

Introduction: The Second Degree of Slavery

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

– Hinton Helper, 1857¹

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

– J.G. Palfrey²

In the few years prior to the Civil War, Hinton Helper was one of the most reviled names uttered among the slaveholders of the South. His thoughts banned from the region, his likeness burned in effigy, and his life threatened with death, Helper had published a book that struck fear into the hardened hearts of slave masters everywhere, ultimately helping

¹ Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (1857; reprint, New York: A.B. Burdick, 1860), 32–3.

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

push them to the brink of secession. While *The Impending Crisis of the South* certainly advocated the end of chattel slavery, its main argument was not focused on the plight of the nation's four million blacks. Instead, Helper crafted a statistically stacked, well-researched tome intended for the masses of white Southerners, calling upon them to join the antislavery movement out of concern for their own self-interest. As a non-slaveholder from North Carolina, Helper was one of the region's only outspoken abolitionists at this point, instantly becoming infamous throughout the country. By claiming that five million poor southern whites suffered "a second degree of slavery" precisely because of the enslavement of blacks, Helper made a variety of convincing arguments detailing slavery's detrimental impact on the lives of non-slaveholders.³

According to Helper, a small but very wealthy group of slaveholders lorded over the South, controlling politics and dominating the economy. Deeming the master class "a disgrace and a curse to humanity," he refuted the pro-slavery argument point by point, asserting that no free white could compete with slave labor. Contrary to planter claims that black slavery boosted the status of all whites, Helper realized that slave ownership mattered much more than white skin when determining southern social status. He thus classified non-slaveholders as a distinct economic class. In a frenzied quest to suppress anything that even mentioned abolition, slaveholders immediately banned *The Impending Crisis* from the South, clamoring for Helper's death and arresting or lynching anyone who brought a copy of his book into the region. Their overzealous reaction to Helper's ideas strongly suggests that his theories may have been more accurate than previously assumed.

While recent scholarly trends have involved minimizing Helper's impact on American history, without a thorough examination of his claims, a full understanding of the path to secession remains incomplete. Indeed, at an Organization of American Historians meeting more than forty years ago, Eric Foner urged a panel of Civil War students "to take a new look at the social and economic structure of the Old South." The best way to accomplish this massive undertaking, Foner asserted, was through innovative research on non-slaveholding whites, "the least studied of all our social classes." While much of the South's history has been interpreted through studies on slaves, planters, and even yeomen, poor whites

³ Helper, *The Impending Crisis*, 32–3; 191; David Brown, *Southern Outcast: Hinton Rowan Helper and the Impending Crisis of the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2006).

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still remain understudied – four decades after Foner’s initial request. Generally defined as owning neither land nor slaves, poor whites comprised, at the very least, about one-third of the South’s white population in the few decades preceding the Civil War. Since the mid-1990s, several good social histories about antebellum poor whites have been published, but they have yet to be synthesized, or incorporated into nineteenth-century history writ large. This book, therefore, attempts to answer Foner’s call for research by situating poor white Southerners into America’s broader political economy.⁴

Organized thematically, it explores how slavery impacted the lives of poor whites in the few decades before the Civil War by focusing on land ownership, labor, material realities, the southern legal system, and vigilante violence. It then argues that the plight of poor whites helped push slaveholders into disunion, and further shows how the active resistance or passive noncompliance of large numbers of poor whites added to the Confederate military’s multitude of problems. Finally, it proposes that black emancipation actually freed poor white Southerners in a variety of ways. By integrating the story of poor whites into the broader narrative of the nineteenth century, the answers to some of the biggest questions in American history become clarified and nuanced.

With no direct ties to slavery, poor whites had long posed a threat to the maintenance of the peculiar institution. The tumultuous decade of the 1830s brought sweeping social changes to America, especially with the rise of abolitionism. As many slaveholders in the Mid-Atlantic and Upper South states began to disentangle themselves from the institution, over the next two decades close to a million slaves were sold farther South, flooding the labor market and pushing poor whites closer to the margins of society. Moreover, by the end of the 1830s, the land brutally stolen from Native Americans and sold cheaply to white settlers was no longer readily available in the older slave states, and land prices became too expensive for many poorer and lower-middle-class whites to purchase.⁵

⁴ Eric Foner quoted in Fred Arthur Bailey, *Class and Tennessee’s Confederate Generation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 17; Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites in the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 5. For a full discussion of how I arrived at (and why I use) this conservative estimate, see the Appendix.

⁵ For the purposes of this book, the Deep South refers to South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Louisiana’s complex racial hierarchy was obviously too different from its sister states to be fully included, but examples from it, as well as from the bordering states of Tennessee and North Carolina, are occasionally used.

The Specie Circular Act of 1836 further helped solidify class distinctions, as the law required that all governmental land purchases be transacted with silver or gold, making it nearly impossible for the landless to enter the ranks of the landed. Supposedly ushering in an era of universal white male suffrage, the Jacksonian era ended with a significant financial crash that helped further concentrate wealth. Although, until recently, historians have tended to overlook the significance of the Panic of 1837, the breadth of its devastation cannot be overstated. As many smallholders lost their land due to foreclosure, bankruptcy, and tax liens, plantation owners began buying up the acreage around them, consolidating much of the region's landholdings.

Problems for non-slaveholding whites continued accruing throughout the 1840s, right on the heels of the economic recession. By this time, the profitability and profusion of plantation slavery had rendered most unskilled white workers superfluous, particularly in the Deep South, where higher percentages of slaves exacerbated the problem. Like their forefathers, most poor whites had spent their lives working in agriculture, only to find their services no longer required, except during the bottleneck seasons of planting and harvest. Shut out from much of the Deep South's agricultural work, many poor white laborers spent the late-antebellum period experiencing long bouts of unemployment or underemployment.⁶

The situation only grew worse with the cotton boom of the 1850s, as the richest slaveholders grew their wealth while non-slaveholders continued to flounder, increasingly shut out of the market economy. Agreeing with historian Gavin Wright that "antebellum southern agriculture was characterized by a highly unequal wealth distribution," economist Albert Niemi described the region as marred by deep levels of inequality, regardless of the cash crop produced. Slavery had already driven the wages of southern white laborers well below those of their northern counterparts, but even more detrimentally, it decreased the demand for white tenants,

⁶ Most studies that focus on antebellum laborers in the South have tended to concentrate on a slightly higher class of workers, like those with artisanal skills. Other scholars have lumped poor whites into a broad non-slaveholder category. See Michele Gillespie, *Free Labor in an Unfree World: White Artisans in Slaveholding Georgia, 1789–1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000); J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterland* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1985); Timothy J. Lockley, "Partners in Crime: African Americans and Non-Slaveholding Whites in Antebellum Georgia," in Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (New York: Routledge, 1997), and Timothy James Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750–1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

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croppers, day laborers, and even mechanics, creating a large underclass of white people who were unable to find consistent work or earn a living wage. As poor white Isaac Grimes remembered, employment opportunities were “awful scarce. Couldn’t hardly get work [and] wages [were] so low – I have worked that time for \$5.00 a month and board. Worked with oxens, all [I] could get for work.” Another laborer from Georgia complained that “the slaveholders could get the slave for almost nothing and the poor young men like myself could not get a job.” Completely removed from many of the privileges of whiteness, poor whites were essentially masterless men and women in an increasingly hierarchical world held together by mastery. This fact deeply troubled the region’s slaveholders.⁷

Indeed, poor white Southerners not only possessed class consciousness, but as the antebellum period wore on, they became overtly resentful of slaveholders. With their labor rendered almost unnecessary, some poor whites chose to drop out of society altogether, living off the land and often running afoul of the law. Others struggled to make ends meet with occasional odd jobs and seasonal agricultural work. Yet the nature of this type of labor kept many poor white men on the move in search of jobs, fracturing households and leaving many families headed by women, at least for portions of the year. Although they never experienced the brutality and abuse that African Americans did, poor whites still suffered obvious hardships – all because of slavery.

Unfortunately, poor whites made particularly inviting targets for a southern legal system dominated by slaveholders, who generally incarcerated them for behavioral, nonviolent “crimes” such as trading, drinking, and other social interactions with slaves and free blacks. On the eve of secession, slaveholders were still jailing poor whites for small amounts of debt, publicly whipping thieves, and auctioning off debtors and criminals (for their labor) to the highest bidder. In addition to the region’s sophisticated legal system, the Old South also had an extremely effective extra-legal system to keep the lower-class whites in their places. From vigilance committees to minutemen groups, these organizations helped maintain

⁷ See Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1986); Albert W. Niemi, Jr., “Inequality in the Distribution of Slave Wealth: The Cotton South and Other Southern Agricultural Regions,” *Journal of Economic History* 37, No. 3 (Sept. 1977): 747; 750; Colleen M. Elliot and Louise A. Moxley, eds. *The Tennessee Civil War Veterans Questionnaires*, Vols. 1–5. (Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, Inc., 1985), Vol. 3, 966; Vol. 3, 1057.

both slavery and the southern social hierarchy, and ultimately forced a divided region to wage an unwanted war.

Class tensions between white Southerners in the Deep South, therefore, ultimately added to the causes of the Civil War. Angered by their lack of job prospects, poor white laborers – whose ranks were rapidly increasing in southern cities due to immigration – were becoming more and more militant in the decades leading up to secession. They began forming “associations,” or labor unions, and demanded freedom from competition with slaves and even free blacks, whose wages always undercut their own. Vocal leaders of these groups threatened to stop supporting slavery if something was not done to help raise their wages. The master class was already strenuously defending the peculiar institution from attacks by northern abolitionists and by slaves themselves. When poor whites created a three-front battleground, slaveholders had few viable alternatives other than secession to protect their main source of wealth and revenue.

Attempting to frighten poor whites into supporting disunion, slaveholders predicted an impending race war following emancipation. Warning that freeing the slaves would drive down the wages of poor whites to “starvation levels,” slave owners then prophesied that black men would marry the daughters of the white poor. Without slavery, masters cautioned, poor whites would become impoverished peons, the social equals of blacks. Still, despite slaveholders’ racist rhetoric, many poor whites objected to the Confederate cause, but slave owners used threats of imprisonment, vigilante violence, and even death to impress the poor into service. During the Civil War, the extremely high rate of layouts and desertions among lower-class whites eventually helped lead to the Confederacy’s demise.

Slavery certainly had been detrimental for poor whites, yet in a similar way, black emancipation ushered in several new freedoms for the white poor. Most importantly, poor white workers were finally able to compete in a free labor economy. But their increasing inclusion in the spoils of whiteness often came at the expense of blacks. While freedmen waited in vain for forty acres and a mule, some poor whites were granted land from the Homestead Acts. Emancipation also brought an end to the high rates of incarceration for poor whites who had threatened the stability of slavery. Instead, African Americans became the primary targets of the southern legal system, but their punishments were much more extreme and vicious than they ever had been for poor whites. The end of slavery, therefore, heralded many new freedoms for lower-class white

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Southerners, while African Americans realized they now occupied poor whites' former place at the bottom of "free" society.

By simply stating these facts, one of the biggest and most persistent falsities of southern history is revealed: the myth of white unity over slavery. Poor whites consistently supported slaveholder policies, and even fought for the Confederacy, the argument goes, because they greatly admired the slaveholders and aspired to own slaves themselves. To be sure, there was certainly near-universal consensus among southern whites regarding racism, but support for slavery varied significantly, especially among members of lower-economic classes. Heeding the recent work of economists, however, shows that the vast majority of poor whites recognized the near-impossibility of eventually owning slaves.

With the research of the cliometricians appearing in the 1960s and 1970s, the long-accepted premise that the white South was united across class lines became more tenuous. Understanding wealth distribution and the price of slaves helped dispel the misconception that every non-slaveholder, no matter how impoverished, believed that one day they would enter the ranks of the master class. In 2011, the pioneering work of economists Samuel Williamson and Louis Cain established that by the later antebellum period, purchasing a slave was far outside of the realm of possibilities for poorer whites. By using different measures of economic value, these scholars arrived at a much more accurate analysis of the capital it required to become a slaveholder. Arguing that both economic status and economic power influenced the cost of slaves, Williamson and Cain wrote that "Even if they have not been elected to power, the wealthy often have disproportionate influence on those who do . . . [and] Slaveholders as a group had considerable economic power." Therefore, while the average "real price" of a slave in 1860 was \$20,000 in today's terms, that number is not an accurate indicator of how much capital a non-slaveholder needed to enter into the ranks of the slaveholding oligarchy.⁸

Instead, by using a "comparable value" based on three measures of worth, Williamson and Cain took into consideration (1) labor or income value, (2) economic status, and (3) real price. They found a threefold increase in slave prices following the long depression that started with the Panic of 1837 and ended around 1843. Using this new valuation process, they calculated that the average price of a slave in 1850 (\$400) would be

⁸ Samuel H. Williamson and Louis P. Cain. "Measuring Slavery in 2011 Dollars." Paper on MeasuringWorth.com.

\$82,000 in 2011. As the price of slaves rose throughout the decade, and slave ownership became even more concentrated, on the eve of secession the “purchase of a single slave represented as much as \$130,000 and more in today’s prices.” This astonishing fact – that in 1860 it took about \$130,000 to purchase a single slave – combined with the reality that less affluent white Southerners had no access to loans, finally puts the slaveholder-aspiration illusion to rest. “Potentially all slaveholders ranked in the top one percent,” Williamson and Cain concluded, “if economic power is used as the standard of comparison.”⁹

By understanding that the lives of poor whites and blacks followed similar trajectories during the mid-nineteenth century, the far-reaching impact of slavery is finally revealed. Traveling through the South just a couple of years prior to the Civil War, one Northerner plainly stated that the rather pitiful status of the South’s poor whites was a blight upon the entire country. A direct result of slavery, non-slaveholders’ “poverty, ignorance, and debasement, are not merely sectional” problems, he wrote, but “constitute a national calamity, an element of impoverishment, a running sore in the body-politic. The whole Union is weakened by it.” A century and a half later a team of economists revealed similar sentiments. Finding that the “historical use of slavery is significantly correlated with current levels of inequality,” their research convincingly demonstrated that even today slavery’s legacy is undeniably visible in the economic circumstances – and thus the material well-being – of all nonelite Southerners, both black and white. While the consequences were certainly far more severe and sustained for black Americans, it is important to recognize that the economic repercussions of slavery also greatly affected lower-class whites.¹⁰

⁹ *Ibid.* Williamson and Cain also showed that “the holder of 10 slaves likely ranks in the top one percent of the distribution [of total estate], if economic status is used as the standard of comparison.” Wealth grew by about 30 percent during the decade of the 1850s, but in the South, non-slave wealth grew at 25 percent, while slave wealth grew at 40 percent. By 1860, the top 1 percent of white Southerners held 27 percent of total estate, while the bottom 50 percent held 1 percent. Only 0.11 percent held more than 100 slaves, and “Those who owned over 500 slaves had a measure of economic power that compares to billionaires today.”

¹⁰ John S. Abbott, *South and North; or Impressions Received during a Trip to Cuba and the South* (New York, 1860), 145, Web; Rodrigo R. Soares et al., “A Note on Slavery and the Roots of Inequality,” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 40, (2012): 578. “The correlation between slavery and inequality,” they reported, “survives the inclusion of variables controlling for development, geographic characteristics, institutional quality, and provision of public goods ... [and holds true] still today.”

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In the Old South, the daily realities of this sizable poor white class clearly show how the institution of slavery was detrimental to their livelihoods. They consciously recognized its negative impact on their lives. Kept uneducated and mostly illiterate, poor whites had few chances to rise out of poverty. Industrialist-turned-historian James Ford Rhodes compared the South's poor whites to northern laborers, concluding that "they were in material things abjectly poor; intellectually they were utterly ignorant; morally their condition was one of groveling baseness." As the antebellum period wore on, some particularly disillusioned poor whites chose to drop out of the workforce altogether, preferring to live on the fringes of society. As Governor James Henry Hammond reported to the South Carolina Institute in 1850, many poor whites were able to "obtain a precarious subsistence by occasional jobs, by hunting, by fishing, by plundering fields or folds, and too often by what is in its effects far worse – trading with slaves, and seducing them to plunder for their benefit."

This illicit trading with slaves, coupled with the high numbers of young, property-less white men drifting from county to county in search of work, caused slaveholders to begin selectively enforcing behavioral laws, especially in places with both high slave populations and recent influxes of transient whites. By insisting that poor whites be arrested for vagrancy, buying liquor on Sunday, or engaging in lewd behavior, slaveholders were able to incarcerate non-slaveholders whenever they needed to reinforce subordination to their authority. Poor whites' increasingly frequent bouts with local law enforcement officials helped brand them as hardened, troublesome criminals, characterized, as A.N.J. Den Hollander put it, by "laziness, carelessness, unreliability, lack of foresight and ambition, habitual failure and general incompetency."¹¹

Certainly by the late antebellum period, poor southern whites had few opportunities to rise above the economic station into which they were born. Under slavery, E.B. Seabrook wrote, "The poor white, instead of being an active, vital member of the organism of society, was merely an excrescence upon its body. Useless to others, he became helpless to himself." Because slavery's association with agricultural and manual

¹¹ James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 to the McKinley-Bryan Campaign of 1896*, Vol. 1, 1850–1854 (New York: Macmillan Company, 1920), 344, Web; quoted in George M. Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South* (Washington, DC: Buell & Blanchard, 1856), 3, Web.; A.N.J. Den Hollander, "The Tradition of 'Poor Whites,'" in W.T. Couch, ed., *Culture in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 414.

labor “rendered toil ignoble in the estimation of the whites,” poor white laborers adopted “a willful, determined indolence, which actually became the badge and ensign of their independence.”¹²

The lives (and deaths) of poor white Southerners were often chaotic and unpredictable. For a meaningful proportion of them, some combination of material want, hunger, illiteracy, involvement in criminal activity, and problems resulting from alcohol abuse reinforced these self-perpetuating cycles of poverty. Writing almost one hundred years after Hinton Helper, Richard Morris critiqued the assumption that white skin entitled an individual to freedom in the slave South. Instead, he claimed, “two-thirds of that white population which was ‘free’ in name never fully enjoyed the fruits of that freedom.” Slavery, Morris concluded, had “seriously undermined the economic security of white labor in the slave states and left ugly scars upon the character and temperament of the ruling class.”¹³

The master class, of course, would never admit to the numbers of poverty-stricken poor whites in the region. How could they, William Jay incredulously asked, when they would be acknowledging that slavery was detrimental to a large percentage of free white citizens? William, the second son of John Jay, was an abolitionist lawyer who appealed to non-slaveholding southern whites in 1849. “It is amusing to observe how adroitly the slaveholders avoid all recognition of any other classes among them than masters and slaves. Who would suspect from their language, that they were themselves a small minority of the white inhabitants, and that their own ‘white negroes’ could, if united and so disposed, outvote them at the polls?” he prodded. “It is worthy of remark that in their denunciations of the *populace*, the *rabble*, *those who work with their hands*, they refer not to complexion, but to condition; not to slaves, but to the poor and laborious of their own color.”¹⁴

Poor whites, therefore, are well hidden in the annals of southern history for a variety of reasons. Slave owners were very reluctant to publically acknowledge the poor’s existence, as doing so would have nullified the pro-slavery charges of “wage slavery” in the North. By

¹² E.B. Seabrook, “Poor Whites of the South,” *The Galaxy Volume*, Issue 6 (Oct. 1867): 685.

¹³ Richard M. Morris, “The Measure of Bondage in the Slave States,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41, No. 2 (Sept. 1954): 240.

¹⁴ William Jay, *Address to the Non-slaveholders of the South, on the Social and Political Evils of Slavery* (New York: William Harned, 1849), 18 (This tract is wrongly attributed to Lewis Tappan on the Web).