERTY AND SLAVERY:**  
**LANDLESS WHITES AND LABOR IN THE SECTIONAL CRISIS**

In the decades before the Civil War, poor laborers were necessarily at the center of an intellectual and political debate between sections over the merit of the emerging free labor system of the industrial North. Southern intellectual elites generally portrayed the free labor system as exploitative, immoral and uncondusive to the maintenance of a stable social system. They did so while, for the most part, omitting discussion of the existence of a large class of impoverished white laborers in the South. The existence of this class of white men challenged the white supremacist basis for the increasingly dominant proslavery ideology of the elite South. Additionally, it challenged their ideals of paternalistic honor. If the slave labor system had in fact created poverty amongst a class of white men, then the system run by elite paternalists had failed. While many southern commentators simply ignored their impoverished white neighbors, others went to great length to justify their degraded position within the southern social and economic hierarchy. These arguments were based in ideas of race and biological determinism, which tied into elite understandings of Cavalier mythology. This class existed not because southern society did not give white men economic opportunity, but because these men were innately inferior, the product of peasant and criminal biological stock. They were either physically and mentally incapable or of such low personal character that they rebuked their

personal responsibilities. And if they rebuked these responsibilities, as they did the trappings of aristocratic southern honor culture, then potentially they could rebuke the political responsibilities of southerners to protect slavery from antislavery forces in the North.

These debates took place in the context of an increasingly hostile sectional conflict over the future of American labor systems and governmental policy. With the rise of proslavery intellectual culture in the South, authors attempted to convince non-slaveholders of the superiority of the slave labor system in creating equal opportunities for all white men. Because their arguments hinged on the idea that white men would prosper in a society where blacks were perpetually on the bottom of the economic ladder, the presence of a sizable class of landless whites constituted a troubling aberration which concerned proslavery commentators. The aristocratic South justified their rule under ideals of paternalism and white equality, and the presence of a class of poor whites challenged the legitimacy of the arguments of proslavery southern paternalists. In response southern authors often resorted to arguments that emphasized the inferiority of landless whites, explaining that there was nothing that any system of labor could do for a people that were simply incapable of making a good life for themselves. The aristocratic south had not failed to live up to their paternalistic ideals, instead these people had chosen to rebuke the mainstream chivalrous ethos of the South.

When elite commentators at the time talked of “white southerners,” they were not also talking about the landless whites of the South, however, elite anxieties over the loyalty of lower class southern whites led, in certain contexts, to the wooing of poor white laborers. They attempted to connect all white southerners to the slave labor system by promoting slave ownership as a tool for economic uplift, arguing that slave owning could serve as an equalizer among whites. This argument likely had little effect on convincing landless whites of proslavery

ideology. It is doubtful that much of the political debate and proposed legislation reached the ears and eyes of landless white southerners, a group that were social outsiders and largely illiterate, and who often had no aspirations to own slaves anyway.<sup>184</sup> Ultimately, race was enough to wed poor laboring whites to the slave labor system. But elite southerners, who perceived the degraded place of poor whites in southern society, feared that class resentments would emerge. With the rise of northern antislavery and the emergence of the Republican Party, these elite southerners feared the worst, that a large class of poor white southerners, newly franchised, would ultimately turn against their cherished institution.

Starting in the 1840s, social observers began to question the origins of poverty, and discussed the role of industrialization and slavery in it. In the 1850s print media became increasingly available to literate audiences in the South. While the South lagged behind the North in consumption of printed material, elite southerners often served as an audience for these works.<sup>185</sup> Direct engagement with the problem of landless whites increased perceptibly in the 1850s, an apparent switch from the largely descriptive and academic purposes of accounts of the South that were written in the 1830s and 1840s. This was the result of political crisis and discussions over the future of the South. In the late antebellum period antislavery northerners and proslavery southerners, in a variety of print mediums, vied over how slavery as an economic and labor system affected white society.

South Carolina Governor James Henry Hammond, highlighted the importance of slavery to southern elite political intellectualism, showing the marginal role that laboring whites held in mainstream southern politics. In 1845 he wrote that “it will scarcely be disputed that the very

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<sup>184</sup> David Brown, “A Vagabond’s Tale: Poor Whites, Herrenvolk Democracy, and the Value of Whiteness in the Late Antebellum South,” 806.

<sup>185</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White*, 47-48.

poor have less leisure to prepare themselves for the proper discharge of public duties than the rich; and that the ignorant are wholly unfit for them at all.” This is why slavery was so important to the maintenance of republican government in the South. Most other countries had excluded the poor from politics, but in a democratic republican system, such as that in the United States, the poor could not be excluded. “In every part of the world more than half the people are ignorant and poor,” he claimed, but in the South “nearly one-half of the whole population, and those the poorest and most ignorant, have no political influence whatever, because they are slaves.” The other half, Hammond argued, were educated and independent white men, who had a stake in preserving social order. By his estimation, slavery then was “truly the ‘corner-stone’ and foundation of every well-designed and durable ‘republican edifice.’”<sup>186</sup> Here, when talking about laborers, Hammond was talking about slaves, not poor whites. Despite their widespread presence southern intellectuals rarely placed importance in the presence of this large class. They claimed that poor landless non-slave owning whites were no more than a small, marginal and unthreatening group. But the abundance of time and energy that would be expended by the southern intellectual elite in explaining this class, especially in the decade before secession, suggests that poor whites caused anxiety for those tasked with justifying slave society to non-slaveholders.

If slavery was in fact the cornerstone of the elite view of the ideal republic, then a class of laborers outside the institution would have seemed a threat to social stability. Poor whites have often been downplayed by historians as unimportant to southern politics, they were not organized as a class, and were easily persuaded into supporting slavery and secession. But it is misguided

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<sup>186</sup> James Henry Hammond, “Hammond’s Letters on Slavery,” in *The Proslavery Argument: As Maintained By the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1853), 110-111.

to think that slaveholders would have known that these people would ultimately support their cause. These men did not have the foresight to predict the political ambitions of non-slaveholders in the coming crisis, and many deduced that the non-slaveholders who had achieved the least amount of economic success within the slave labor system would likely harbor resentment for the institution. A palpable resentment of planter culture, as well, indicated to slaveowners that landless whites constituted a potential, if weak, opposition. Political and social arguments emerged which engaged the landless white problem, and the prevention of social unrest was often at the basis of them. Building off of the fear that derived from potential slave insurrection and the involvement of non-slaveholding whites in them, the southern debate over industrialization and its needs for labor fermented even greater anxiety with its potential for urban development and the concentration of poor landless whites.

Fear of social unrest, caused by similar urban development as seen in the industrial North and Europe, pervaded elite discussions of the role of poor laboring whites in the future southern economy. Industrialization could result in the assembly of large amounts of poor whites, in an urban environment, intermixed in cities with elite southerners. These elite southerners saw these poor not quite white southerners as a public nuisance. A nuisance that their honor culture taught them to avoid, lest they be tainted by the crass, dishonorable and untrustworthy ways of poor whites. These cultural and social fears and aversion translated into fears of political revolt. Poor white men, in the post-democratized South, constituted a not insignificant portion of the voting population. Slave owners had long suspected non-slaveholder resentment, and poor white resentment in particular, of slave owners and their institution. While race stood as a strong barrier to class unification under antislavery politics, slave owners feared, especially with the prospect of urban industrialization on the horizon, that poor whites would realize that the slave

labor system might not be in their best interests. Landless whites constituted a legitimate potential threat to not only the social stability of the South, but also to the political consensus that had protected slavery on the national level.

The rise of urban industrialization and embrace of free labor ideology in the North, triggered a reflexively defensive response from southern intellectuals. These writers often emphasized a lack of social discord in the South. This was the result, they argued, of the ability of the slave labor system to contain its laboring class. As George Fitzhugh observed, “society has been so quiet and contented in the South—it has suffered so little from crime or extreme poverty, that its attention has not been awakened to the revolutionary tumults, uproar, mendicity and crime of free society.” Few in the South, he argued, were aware of this blessing of slave society.<sup>187</sup> The great fear of southern elites was that their social system would be upended by the influence of northern ideologies of free labor, and sought to intellectually justify slave society, not only to themselves but also to those who could potentially see slavery as the cause of their relative place in the social hierarchy. This worry had been around since the rise of antislavery activism in the early 1830s, and these authors were explicit in their intentions to deflect the challenges of antislavery authors. William Gilmore Simms, in his “The Morals of Slavery,” credited the recent rise of proslavery writing as a response to the recent “progress of anti-Slavery sentiment, in the Northern States and other regions, not having shown itself so active, pressing and insolent as it has since become.”<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society* (Richmond, VA: A. Morris, 1854), iii.

<sup>188</sup> William Gilmore Simms, “The Morals of Slavery,” in *The Proslavery Argument: As Maintained By the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1853), 175, originally published in *The Southern Literary Messenger* in 1837.



The debate over southern industrialization is where much of the discussion over the place of landless whites in southern society took place in the late-antebellum period. In discussion of the future of the southern economy, proslavery southerners, by necessity, had to place slavery in the heart of the south's foray into industrialization to ensure its political future. But poor whites were often at the center of these discussions as they were seen to have been the likely beneficiaries of new low skill jobs in southern industries. Elite southerners often justified industrialization as a way to placate laboring white men and blunt the attacks on the southern labor system coming from the North, while it was also pitched, to middle- and upper-class southerners, as a way to control the unruly class of southern poor whites. Southern industrialist William Gregg argued in 1851 that the industrial "villages" seen in the North were the only way that the South could get its laboring class under control. But most southern intellectuals and politicians viewed it the other way around. James Henry Hammond also talked of these industrial villages, but saw them as a burden to other southerners, further he thought that industrial work would offer little opportunity to laboring whites. "It is only necessary to build a manufacturing village," he argued, "to have crowds of these people around you, seeking employment at half the compensation given to operatives at the North." He feared bringing laboring whites into urban centers mainly for reasons that reflected a stereotyped view of poor whites. It was "painful" for the better parts of society "to get brought in contact with such ignorance and degradation."<sup>189</sup> Industrialization was viewed as a negative because it would bring a class of people of low character and morals into contact with people who otherwise lived their lives within the ethics of southern aristocratic culture.

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<sup>189</sup> Gregg and Hammond quoted in George M. Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South* (Washington D.C.: Buell & Blanchard, 1856), 3.

Others saw industrialization as a way to raise southern poor whites out of their degraded position. In response to the objections “that these manufacturing establishments will become the hot-beds of crime... to corrupt and destroy the public morals,” Georgia Supreme Court Chief Justice Joseph Henry Lumpkin would not “concede that our poor, degraded, half-fed, half-clothed and ignorant population, without Sabbath-schools, or any other kind of instruction—mental or moral—or without any just appreciation of the value of character will be injured by giving them employment.” In fact, these jobs “would bring them under the oversight of employers, who will inspire them with self-respect, by taking an interest in their welfare.” This paternalistic view of the relationship between southern laborers and capitalists suggests a view of poor white southerners as a helpless people who needed superior southern aristocrats to watch over them. As Lumpkin suggests, elite southerners could better their impoverished neighbors as the “most powerful motives to good conduct” was to “bestow proper rewards upon meritorious industry.” While thinkers like Lumpkin did see poor southerners as capable of industry, it still required guidance and reward from Southern Gentlemen.<sup>190</sup>

The relative lack of urban depravity in the South was seen to have been a product of the slave labor system. Under this system slaves were the laboring class, and as Nehemiah Adams, a northern clergyman who travelled to the South to observe the effects of slavery on the religious morality of slaves, contended, the consequence of this was “the absence of mobs.” “That fearful element,” which was so prominent in the North was not found in the South. “Street brawls and conflicts between two races of laboring people, or the ignorant and more excitable portions of different religious denominations,” Adams argued, was “mostly unknown within the bounds of slavery.” In one instance Adams observed a northern man who, at the procession of the late

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<sup>190</sup> J.H. Lumpkin, “The Industrial Regeneration of the South,” *De Bow’s Review* 12 no. 1 (Jan. 1852), 49.

Senator John C. Calhoun in Charleston, asked a southern man, ““Where is your underswell?”” He was referring, according to Adams, to “the motley crowd of men and boys” who would gather at public spectacle in the North. The man was “surprised to learn that those respectable, well-dressed, well-behaved colored men and boys on the sidewalk were a substitute for that class of population which he had elsewhere been accustomed to see with repugnant feelings on public occasions.”<sup>191</sup> Adams, like many elite southerners and their northern visitors, misunderstood the reality of southern poverty, the byproduct of its more rural nature in the South, and the relative prominence of urban poverty in the North. But implicit in these observations, which were likely influenced by the views of southern elite slave owners, was an understanding that the aristocratic South, and those who aspired to its ethos, desired to keep undesirable whites outside of spaces meant for true “Southerners.”

These ideals of social harmony also fed into the Cavalier mythology. William Taylor has argued that literary characters, such as Francis Beverley Tucker’s *George Balcombe*, represents the author's desire for social order. This stereotypical Southern Gentleman faced off against lawless poor white characters who threatened the tranquility of southern society. For Tucker, as well as other southern authors, “the gentlemen planter was not simply a Southerner, he was the principal civilizing agent in a society where everything tended toward anarchy and disorder.” In the eyes of elite southern culture “only the Cavalier possessed the heroic force of character” that could hold back the forces that degraded southern character and morals. While the Cavalier mythos was purely literary fantasy, elite southerners agreed, at least, that southern society needed citizens who reflected its moral code.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Nehemiah Adams, *A South-Side View of Slavery* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, B. B. Mussey & Co., 1854), 44.

<sup>192</sup> William R. Taylor, *Cavalier & Yankee*, 301-304.

As the South began to decline economically and demographically behind the North, elite southerners increasingly began to focus on fostering elite Cavalier ideals amongst the yeomen class. They began to focus on teaching this class, who they viewed as the future of the South, the chivalry of aristocratic southern honor culture. But while they wooed yeomen, there was “no suggestion in any of these novels that the yeoman, whatever his accomplishments, is entirely the social equal of the gentleman.” They were often still referred to as “peasants” and said to lack the leadership qualities that would suit them in politics or the military.<sup>193</sup> This view of southern social hierarchy presents a patriarchal elitist vision of the South, with Southern Gentlemen at the top, yeomen as their loyal subordinates and slaves as their labor. This view, again, relegated landless whites outside of ideals of southernness, as well as ideals of democratic and republican virtue and responsibility.

Because elites saw the existence of a poor white class in the South as a mere aberration, the southern elite attempted to illustrate that, while they did have some white poverty in the South, it was in fact free labor and capitalism that created real and substantial poverty. Industrialization, white labor, slave labor, poverty and social order, were subjects at the forefront of the burgeoning literature of southern sociology that emerged in the 1850s as sectional conflict reached its apex and northern industrialization was becoming more established. Authors such as George Fitzhugh and Henry Hughes, attempted, in the decade before the Civil War, to not only justify the slave labor system but also to illustrate its superiority to the northern free labor system—especially as it related to the ability of elite white men to rule society in a way that reflected their ideals of respectability and stable social relations. Fitzhugh, commenting on Adam Smith’s theories on capitalism, argued that while Smith thought that “free trade would benefit his

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 183, 299.

country” there was a hidden world “whose misfortune, under his system, were to make the fortunes of his friends and his country.” His limited elite perspective had blinded him to the part of society “far more numerous than his friends and acquaintances,” the poor, “the weak in mind or body, the simple and unsuspecting, the prodigal, the dissipated, the improvident and the vicious.” Laissez-faire government did not suit this class as “one portion of them needed support or protection; the other, much and rigorous government.”<sup>194</sup> Henry Hughes likewise favored a strong central government as a protection against social unrest. The Mississippi lawyer turned sociologist advocated a labor system he termed warranteeism. Under this system the slave owner, or capitalist, was the warrantor and the labor the warrantee. The system Hughes outlined reflected the reciprocal responsibilities inherent in southern paternalistic ideology. “Property in man, is absurd,” Hughes argued, in warranteeism “what is owned is the labor-obligation, not the obligee. The obligee is a man. The obligations of men, are valuables... the warrantee-obligation is reciprocal.” The power of the state was required to enforce these reciprocal relations.<sup>195</sup>

Hughes in effect sought to lay the paternalistic master-slave relationship at the base of government, labor relations, and the ideal of social order. This system was presented in a way that highlighted its divergence from free labor, which was seen to be detrimental to the work ethic of poor laborers. “In free-labor systems,” Hughes claimed, “laborers are economically free to be idle; in warranteeism, they are economically and politically ordered to be industrious.” Extension of the paternalist slave labor system to all labor would serve as a means of control. Under free labor, poor laws and charity served to supplement its economic deficiencies, while under this system there would be “no paupers. There are no poor classes. One class has capital: and another competence. All have sufficiency. Want is unknown and eliminated.” The

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<sup>194</sup> George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society*, 12.

<sup>195</sup> Henry Hughes, *Treatise on Sociology, Theoretical and Practical*, 167-168.

government would regulate the paternalistic reciprocal relationship under this system, while under free labor wages are allowed to fluctuate. This was a problem for the prospect of social order as “pauperism is, by necessity, from wages free to vary below the standard of comfortably sufficiency.”<sup>196</sup> In defense of southern slavery, proslavery elites sought to validate an economic system that revolved around slavery and was justified through a paternalistic ethos. Authors like Hughes presented their system as a valid alternative, even for white laborers, to the free labor system of the North. This contributed to the marginalization of laboring whites, as they were relegated to a status, within this discourse, little better than a black slave.

While most southern social commentators ignored the existence of a class of landless poor whites, authors such as Daniel Robinson Hundley attempted to explain the place that the class had in southern society. His substantial work on southern social relations reflected a popular understanding of the importance of biological determinism to the southern elite view of social hierarchy. He claimed that in capitalist Europe, poverty is the cause of social upheaval and led to “strikes, trade-unions, socialist and communist tendencies.” When it came to the sorry state of the urban poor in Europe, Hundley contended that much can be explained by “blood.” The peasants of these countries were the result of bad blood, the same blood that Northerners and the poor whites of the South descended from. In contrast, the strong stock of the southern aristocracy had been cultivated over centuries from Cavalier heritage. The leaders that sprang from this cultivation were the reason that America was able to secure independence from the old world. And other societies, such as the North and those in Europe, were “foolishly clamoring that every nation and every people under heaven are just as fit and capable to control and govern themselves.” Hundley saw the southern aristocracy as the true heirs of the American ideal of

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 283-284.

republican independence, a class who rose naturally through biological determination to serve as the guardians of American liberty.<sup>197</sup>

Hundley dismissed the North's argument that slavery created poverty, claiming they misunderstood the innate inferiority of certain people. He claimed that slavery was so central to American prosperity that the North had to concede on the issue of the morality of paternalistic slave ownership, and instead had to argue that the slave labor system was “a terrible curse of the non-slaveholding whites, and ought to be abolished on account of the latter.” Northerners jumped to conclusions when they assumed that poor whites were poor because of slavery, as they did not “trouble themselves to inquire what are the natural causes of the existence in the South of a class of lazy vagabonds known as Poor Whites,” and northerners rushed “madly and recklessly to the conclusion that they form the bulk of the Southern masses, and are rendered the pitiable wretches they are by reason of the peculiar institution.” In fact, much of the non-slaveholding class were “thrifty” middle-class yeomen who, like their Cavalier superiors, descended from healthy Anglo stock. The rest were “what has become of those paupers and convicts whom Great Britain sent over to her faithful Colony of Virginia—of those indentured servants who were transported in great numbers from the mother country, or who followed their masters, the Cavaliers and Huguenots,” Hundley wondering if there was “any thing in the nature of our soil and climate which would soon transmogrify such untutored, uncultivated, and servile creatures into freemen and gentleman?”<sup>198</sup> While he conceded the existence of a sizable class of poor whites in the South, he argued that they were the inevitable result of bad genes and lineage, and not the result of slave labor system’s degradation of laboring whites. This served the purpose of

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<sup>197</sup> Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, 251-252.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 254-257.

deflecting northern appeals to non-slaveholder that they were better off under free labor capitalism.

Southern commentators observed that not only did slavery not degrade southern poor whites, in fact they were better off than northern poor whites. Despite southern poor whites' "ignorance and general spiritual degradation," Hundley claimed it was rare for them to "suffer from hunger or cold" as so many of "the peasantry of Europe, and many a poor mechanic in New-York City" did. The northern poor "would be most happy at any time from December to March, to share the cheerful warmth of the blazing pine fagots which glow upon every poor man's hearth in the South." Further northern industry created urban poverty, where "the entire family, both male and female, occupy the same apartment at all hours of the day and night." In contrast even the most degraded southern poor white still "has his own lowly cabin."<sup>199</sup> The southern labor and social system, proslavery writers argued, provided a contrast to the exploitative model of northern free market capitalism. This was reflected in the relative comfort that southern poor whites experienced, but elite southerners also felt that the paternalistic ideals held by the southern ruling class offered a kind of protection against the most oppressive forms of urban and industrial poverty.

Henry Hughes' system of planter paternalism writ large, sought not only to protect the slave labor system, but also, he claimed, it would provide amelioration to the laboring whites of the South. Free labor was bad for the poor, but in a system where the capitalist was held responsible, by the government, a system of reciprocal relationships would make up for the power imbalance inherent in capitalist labor negotiations. In a "warrantee system" the regulation of labor is done through democracy, with the capitalist—or slave owners—as its "deputy

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 261, 265.



orderer,” he executes the state’s demands, including providing an adequate life to his workers. Further this system would work as a tool for moralizing poor whites. “In this system, the implement for the suppression of intemperance, is the payment of wages in necessaries, instead of currency,” Hughes claimed, “laborers in warranteeism, cannot buy drink; because they have no money... the capitalist also, is economically enforced to prevent esthetically, the intemperance of the simple-labor class.”<sup>200</sup> The relationship between capital and labor must be public, as “subsistence cannot be actualized” by any other means than within the public eye. “Laborers must be treasured,” Hughes explained, and they “must not be free-laborers. For if they are; some must starve.” Beyond simply providing a white man's right to basic subsistence, Hughes further argued that the poor also had to be protected in order to enhance Christian morality within society. This had the twofold effect of fending off crime and illicit behavior as well as spurring economic growth through the dispersion of Christian work ethic.<sup>201</sup>

At the heart of concerns over poor white morality, were concerns over social stability and moral order. One commentator in 1857 worried that “communions fail to reach the masses.” The author lays this problem at the feet of elite aversion to consorting with poor whites. To this he argued that “Jesus, and Paul, and Peter, consorted with the very humblest and poorest of the community.” Aristocratic ladies and gentleman needed to intermingle with these people, as it was “the imperative duty of these churches to come in contact with the masses.”<sup>202</sup> Elite southerners worried that without contact with their superiors, poor whites would drift from the confines of the elite southern honor culture, and sink into a moral despotism, threatening the stability of southern social hierarchy.

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<sup>200</sup> Henry Hughes, *Treatise on Sociology*, 110-112.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 196-197, 201.

<sup>202</sup> “The Inefficiency of the Pulpit,” *The Southern Literary Messenger* (Richmond: Macfarlane, Fergusson & Co., 1857), 106-107.

Poverty was viewed as a negative reflection of the morals and ethics of society. One author's description of European poverty was highlighted by the *Southern Literary Messenger* as an illustration of poverty being the result of moral decay. The streets of Edinburgh, Scotland, were described as "crowded with people, bare-headed and bare-footed" who exhibited many of the same characteristics as the stereotyped landless southern white. They were "miserable, starving, drunken, ignorant, dissolute, poor, forlorn, wretched beings... in the midst of what is called a Christian community." The author visited a nearby church where he found "churches crowded with people full of rancor," but these people had expended their efforts towards missions for "heathens" while they "neglect their poor, suffering brethren... at their own doors!" The author could not resist comparing these people to slaves, finding Southern slaves to be "almost a condition of felicity" to the masses of European poor.<sup>203</sup> In negative portrayals of the foreign poor, elite southerners could not help but find the origins of poverty in the moral degradation of its social and cultural institutions. They were consistently on the offensive for the institutions of slavery and the social culture it fostered, unable to acknowledge the poverty it created at their own doorstep. Southern psychology was often conflicted by its need to square slavery with the ideals of democratic society, and with their honor system. The debate over poverty was no different, and it is clear why the discussion of the topic would be difficult within a social and labor system that justified itself by claiming it preserved independence and opportunity for whites.

Social theorists debated the adoption of an industrial capitalism in the South. Some argued industrialization created urban poverty and moral depravity, and positioned the slave

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<sup>203</sup> Review of Henry Colman, *European Life and Manners: In Familiar Letters to Friends* (Boston Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1849), in *The Southern Literary Messenger* vol. 15 (Richmond: Macfarlane & Fergusson, 1849), 439 (emphasis added).

labor system as the ultimate solution to problems of social stability, while others viewed industrialization as a way to employ an otherwise nefarious class of landless poor whites. “Pauperism and beggary,” George Fitzhugh explained, was unknown in places like the North and Europe until they embraced “a free-labor industrial system.” The urban poor of industrial cities enjoyed a liberty “very much like that of domestic animals that have gone wild... the new freemen were bands of thieves and beggars, infesting the country and disturbing the peace.” In a slave labor system, the “laboring class” are slaves, as it is crucial to keep laboring people in check “not only to support and sustain them and to prevent general mendicity, but equally necessary in order to govern them and prevent crime... the statistics of crime demonstrate that the moral superiority of the slave over the free laborer.”<sup>204</sup> Georgia’s Joseph Henry Lumpkin offered industrialization as a way to get out from under the economic thumb of the North. Cotton mills had already made progress in the southern states, but “thousands who are now idle, and other thousands who are engaged exclusively in planting, must be employed, in whole or in part, in mechanism and manufactures.” If they were to utilize the millions of poor whites whose labor was underutilized “the South will rise with renewed activity, and speedily become, as, from her natural advantages, she always deserved to be, ‘magnificently rich and gloriously independent.’” Instead of shipping their resources to the North for them to create products purchased by southerners, they would make them back home with their newly rejuvenated poor laboring class.<sup>205</sup>

The plight of poor whites under the free labor system was often highlighted by proslavery writers, as they attempted to argue that the slave labor system elevated them above the degradation of servile labor. Industrial capitalism, George Fitzhugh explained, “makes the rich

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<sup>204</sup> George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society*, 34-35.

<sup>205</sup> J. H. Lumpkin, “Industrial Regeneration of the South,” 41-45.

richer and the poor poorer,” by a “reign of physical force” that enables the rich to “accumulate more than their share of wealth,” by reducing white men who otherwise could be pursuing intellectual development to “wretchedness and poverty.”<sup>206</sup> The attempt to defend the social structure of slave society in the face of northern criticism, led elite southern authors like Fitzhugh to ignore the plight of poverty within their own society. These authors, and presumably many of their readers, felt the acute need to explain the origins of poverty and prove the northern system of free labor capitalism was worse than slavery.

Purchasing slaves was the only sure way to penetrate the privileges of whiteness. While a German settler could comment that “nearly all of his countrymen who emigrated with him were now slave owners,” not all “poor” southerners sought to accumulate slaves. Even so, acquiring a slave was often nearly impossible due to planter domination of fertile lands. As Robert Russell, a particularly observant contemporary, argued at the time “if these German immigrants had settled on the poor soils of the pine barrens, it is not probable that they would have been holding slaves.” The failure of the landless white to become slaveholders was not necessarily a product of laziness or ineptitude, as on the land they were relegated to “their own labour would have been so much less productive, that it could not have enabled them to purchase slaves.”<sup>207</sup> Even contemporaries could see these barriers, but often saw it as a cycle where boundaries to slave owning led to idleness and then to poorness of character. One commentator argued that poor whites possessed “almost universally poor” land which through its “scanty subsistence” only perpetuated poverty. In the end “the acquisition of a respectable position in the scale of wealth appears so difficult, that they decline the hopeless pursuit.”<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! or Slaves Without Masters* (Richmond: A. Morris, 1857), 69-70.

<sup>207</sup> Robert Russell, *North America and its Agriculture and Climate*, 284-285.

<sup>208</sup> M. Tarver, “Domestic Manufacturers in the South and West,” 1847, quoted in George M. Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South*, 2.

The southern elite fundamentally distrusted landless whites. They did not fit into the confines of southern honor culture, they resisted authority and they interacted inappropriately with enslaved laborers. They had good reason to fear potential resistance from landless whites to planter rule. Their marginal and minority place, though, made them an insignificant political threat at first. But with the rise of abolitionism after 1830 and the formation of the Republican Party in the mid to late 1850s, the southern elite became increasingly paranoid about their enemy within. One incident recounted to Alexander Stephens illustrates the extents to which they went to squelch open dissent among poor whites. After John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry one overseer reported that a local landless white commented that the results would be "a war." The man claimed "he was going to take care of himself by joining the strong side" as "there weren't no niggers" to compete with in the North. For this a vigilante committee was formed and the man was questioned for "uttering abolitionist sentiments." The man, in front of the impromptu court, claimed he "was as good a friend of slavery as any man who owned a nigger." The man was released because he was a "poor, simple naive," who could end up a "martyr" for the antislavery cause.<sup>209</sup>

According to southern sociologist Henry Hughes, "although as a class the Poor White Trash are intensely pro-slavery, now and then one will find amongst them fierce abolitionists." But just as the poor character of these people was a product of biology, Hughes used biology to explain away the occasional anti-slavery white southerner. These poor white men were "not usually of the pure, unadulterated pauper blood," but the result of mixed blood. "It happens not infrequently that a poor Sandhillier is blessed with a more than commonly pretty daughter, whose rosy cheeks, blue eyes, pearly teeth, and wealth of golden hair... win the affections of some

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<sup>209</sup> Linton Stephens to Alexander H. Stephens, 3 February 1860, quoted in William J. Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society*, 64.

robust, honest, hard-working young Yeoman.” This would sometimes result in offspring of unusually high intelligence for a poor white man. Their “inborn spirit of gentlemanship” would push them towards higher aspirations, and they would inevitably become jealous of the prosperity of slave owners, and blame their own failures on slavery itself.<sup>210</sup> This framework allowed deflection of the role that the slave labor system had in creating and perpetuating white poverty in the South, further it bolstered the image of the landless white southerner as the natural result of bad blood. It also tellingly wrote off southern white antislavery as the mere byproduct of class jealousy.

Ex-slave Henry Bibb perceived opposition to slavery amongst landless whites, claiming that they “would be glad to see slavery abolished in self defense; they despise the institution because it is impoverishing and degrading to them and their children.”<sup>211</sup> As historian William Harris explains “it was frightening enough to contemplate the dangers of a slave uprising,” but “what if other white southerners harbored dangerous thoughts and resentments? Did northern fanatics have thousands of potential allies in the very heart of the slave states themselves?” There was a rudimentary understanding among landless poor whites of their degraded position in the slave south, this would have been perceived by elite southerners, among both proslavery and antislavery advocates.<sup>212</sup>

Published in 1857, Hinton Rowan Helper’s *The Impending Crisis of the South* was perhaps the only work by a southern intellectual to articulate the true position of poor landless whites in southern society. He understood that non-slaveholders in general were not considered to be part of society at all. “I do not recollect,” Helper observed, having “ever have seen or heard

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<sup>210</sup> Henry Hughes, *Treatise on Sociology, Theoretical and Practical*, 274.

<sup>211</sup> Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 24-25.

<sup>212</sup> William J. Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society*, 65.

non-slaveholding whites referred to by Southern ‘gentlemen’ as constituting any part of what thing they call ‘the South.’”<sup>213</sup> While Helper’s book received little circulation in the South, and was likely read by very few landless whites, it did reflect much of the wider debate taking place between the North and South.<sup>214</sup> Northerners had been arguing that slavery degraded the lives of non-slaveholding southerners for decades. Slave owners were aware of this, and rightfully feared this argument’s effects on non-slaveholders and landless whites. Landless whites were aware of their place in white society, as in one mountaineer who commented on the biased nature of southern government: “why you see they vote on the slave basis; and there’s some of them nigger counties where their ain’t more’n four or five hundred white folk, that has just as much power in the legislature as any of our mountain counties.”<sup>215</sup>

Reaction to *The Impending Crisis of the South* hints at the fears it helped to unleash. An 1860 New Orleans editorial observed that if a Republican president won election, the party would gain “followers and sympathizers” throughout the South, who would disseminate Helper’s arguments to poor whites. “Let us beware,” the editorial warned, “when the slavery question shall... become a domestic question.”<sup>216</sup> Slave owners knew they had to meet these arguments or risk political disaster. As Harris has observed, slaveholders in response attempted to disperse ideas showing “poor whites that slavery promoted their economic well-being... demonstrating, in the process, that the threats of Helper were taken seriously.”<sup>217</sup> Elite southern unease with their white underclass, led them to fear their betrayal to the north and the Republican party.

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<sup>213</sup> Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (New York: Burdick Brothers, 1857), 164.

<sup>214</sup> Paul H. Buck, “The Poor Whites of the Ante-Bellum South,” 41.

<sup>215</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country*, 259.

<sup>216</sup> Quoted in Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South. How to Meet It*, ed. George Frederickson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), xviii.

<sup>217</sup> William J. Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society*, 74.

Works of popular southern literature reflected an uneasiness that pervaded the South during the sectional crisis. Earlier, as William Taylor explains, “Southerners betrayed a growing uneasiness over their ability to keep their house in order.” But now they were painfully aware of divides within the South. They attempted to assure themselves that the poor and new immigrants could be controlled and assimilated into southern society.<sup>218</sup>

The cultural distrust that elites had for landless whites also stretched into politics. During the sectional crisis over slavery, elite slave owners emphasized the importance of slavery to white opportunity in an attempt to align non-slaveholders with them politically. While this strategy ultimately worked, slave owners had good reason to believe that those who had been marginalized, not just socially and culturally but also economically, by the society produced by plantation slavery, would not buy into these arguments. An all-around sense of distrust led southern political and social commentators to highlight the potential political threat that poor landless whites could have on the institution of slavery. Further, this debate played out within the ethnocultural conflict that defined the North-South debate over slavery as an economic and social system. Northerners began to argue that slavery degraded white laborers and targeted non-slaveholders as a political class, which spurred a southern defense, a political one, and one in popular literature which protected southern honor from these attacks, excusing poverty as the result of individual moral failings.

Decline of non-slaveholders’ economic prospects in the 1850s, coupled with increasing slaveholder paranoia over the spread of antislavery and illicit crime and trade between poor whites and slaves, created a paranoid mindset about the ability of non-slaveholders to undermine slaveholder rule in the South. George Weston, a southern newspaper editor with some sympathy

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<sup>218</sup> William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, 293-296.



for the plight of poor whites, declared in 1856 that “the non-slaveholding whites of the South, being not less than seven tenths of the whole number of whites, would seem to be entitled to some inquiry into their actual condition; and especially, as they have no real political weight or consideration in the country.” Weston estimated that only 32% of white southerners had any real interest in the institution of slavery. Non-slaveholders, he argued, were not really considered “southerners,” as “when the rights of the South, or its wrongs, or its policy, or its interests, or its institutions, are spoken of, reference is always intended to the rights, wrongs, policy, interests, and institutions, of the three hundred and forty seven thousand slaveholders.” There was an interest, though, competing with elite slave owners that encompassed “two to three times as many white people.”<sup>219</sup> Weston knew he was striking at a raw nerve when he intimated that non-slaveholders could pose a threat to slavery on a political level if they ever came to see it as against their interests.

While ultimately their fears were unwarranted, southern proslavery politicians began to pander to the lower class. They did this mainly by claiming that the end of slavery would mean the end of white supremacy, and put forth an argument that slavery ultimately meant white equality. Future Alabama governor John Gill Shorter argued that “should the time ever arrive when four million slaves... were turned loose upon the country, there would then be a contest between the two races for supremacy,” and since the rich had the resources to leave the South “the poor white man would be left in the most lamentable condition... reduced to the most abject and degraded servitude.”<sup>220</sup> Proslavery author Thomas Cobb argued that under slavery all

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<sup>219</sup> George M. Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South*, 1-2.

<sup>220</sup> *Resolutions of the Montgomery Southern Rights Convention of March, 1852*, quoted in J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 207.

citizens feel they belong to an elevated class, that “it matters not that he is no slaveholder; he is not of the inferior race; he is a freeborn citizen; he engages in no menial labor.” He termed this “republican equality.”<sup>221</sup> Clearly proslavery writers were acutely aware of the need to convince non-slaveholders of their argument for the perpetuation of slavery as a positive for non-slaveholders, in particular landless whites.

Elite southerners spent much time attempting to explain how slavery benefited the class of landless southern whites. South Carolina Governor James Henry Hammond explained to southern whites that under industrial free labor “the poor and laboring classes of your own race and color, not only your fellow beings, but your fellow-citizens, are more miserable and degraded, morally and physically, than our slaves.”<sup>222</sup> Southern politicians offered economic aid and attempted to woo poor whites at barbeques to keep them loyal to the South and to slavery.<sup>223</sup> They argued that a society dependent on slavery allowed higher wages for whites than the industrial North, allowing for them to eventually buy into the slave system.<sup>224</sup> Another South Carolina Governor, James Hopkins Adams, wanted slaves exempt from debt sales to encourage slave ownership among landless whites, and other politicians sought the reopening of the slave trade in order to lower the price of slaves.<sup>225</sup>

This wooing of non-slaveholders and poor whites stemmed from fear of the development of a class of antislavery southerners. The reopening of the slave trade was presented by some

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<sup>221</sup> Thomas R. R. Cobb, *An Historical Sketch of Slavery from the Earliest Periods* (Savannah: W. Thorne Wells, 1858), ccxiii.

<sup>222</sup> James Henry Hammond, “Hammond’s Letters on Slavery,” 135.

<sup>223</sup> Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins*, 17.

<sup>224</sup> [J. G. B. De Bow], *The Interest in Slavery of the Non-Slaveholder* (Charleston: Evans & Cogswell, 1860).

<sup>225</sup> Augusta Chronicle, November 27, 1856, and Ronald Takaki, “The Movement to Reopen the Slave Trade in South Carolina,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* (1965), quoted in William J. Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society*, 92.

southern politicians as a way to get more southern whites directly involved in the institution. An 1858 convention of southern states that took place in Montgomery, Alabama took up this very proposal. Delegates from states such as South Carolina argued that increasing the number of slaves in the South would give it “permanency and stability.” “You must enlarge its basis,” and make more southerners dependent on it. Some who opposed the proposal explained that it “assumes that there is a class of white citizens in the South disloyal to the institution of slavery,” while in fact non-slaveholders “were some of the staunchest and most invincible champions of slavery.” Poor whites were central in this debate in particular. Virginia delegate Roger Pryor argued that increasing the population of slaves would depreciate the price of labor and land, creating “conflict with the interest of our poor white population.” Alabama fire-eater William Lowndes Yancey claimed that there was no better way of “strengthening the institution” than by “showing the non-slaveholding class of our citizens that they can buy a negro for \$200, which, in a few years, by his care and instructions, will become worth a thousand dollars? Teach the poor white man, who cannot buy a negro, that by this means he can buy one, you secure him to the interests of the South.”<sup>226</sup>

In reality, though, most landless whites were dependent tenants and laborer with limited prospects of upward mobility. The political claim that slavery preserved equality must have rung hollow as their experience as marginalized men who were not quite white, showed poor whites that it was not true.<sup>227</sup> It is unlikely that these elite southerners did not know their message rang hollow, and thusly they lamented the potential for landless white alliance with antislavery Republicans, or even just landed non-slaveholders. North Carolina Governor William Graham

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<sup>226</sup> “Late Southern Convention at Montgomery,” *De Bow’s Review* vol. 24 (New Orleans, 1858), 580, 586-587.

<sup>227</sup> Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South*, 120.

sketched out the precarious position of slavery if non-slaveholders turned against it. “The landholders are not a majority of the people,” he argued, “but they approach much nearer to it than the slaveholders... and if you expose their land to unlimited taxation,” they would eventually move to attack slave property.<sup>228</sup> Elite southerners were aware of the deteriorating position of poor whites in southern society in the late-antebellum period. George Weston painted a “distressing” picture of the prospects of non-slaveholders, claiming three-fourths of southern whites were “substantially destitute of property” and what land they could obtain was only able to produce a marginal subsistence. The prospect of attaining respectability was so hopeless that they became discouraged and resigned to idleness. Weston saw the “great bulk of the white population growing worse instead of better” and each generation was “in every point of view less respectable than their ancestors.”<sup>229</sup>

As northern antislavery appeals geared towards southern white laborers increased, fear of white resistance to planter rule became more apparent. Elite southerners put much effort, especially in the 1850s, to bring these people into the proslavery fold. It is clear that this effort reflected an underlying fear that a class of poor white southerners could come to threaten the balance of southern politics. They saw this class as potentially important to southern, and perhaps national politics. Southern commentators saw the potential for southern non-slaveholders to align with proponents of antislavery in the North, especially with the rise of the Republican party in the mid-1850s. These anxieties were heightened by the increased frequency and forcefulness of northern attacks on southern slavery and southern honor.

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<sup>228</sup> William Graham, “Speech of the Honorable William A. Graham of Orange, on the Amendments of the Constitution in the Senate,” December 12, 1854.

<sup>229</sup> George M. Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South*, 2.

The release of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852 changed the face of sectional conflict. Beecher used the trapping of the plantation novel genre to portray its usually subjects, southern gentlemen and ladies, as vicious and immoral slave owners. Its sheer popularity and challenge to southern ideals of aristocratic honor, caused a significant response from elite southern writers. Appeals like Stowe's in popular literature worried elite southerners were already anxious over the penetration of northern antislavery political arguments to non-slaveholding southerners. They attempted to refute these cultural and moralistic appeals as the ignorant product of passionate radicals and not the product of rational observation of human nature.<sup>230</sup> From its release to the coming of the Civil War, the southern plantation novel was used as a tool to reclaim southern honor and rebuke Stowe's image of the South, which was reaching upper- and middle-class Americans all over the country. As one of these anti-Tom novels put not too subtly, "the object which the author of the following story has in view, is to represent the relations between master and slave," or in this case to present the ideal picture of southern slavery as interpreted by the southern code of chivalric honor.<sup>231</sup>

As William Taylor has observed, cultural and political conflict, coupled with the growing economic divide between North and South, forced elite southerners to invent new ethics of society. As Taylor explains, "the problem for the South" was that it was forced to either live by the free labor values of the North or invent others that validated their social realities. As they contended with the North, conflict was becoming suffused with the biological arguments of southern Cavalier mythology, and elite southerners "persisted in seeing themselves as different, and increasingly, they tended to reshape and this acknowledged difference into a claim of superiority." Like poor whites, northerners were of innately inferior biology. This inferiority

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<sup>230</sup> "The Edinburgh Review on the Political Crisis in the U.S., October 1856," 25.

<sup>231</sup> W. L. G. Smith, *Life at the South: or "Uncle Tom's Cabin" as it is*, v.

translated into political culture, where northerners were presented as “mercenary, hypocritical and Philistine,” while “generous-hearted Southerners won admiration for his indifference to pecuniary drives and his reputedly greater familiarity with political culture and genteel ways.”<sup>232</sup> Southern leaders had been cultivated by the social system of slavery, where an aristocratic bloodline was preserved amongst the planter class. “Domestic slavery in the Southern States has produced the same results in elevating the character of the master that it did in Greece and Rome,” George Fitzhugh explained. “A Yankee sometimes gets hold of the reins of state” but inevitably fell short, men like “Calhoun and Washington, are the noble results of domestic slavery.”<sup>233</sup>

Through the 1850s, southern writers engaged in ethnocultural conflict with the North, perhaps most voluminously within the genre of anti-Tom plantation novels. Caroline Rush’s 1852 anti-Tom novel, *The North and South, or, Slavery and Its Contrasts*, came to the defense of southern honor by portraying the North as the true cause of poverty and white degradation. In the free labor system of the urban North men and women were exploited by factory owners—often abolitionists—who financed the printing presses stirring up unrest in the South. They preached against the degradation of black southern slaves at the same time they created a class of “poor white slaves” who toiled in their factories. After relaying the story of a poor sewing girl, driven to destitution by the degradative conditions of free labor capitalism, Rush assured her readers that as “heartless as such things appear, they are really true. In many cases the rich employ persons to sew for them, who only work for spending money,” relegating them to a status of mere subsistence and servility.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> William Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, xvii, xxi.

<sup>233</sup> George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society*, 244.

<sup>234</sup> [Caroline E. Rush], *North and South, or, Slavery and its Contrasts*, 45-46, 60.

Weaved within this genre of romantic novels were clear and explicit political statements and allegories. Notably, authors like Rush rarely engaged with poor whites or the poverty that pervaded the South. Rush's novel was part of a subgenre of anti-Tom novels which, beginning with Charles Jacobs Peterson's *The Cabin and Parlor*, sought to illustrate the existence of the "northern slave," exploited poor workers degraded by industrial labor, whose existence was often worse than that of the slaves of the South. In the novel Peterson quotes a European traveler's perspective as well. "After witnessing slavery in almost every State where it existed, and living for weeks among negroes on cotton plantation," he explained of the man, he "asserted that he never saw one-fifth of the real suffering that he had beheld among the laboring poor of England." In one instance in the novel, a Southern Gentleman is accosted by a dying northern laborer, who mistaking him for a factory owner exclaims "you are one of the bad men. You make slaves of white children—poor orphans—and work them to death... I've often seen you in my dreams. Go away."<sup>235</sup>

Southern proslavery writers sought to contrast the northern free labor system of the North to the South by emphasizing the power of slavery to elevate all white men. Charles Dew claimed in the early-1830s that in the South, and because of racial slavery, "the poorest white person seems to consider himself nearly on a level with the richest." This allowed him approach his employer on a level playing field and receive just reimbursement for their work. It was this "spirit of equality" that was the "generator and preserver of the genuine spirit of liberty."<sup>236</sup> Elite northerners did not favor free labor to provide prosperity for poor white men, nor did they oppose slavery for moral or religious reasons, they did so, southern writers argued, because they stood to make money from the exploitation of labor. "Free-soilers are not fanatics, but

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<sup>235</sup> Charles Jacobs Peterson, *The Cabin and Parlor; Or Slaves and Masters*, 4, 243.

<sup>236</sup> Thomas Roderick Dew, "Review of the debate in the Virginia Legislature, 1831-32," 462.

economists and politicians,” explained Henry Hughes, “Northern antagonism is more than a moral and religious antagonism. It is an economic antagonism.”

At the heart of cultural and sectional conflict, according to these authors, was the raw interest of northern capitalists in the political protection of their right to the exploitation of white laborers. The North and the South had developed two competing socioeconomic worldviews and “we thus see that the two sections are in antagonism because their policies are in antagonism, and their policies are different because their labor systems are different.”<sup>237</sup> These economic and political differences were couched, in the South, in the ethos of southern honor culture and Cavalier mythology. William Burwell, on the eve of disunion, put this outlook succinctly when he declared that “it is a gross mistake to suppose that abolition alone is the cause of dissension between North and South,” in fact their differences were more biological, “the Cavaliers, Jacobites, and huguenots who settled the South, naturally hate, contemn, and despise the Puritans who settled the North. The former are master races, the latter, a slave race... the ancestors of the Yankees, came from the cold and marshy regions of the North; where man is little more than a cold-blooded, amphibious biped.”<sup>238</sup> A biological determinism that poor whites also stood outside of.

Elite southern social commentators agreed that sectional conflict was the result of opposing labor systems, but the North and the South had developed different systems of labor not simply because plantation slavery was uniquely suited for the South, but because the regions were populated by people of biologically different necessities. Hundley, responding to the proclivity of authors such as Stowe to criticize southern peculiarities, such as “social habits,

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<sup>237</sup> Henry Hughes, “Reopening the Slave Trade: A Series by ‘St. Henry,’” 81-83.

<sup>238</sup> William M. Burwell, “The Message, The Constitution, and the Times,” *DeBow’s Review* vol. 30 (New Orleans: 1861), 162.



manners, customs, observances, and domestic institutions.” But these criticisms were based on erroneous assumptions, if they were to only learn about the South from novels such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* they would end up like “poor John Brown when he made his foolish raid into Virginia.” But the South was only inhabited by two significant groups, African slaves and “the high-bred English courtier of aristocratic mien and faultless manners.”<sup>239</sup> Hundley downplayed the millions of poor white southerners in order to appeal to racial fears justifying slavery and opposing systems of labor.

Fitzhugh suggested that those who sought to introduce free labor to the South were simply proposing “to introduce *white slave labor* instead of black slave labor.” New England had sought to send emigrants to the unused land of the border states, where their “underground railroad” would “steal a part of our slaves and poison the minds of the balance.” Groups such as the Emigrant Aid Society of Massachusetts “had sought to setup the colonies among us.” “Half of the lands in these border States,” Fitzhugh claims, were without a source of labor, and without an influx of slaves to cultivate it they would be populated by the white labor of northern infiltrators. They would compete with the slave trade with the perpetuation of a white slave trade. To fight this infiltration “two measures are necessary. The one, State legislation that shall require all New-England emigrants to give security for their good behavior. The other, the renewal of the African slave-trade, to fill up that vacuum in our population which will be filled up by abolitionist if not by negroes.”<sup>240</sup> Again poor whites were left out of any discussion of their involvement in the institutions of the South. Fear drove an image of an industrial South infiltrated by nefarious northern abolitionists who would seek to enslave white southerners.

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<sup>239</sup> Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, 7-8, 10.

<sup>240</sup> George Fitzhugh, “Disunion Within the Union,” 1-2.

Others framed slavery as a barrier to the development of class conflict. “The struggle between Capital and Labour... in the non-slaveholding States of this union,” one southern writer claimed, “as long as labour is free.” Sectional conflict manifested itself in arguments that stressed the development of inequality among white in free labor systems. In free labor, “Capital, in great and magnificent accumulations, is holden by the few, who naturally desire to get labour for as little as they can.” In this dynamic no natural sympathy developed between employers and employees. The North, in this vision, was a cold place, where white men were pitted against each other, and the “mighty warfare between Labour and Capital... each year adds to the number of the poor, the miserable, and the destitute.” In contrast, “because the labour of the South—the slaves—constitutes a great part of the wealth and capital of the South. This union of labour and capital in the same hands, counteracts and avert all those social, moral, material, and political evils which afflict the North.”<sup>241</sup> Slavery served as a barrier to the moral and social degradation that the southern elite had long placed at the feet of the antislavery North. Economics joined ethnocultural conflict as the northern labor system was shown to destroy the moral fabric of society.

Fear of class conflict laid at the heart of these justification of the slave labor system. A contemporary proslavery historian, Thomas Cobb, observed a lack of class development in the South, and claimed that “there is perhaps no solution of the great problem of reconciling the interests of labor and capital, so as to protect each from the encroachments and oppressions of the other, so simple and effective as negro slavery. By making the laborer himself capital, the conflict ceases, and the interests become identical.”<sup>242</sup> When these interests did not align, Hughes

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<sup>241</sup> “American Slavery, in 1857,” *The Southern Literary Messenger* vol. 15 (Richmond: Macfarlane, Fergusson & Co., 1857), 84-85.

<sup>242</sup> Thomas R.R. Cobb, *An Historical Sketch of Slavery from the Earliest Periods*, ccxvi.

explained, “the rich and poor conflict... the fundamental laws for the public health, public peace, public industry and public subsistence, are not executed.” This resulted in “strikes and riots” as the “economic system is not civilly ordained and established.”<sup>243</sup> Elite southerners laid out a system of labor that left out an entire class of laboring poor whites. Slaves they argued were the ideal laborers. This marginalization reflected an underlying fear of class conflict in a society dominated by elite planters. It is clear that despite a belief in the slave labor system’s ability to unify whites as one class, that traditional economic class concerns still lingered. Especially within the context of a continuing debate over industrialization.

One southerner observed the precarious place of lower class non-slaveholder in the southern economy, placing the effects of the slave labor system as the cause. He argued that the land possessed by non-slaveholders was “almost universally poor, and so sterile that a scanty subsistence is all that can be derived from its cultivation.” Writers questioned planter domination, claiming that they ate up all the fertile land, causing non-slaveholders, and in particular landless whites, to “settle down into habits of idleness.”<sup>244</sup> Despite this dynamic, southern poor whites would ultimately end up supporting slavery. “Impoverished black belt whites saw scant reason to assault the stakeholders who monopolized the lushest land,” Forret has argued, claiming that while poor whites knew they had to compete with blacks, ultimately the preferred them enslaved than free.<sup>245</sup> Poor whites were united with elite planters through what historians have termed *herrenvolk* democracy. The rhetoric of white supremacy and equality under slavery was powerful enough, ultimately, to overcome class differences.<sup>246</sup> Poor

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<sup>243</sup> Henry Hughes, *Treatise on Sociology, Theoretical and Practical*, 290.

<sup>244</sup> M. Tarver, “Domestic Manufacturers in the South and West,” 1847, quoted in George M. Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South*, 2.

<sup>245</sup> Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins*, 21.

<sup>246</sup> George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*, ch. 2.

whites supported secession as a way to protect themselves from potential competition with free blacks, and avoid the destitution they were told would result from a move towards free labor and industrialization.

Elite slaveowners still feared that antislavery arguments that hinged on a critique of the slave labor system would reach the non-slaveholding class and prove particularly persuasive to the landless white class whom they already distrusted and feared on a variety of levels. Arguments began to emerge that stressed the importance of separating southerners without a stake in the economics and social culture of slavery from the antislavery messages of the North. This bolstered the secessionist argument, and was a clear and explicit impetus for proslavery arguments that radicalized southern ideology and politics in the late-antebellum period. The sheer size of the landless white class, coupled with a fear of instigation of slave insurrection, whether paranoid or not, a palpable class and cultural resentment and the danger of antislavery arguments targeted at poor southern whites, constituted a significant motivation for the radicalization of southern ideology, and for secession from the free labor North. In the previous decades, as new southern states entered the Union with white manhood suffrage, many of the older southern states were pressured to amend their constitutions in order to placate a growing opposition to aristocratic southern rule. This political upheaval had the potential to threaten slave owner domination in southern politics, as the vote had been given to almost every southern white male by 1860.<sup>247</sup>

In 1850, J. H. Taylor argued against southern industrialization, in an effort to prevent poor whites from realizing their degraded position. “So long as these poor but industrious people could see no mode of living except by a degrading operation of work with the negro upon the

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<sup>247</sup> William Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, xvi.

plantation,” he claimed, “they were content to endure life in its most discouraging forms, satisfied they were above, the slave.” If they were given opportunities “the great mass of our poor white population [would] begin to understand that they have rights.” This was a problem because “the poor man has a vote as well as the rich man, and in our State the number of the former will largely overbalance the latter,” and they were “fast learning that there is an almost infinite world of industry opening before them, by which they can elevate themselves and their families from the wretchedness and ignorance, to competence and intelligence. It is this great upheaving of our masses that we have to fear, so far as our institutions are concerned.”<sup>248</sup> Despite what the elite southerners thought about the cultural and even biological inferiority of landless whites, above all slave owners feared that non-slaveowners would become aware that the slave labor system was actually not in their best interest. They appealed to poor whites by claiming that under free labor systems “the poorer classes are born to servile labor.” Poor white slavery would result, as “ever since the negroes have been liberated” in the North, the poor whites have been degraded by “being substituted for negroes to wait on the rich.”<sup>249</sup>

By the late 1850s southern elites understood that landless whites perceived their degraded position and understood its root was slavery. One sarcastic non-slaveowner commented on a proposal at the height of political crisis that would allow for slaveholders to sell a tenth of their slaves to non-slaveholders to foster a vote for secession. “Already I have seen it mentioned in Abolition journals that they have allies among the non-slave owners, of which class I am sorry to say I am,” he explained, “for reasons that I very much regret, I never was able to own one.”<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> J.H. Taylor quoted from *De Bow's Review*, January, 1850, in George M. Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South*, 2.

<sup>249</sup> “Hereditary Descent; or, Depravity of the Offspring of Polygamy Among the Mormons,” *De Bow's Review*, 5 no. 2 (New Orleans: Feb. 1861), 216.

<sup>250</sup> Edgefield Advertiser, 28 November, 1860 quoted in William J. Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society*, 91.

The resentment was palpable, and it points to why secession may have been the only solution to their landless white problem. In the end secession was presented as a way of securing white equality, as one Alabama congressman argued at the secession convention slavery “secures the equality of the white race, and upon its permanent establishment rest the hope of democratic liberty... let us keep the white race as they are now and ought ever to be—free, equal and independent.”<sup>251</sup>

On the eve of secession, one southern writer gave a last ditch effort to appeal poor non-slaveholders’ sense of privilege within white supremacist slave society. John Townsend of South Carolina claimed that “in no country in the world does the poor white man, whether slaveholder or non-slaveholder, occupy so enviable a position as in the slaveholding States of the South. His color here admits him to social and civil privileges which the white man enjoys nowhere else. In countries where negro slavery does not exist... the most menial and degrading employments in society are filled by the white poor, who are hourly seen drudging in them.” In free labor societies poverty became the “badge of inferiority,” while in the South, “the status and color of the black race become the badge of inferiority, and the poorest non-slaveholder may rejoice with the riches of his brethren of the white race, in the distinction of his color.”<sup>252</sup>

Some historians have argued that elite concern for antislavery’s appeal to non-slave owning southerners, and in particular laboring whites, was a “prime motive” in the move towards secession. Formation of a southern confederacy, with a constitution that protected property in slaves, would remove the threat that non-slaveowners posed if they came to identify politically

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<sup>251</sup> William R. Smith, *Convention of the People of Alabama* (Atlanta: Wood, Hanleiter, Rice & Co., 1861), 256.

<sup>252</sup> John Townsend, “The Non-Slaveholders of the South,” *De Bow’s Review* 5 no. 1 (New Orleans: Jan. 1861), 123, from a speech titled “The Doom of Slavery in the Union.”

with antislavery.<sup>253</sup> The political upheaval of white manhood suffrage, which emerged in the southwestern states in the early nineteenth century and grew through the antebellum period in order to placate the growing resentment of aristocratic rule, gave elite southerners a reason to fear a political revolt of landless laboring southerners.<sup>254</sup> Just the sheer number of landless whites constituted a potential, if ultimately unlikely, threat. The fear created by the untrustworthy and not quite white perception of landless whites, which marginalized them from the mainstream culture of the South, was exacerbated by interaction with slaves and given immediacy by the political crisis of the late-1850s. Significant impetus was given to the radicalization of southern ideology in order to protect slavery from whites who were degraded by the slave labor system. The proslavery arguments produced from these fears ultimately led to secession, which indeed did accomplish separating southern poor whites from their potential political and class allies in the North.

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<sup>253</sup> Stephen V. Ash, "Poor Whites in the Occupied South, 1861-1865," 42-43; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 314-315; William Harris, Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society, 64-93, 137-138; Michael P. Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 85-94.

<sup>254</sup> William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, xvi.

## CONCLUSION

The cultural, social, and political unease that elite southerners felt for the class of landless southern poor whites, brought them to the forefront of literary and intellectual antebellum southern culture. From their not quite white racial status to their common interaction with slaves, poor whites put elite southerners—who justified their social system on ideals of white supremacy—on edge. They were perceived as unruly, and interaction with them was seen to cause moral degradation. They were also used as a rhetorical tool for both internal and external attacks on the slave labor system. This class, and the anxieties they created, highlighted the inconsistencies of elite southern ideology. It laid bare the limits of white supremacy, slave based economics and democratic republicanism, in the increasingly mainstream proslavery worldview that emerged after 1830. The reality of white inequality in decades before the Civil War forced the literary vanguards of slavery to invent new formulations of southern society. These views were filtered through the biological, racial and cultural constructions of southern Cavalier honor culture. They claimed a superiority to those left out by the slave economy, and sought to bring aspirant yeomen into the proslavery fold. The cultural perceptions of poor whites resulted in social and political fears, providing an impetus for attempts at consolidation of white supremacy, and separation of the South and its potentially disloyal elements from potential class allies in the North.

Cultural and political conflict between the North and South shaped literary and intellectual discourse, particularly in the three decades before the Civil War, when poor whites



were at the forefront of elite thought. Engagement with poor whites was wrapped up in elite southern emphasis on the cultural and biological superiority of an aristocratic southern culture nurtured in plantation slavery. While defending their honor, elite southern writers offered poor whites as a contrast to the masculine chivalrous southern patriarch or “Southern Gentlemen.” In the thirty years before the Civil War, romantic popular literature, constructed the ideals and rules of engagement of a planter based aristocratic chivalric tradition of honor. In the 1850s the anti-Tom plantation novel genre hastened development of a cultural component of proslavery ideology, even engaging directly with the political debates of the sectional crisis, including the relative merit of the slave labor and free labor system in creating white poverty. Elite southerners painted sectional differences as cultural and biological differences, which diverging socioeconomic differences and interests emerged from. The large class of landless poor white southerners were often tellingly left out of these elite conceptions of society. And when they did attempt to justify this class’s existence, it was done by highlighting the degradation of white laborers in the urban and industrial north.

This cultural process of social and political marginalization, helps to explain why class conflict, especially amongst whites, has often been downplayed by historians of the antebellum South. Poor whites, and non-slaveholders in general, in the end, would support slavery and secession. So their place in southern society has been overshadowed by the apparent ability of upper-class southerners to control the political wills of the mass of non-slaveholding southerners. If they supported slavery enough to secede from the union, then what conflict could they have with the slave labor system? Historians thusly have overlooked the importance of class to, at least, the intellectual mind of the ruling class. But it is clear that the existence of the landless white class troubled elite southerners. Fear of the development of a class consciousness among

non-slaveholding southerners was an impetus for a variety of intellectual developments in the antebellum South, which hastened the development of proslavery thought and provided a compelling reason for secession from the increasingly antislavery North. This interpretive hole can also be explained by the methodological difficulties of exploring the social world of antebellum poor whites. Traditional social and political histories have correctly observed that this class did not affect much when it came to the economy and politics of the South. But a failure to penetrate the elite politics of the antebellum South, was not reflected by the power that concern over the poor white class had in shaping elite political ideologies. Contemporary social observers often commented that landless non-slaveholding whites were of little threat to the dominance of elite planters. While at the same time they increasingly sought to justify their existence, worried about the damage they caused to the legitimacy of southern social order.

Though class conflict did not manifest itself in the traditional sense, perceptions of inequality, and degradation at the hands of the slave labor system, signaled to elite planters that their newly enfranchised and impoverished neighbors might feel resentment for the South's slave based system of labor. Economic and social interaction between slaves and poor whites was common in the antebellum South, and served as an additional class fear for elite southerners. Not only could these people find common ground, as similarly marginalized groups in the South who often worked and spent leisure time together, but their sometimes amicable relationships threatened the racial hierarchy that elites used to justify the slave labor system. Race, which was the fundamental basis of southern social culture as well as the reason for non-slaveholder support of slavery and secession, in these contexts, seemed to be of little importance. Southern elite slave owners were never fully convinced that racism would be strong enough to unite the disparate classes of white southerners.

This constituted a decided and perceivable impetus to begin to present slavery as a positive good for all white southerners. White supremacy was both a powerful and problematic ideal when presented to the class of poor landless laboring whites. It stood as a force that, in theory, elevated them above the mass of southern laborers, black slaves. But at the same time elites presented an image of these people that relegated them outside the bounds southern whiteness. This contradiction reflects the difficulty elite southerners had in straddling ideologies of the social economics of the slave labor system, which often saw labor in the abstract and not in racial terms, and the aristocratic structures of mainstream social culture, which often equated whiteness with cultural ideals of romantic chivalry, including traditional gender ideals and manners. Poor landless whites fit into the biological model that undergirded ideologies of the slave labor system, and stood outside of cultural ideals of white southernness. Elite southerners would even flirt with the prospect of a system of white labor modeled on the master-slave relationship, a relationship fostered in the world of plantation slavery and master dominance.

Joining slaves on equitable terms, signaled to elite slave owners that poor southern whites did not abide by their rigid system of racial classification. This was problematic for several reasons. It rendered arguments of racial social hierarchy and white supremacy suspect, and illustrated to elite southerners—concerned of a potential political attack on slavery—that a significant section of the white southern population stood outside the social and cultural structures of plantation slavery. By joining slaves on the battlefield of honor, poor whites established a social equality between them and black men. The southern code of honor implied an equality to those participating in these social traditions, heightening their sense that poor white southerners would not be loyal to other southern traditions and ideals. Elite southerners attempted to enforce the division of slaves and non-slaveowning whites through the mechanisms

of the state, as well as through informal communal systems of social exclusion and humiliation. The extent of slave-poor white interaction suggested to elite southerners that racism may have not been enough to prevent class collusion between poor whites and slaves, and challenged the very social structures that southern social order was based upon. To counteract these potential biracial alliances developments elite slaveholders agitated animosity between slaves and poor whites, by promoting negative poor white stereotypes to their slaves and emphasizing that blacks were a potential competition for laboring whites if slavery were to end. Southern slave owners projected so much disdain towards poor whites that slaves often seemed to have an understanding that laboring whites, in certain context, were trusted and respected less than slaves. Animosity between poor whites and slave was also propagated by elite southerners in a variety of mediums. Popular romantic literature, for example, painted slaves as trustworthy, while poor whites were seen as mischievous criminals, constantly trying to corrupt slaves as well as Southern Gentlemen.

Beyond the development of a biracial class consciousness, slave owning southerners feared biracial lower class interaction due to the common belief that poor whites instigated slave rebellions. After Nat Turner, slave rebellion was always at the forefront of elite engagement with southern society. Racist and paternalistic assumption implied that meddling whites had to be behind the planning of this kind of slave resistance. This gave social disorder and the problem of poor whites a sense of pressing urgency to elite southerners. Lack of social control was always a fear for elite slaveholders, and the prospect of slave-poor white interaction in illicit activities, particularly slave rebellions, hastened efforts to consolidate slavery culturally, socially and politically. This often placed the defenders of slavery against the class of landless poor whites, as they stood as agitators of social unrest and rebellion. Elite southerners were frightened by these

biracial antisocial actions because they implied that white supremacy—their most powerful tool in wedding non-slaveholders to proslavery ideology and politics—may not have been fully appreciated by poor landless whites.

During the sectional crisis, elite southern intellectuals attempted to construct a new ideology of slavery, which justified itself to non-slaveholding whites in the face of urban and industrial developments in the North, and the free labor ideology that it cultivated. As antislavery sentiments increased in volume and in forcefulness, elite southerners became increasingly concerned about the loyalty of non-slaveholders, especially poor whites, who were perceived as being almost completely disconnected from the prospect of slave ownership. These fears were legitimated by perceptions that poor whites did not buy into white supremacy and southern honor culture. They could not be controlled as either servile labor, or through cultural hegemony, and racial distinctions were doing little to keep them in line. Southern intellectuals responded by either producing material that marginalized poor whites, both culturally and numerically, from understandings of southern society, or attempted to spread an argument that the end of slavery was the end of any racial privilege that might have remained for poor whites.

Representation of poor landless whites in elite literature reflected these racial anxieties. Southern authors in the decades before the Civil War constructed a mythology of southern social culture, which relegated this feared class of poor whites to a not quite white status, rendering them outside the social, cultural and political definitions of a true southernness. Their stereotyped image, within the trappings of southern aristocratic honor culture, depicted a people outside of the bounds of respectable society, people unable to live up to the standards of chivalry and manners prescribed by this cultural system. Popular literature portrayed landless whites as idle, unsophisticated, violent and untrustworthy. Though often they were left out of the picture

entirely. The mythos created in elite works was constructed for the purpose of protecting slavery culturally. The Cavalier outlook served this purpose by backing up a biological worldview, that justified the enslavement of inferior black people, at the same time that it explained away the inferior status of poor white southerners. Popular southern authors worked to develop an ideal of the “Southern Gentlemen,” which spread the ideology of slavery and social hierarchy that undergirded their efforts. The anti-Tom novel, the most sustained subgenre of antebellum southern literature, was at its core concerned with the protection of the Cavalier mythology, the masculine honor that motivated it, and the institution of slavery, which was its overriding purpose. It was challenges like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which cut to the heart of southern myths that received the most sustained attention, revealing the importance of these cultural ideals to the elite ideology of the South.

Poor landless whites stood outside the boundaries of these widely accepted models for the ideal “southerner” and “gentleman.” Elite southerners understood this, as evidenced by their sustained attempts to woo poor whites and illustrate to those non-slaveholding southerners who aspired to southern aristocratic culture, that slavery was in their best interests. Elite southerners distinguished between the yeomen landowning farmer and the landless poor white. Poor whites stood outside the racial boundaries of southern respectability and rebuked the ethos of elite chivalrous honor culture. Their landless status also rendered the prospect of slave ownership as a distant, unobtainable fantasy, in the face of planter domination of fertile lands and slave bodies. “The Poor Whites of the South,” Daniel Robinson Hundley argued in 1860, “constitute a separate class to themselves; the Southern Yeomen are as distinct from them as the Southern Gentleman from the Cotton Snob,” a group of planters who despite their status of slaveowners, failed to live up to ideals of southern honor culture. While Hundley separated the “Southern

Gentleman” from the “Southern Yeomen,” he still emphasized the role that aristocratic culture had in determining their relative worth. Slaveowning yeomen “do not act in the masterial way that Southern Gentlemen do,” but they still aspired to one day own slaves, and to mimic the cultural and social customs of aristocratic slave owners.<sup>255</sup> This further highlights just how far removed poor whites were from the status held by elite slave owners, putting the ideals of white supremacy in stark contrast to the social realities of the antebellum South.

Elite southerners feared that antislavery arguments which highlighted the inconsistencies between the ideal of white supremacy and the social and economic realities of the antebellum South, would reach the ears of non-slaveholding southerners. Arguments for the separation of poor whites from potential northern political and class allies, began to emerge in the 1850s. This was the result of a rising distrust of poor whites within southern social culture, and a sectional political crisis over the future of slavery. Both proslavery and secessionist ideologies were bolstered by the problem of poor landless whites in southern slave society. Poor whites constituted a not insignificant portion of white male southerners. And in the newly democratized South, elite southerners feared a political challenge from a class of non-slaveholders turned against the slave labor system. They threatened slavery on a national political level, as well as in their day to day challenges to southern social order. Elite southerners met this threat with arguments, that in the decade before the Civil War, attempted to convince poor whites that the slave labor system was in their best interest.

Slavery was the cornerstone of elite southern views of the ideal society, and having a class of whites within that society with no ties to slavery, and little aspiration to become slave owners, constituted a social and political threat. That these people never came to view slavery as

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<sup>255</sup> Daniel Robinson Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, 193.

the cause of their problems or ever organized together politically, does not mean that they were not a problem in the mind of ruling class southerners. They could not know where their loyalties ultimately lay. They distrusted them on a cultural, social and biological level, and perceived, themselves, the economic inequality that appeared to be the result of plantation slavery. These fears were bolstered by elements of elite southern ideology which stressed the inability of innately inferior poor whites to live up to the responsibilities of civic republicanism. Their cultural worldview convinced them that poor southern whites could not be trusted, with the rise of sectional conflict over labor systems and the formation of a national antislavery political party, elite southerners moved to shore up their cherished institution from not just northern agitators, but from the internal threat the poor landless whites posed.

Ultimately, secession stood as the final tool of elite proslavery southerners in securing slavery against both internal and external threats, and white supremacy was their selling point to the southern populace. South Carolina Congressman John McQueen, in a letter to constituents explaining why South Carolina seceded, argued that other southern states had to “choose between an association with her sisters and the dominion of a people, who have chosen their leader upon the single idea that the African is equal to the Anglo-Saxon,” whose ultimate purpose of placing “slave on equality with ourselves and our friends of every condition.”<sup>256</sup> Arguments were presented that emphasized the power of white supremacy to uplift the white man, but ultimately secession was seen partly by elite southerners as a way to separate poor non-slaveholding whites from antislavery northerners, as well as a way to enshrine slavery within a southern constitutions and political system that would be dominated by men loyal to slavery.

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<sup>256</sup> John McQueen, “Correspondence to T.T. Cropper and J.R. Crenshaw, (December 24, 1860).



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