

**Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: How a Misunderstood Social Class  
Became a Point of Controversy in Slavery Debates**

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## Introduction

When most readers think of social relations in the antebellum south, they typically think it involves two main groups: slaveholders and slaves. With this, readers leave out an important social class that made a pivotal impact on how race and whiteness was perceived in the antebellum south. Making up a large portion of the population, poor whites, as individuals, were widely misunderstood, degraded and forgotten in southern society. However, *the stereotypes* revolving around southern poor whites were frequently referenced amongst northerners and southerners alike. Surprisingly, the stereotype of the poor white played a crucial role in slavery debates made in the 1850s and 1860s. This thesis addresses how and why the poor white stereotype was incorporated into proslavery and antislavery rhetoric throughout the 1850s and 1860s.

Chapter One of this thesis addresses historiography revolving around poor whites, the role their stereotype played in society, and how they fit into the south's labor crisis. This provides important contextual information for Chapter Two and Chapter Three. Chapter Two analyzes how the poor white stereotype was utilized in proslavery and antislavery arguments. Typically, these arguments started with antislavery authors highlighting poor whites' impoverished conditions, and placing responsibility on slaveholders. Proslavery advocates then would respond to these claims with their own arguments revolving around poor whites. The proslavery argument either attempted to create a historically false narrative of white unity throughout the antebellum south; or attempted to find ways to blame poor whites for their own poverty. Finally, Chapter Three explains why poor whites, who were often illiterate and could not contribute to these discussions on their own, were included in these debates. This project fills a gap in historical research on southern poor whites by addressing why they were discussed in antislavery

and proslavery debates; while also building on previous research about poor whites as a class, how they fit into the southern labor crisis, and how their reference in the slavery debates elevated each author's arguments.

The southern poor white stereotype, as discussed throughout the United States at this time, describes individuals in this social class as uneducated, uncleanly, immoral, and 'trashy'. These stereotypes sought to dehumanize poor whites, and categorize them into a social group that alienated them from the rest of 'white society'. The purpose behind these stereotypes was intentional, and can still be seen through the 'white trash' stereotype that perpetuates in American society today. In proslavery and antislavery rhetoric, the poor white stereotype was not used to convince poor whites to take a stance on the slavery debate, as most poor white individuals were illiterate and lacked access to literature. Instead, the poor white stereotype was used as an instrument to strengthen the arguments of antislavery authors against slaveholders and morality of slavery, and to defend the stance of proslavery authors, either in counter-arguments or pushing the rhetoric of white unity. Although poor whites were used to build proslavery and antislavery arguments, the stereotyped social class was never intended as the audience for these debates. There are three primary reasons that the stereotyped poor white social class was included in proslavery and antislavery debates. First, the poor white class played an important role in rising tensions in the antebellum south in the 1850s and 1860s. Poor whites were often the victim to the south's labor crisis, and because of this, antislavery authors began to incorporate the sufferings of poor whites into their arguments about the immorality of slavery. Furthermore, proslavery authors, and slaveholders generally, recognized the importance of having poor whites on the south's side, as the threat of the Civil War increased. Second, poor whites were the greatest challenge proslavery authors faced in asserting the concept of white unity in the

antebellum south. Antislavery authors recognized this, and regularly highlighted the divisions between poor whites and slaveholders in their slavery debates. Finally, poor whites were widely discussed amongst proslavery and antislavery authors alike because southern poor whites made people uncomfortable in their sense of whiteness. Poor whites were viewed as a “problem” amongst both parties that either needed to be addressed by the abolition of slavery or its appearance minimized through the mask of white unity.

The southern poor white was used as a pawn to accelerate the arguments of antislavery and proslavery authors due to their unique role in southern society as a deplorable group that wealthier whites throughout the United States saw as a “problem” that needed to be dealt with through the abolition of slavery or otherwise dismissed by proslavery authors.

## Chapter One

### The Late-Antebellum Poor White: A Topic of Historiography, Class Analysis, and the Southern Labor Crisis

#### Introduction

The late-antebellum poor white has been a widely debated group of people amongst historians and sociologists. Chapter One seeks to review the historiography of the “poor white”, define the poor white in terms for this thesis, reveal the role of the poor white in late-antebellum society, and analyze the south’s labor crisis in conjunction with national political conflict regarding slavery. The image of the poor white recurs frequently throughout the works of antislavery and proslavery authors. Poor whites were incorporated into proslavery and antislavery debates because of their image in southern society and the important roles they played in the southern labor crisis.

#### Historiography of the southern “Poor White”

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, the definition of a “poor white” in the antebellum south has evolved significantly as historians have uncovered more information about those on the fringes of society. In the early and mid-twentieth century, historians such as Frank Owsley in his 1949 book, *Plain Folk of the Old South*, tended to have an entirely different definition of who the “plain folk” were, what they did, and how they viewed themselves in society.<sup>1</sup> Owsley’s book mostly covered a group in the antebellum southern community that could be termed “yeomen farmers”. Yeomen farmers typically owned land, and were generally considered the landowning middle class, unable to afford slaves.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949).

Critics of Owsley, such as David Brown, suggest that Owsley overemphasized the prevalence of the landowning middle class, while ignoring a large, unexamined poor white class. Brown argues,

Owsley insisted that the vast majority of antebellum “plain folk”, as he called them in contradistinction to poor whites, were landowning farmers and not poor white ‘trash’”.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Owsley asserted that the “plain folk” of the antebellum south “did not regard the planters and men of wealth as their oppressors. On the contrary, they admired them as a rule and looked with approval on their successes.”<sup>3</sup>

Through this, Owsley painted the picture that there was no sense of class consciousness in the antebellum south, and promoted the concept that there was racial unity amongst the white population.

On the other hand, some twentieth-century historians, such as Ulrich B. Phillips in his 1929 book *Life and Labor in the Old South* acknowledged the existence of poor whites as a socially distinct class, but claimed that they only made up a small number in southern society.<sup>4</sup> Brown explains that Owsley and Phillips, alongside other early twentieth century historians, heavily overlooked poor whites on the fringes of society because they mainly focused and referenced the census for their research. Because poor whites did not own land, and often moved around, they were under-counted in the census, and therefore, unincorporated from history.<sup>5</sup>

In the late twentieth century, the exclusion of poor whites as a distinct social class had produced the notion amongst historians that poor whites had no sense of class consciousness and were a part of a societal system that benefited from white supremacy. This concept was termed

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<sup>2</sup> David Brown, “A Vagabond’s Tale: Poor Whites Herrenvolk Democracy, and the Value of Whiteness in the Late Antebellum South” *Journal of Southern History* Vol 39, Issue 4, (Southern Historical Association, Nov 2013), 802.

<sup>3</sup>David Brown, “A Vagabond’s Tale” 802.

<sup>4</sup> Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1929).

<sup>5</sup> David Brown, “A Vagabond’s Tale” 801-802.

the “herrenvolk democracy” by George M. Fredrickson, a term he coined from sociologist Pierre Van den Berghe and subsequently applied to the Old South.<sup>6</sup> Fredrickson defined this idea as “[a]n ideological marriage between egalitarian democracy and biological racism [that] pandered at once to the democratic sensibilities and the racial prejudices of the ‘plain folk’ and thus well suited to the maintenance of inter-class solidarity between planters and non-slaveholders within the South.”<sup>7</sup> This concept became widely accepted amongst southern historians. When poor whites were occasionally included in historical research throughout the late twentieth century, they were often grouped under the herrenvolk democracy concept. Brown highlights that historians such as Orville Vernon Burton, Lacy K. Ford Jr., Steven Hahn, and J. William Harris stressed that “racism and whiteness, as well as localism and republican democracy, prevented class tensions from becoming serious.”<sup>8</sup> These historians argued that racial class consensus overruled any sense of class consciousness felt from the lower and middle classes.

Since the 1990s and into the modern day, southern historians' attitudes and understandings regarding poor whites have changed drastically. Historians such as Victoria E. Bynum, Bill Cecil-Fronsman, Charles C. Bolton, Laura F. Edwards, Timothy James Lockley and Jeff Forret have created literature with a specific focus on poor whites, rather than the commonly covered middle and planter classes of the antebellum south.<sup>9</sup> New arguments have emerged that, while poor whites did indirectly benefit from the institution of slavery, there is also evidence that there were boundaries to whiteness in the antebellum south. Furthermore, evidence has been uncovered that poor whites played a key role in the south's slave economy, and in turn, suggests their wider prevalence in society than previously thought. Scholarship on poor whites throughout

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<sup>6</sup> George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny 1817-1914* (New York, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> George M. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (New York: 1981), 154-55.

<sup>8</sup> David Brown, “A Vagabond's Tale” 803.

<sup>9</sup> David Brown, “A Vagabond's Tale” 803-804.

the 1990s and early 2000s complicates the concept of white unity and herrenvolk democracy in the antebellum south. Since then, historians such as David Brown and Keri Leigh Merritt challenge previous notions regarding poor whites and argue that there were boundaries to whiteness and that class consciousness did exist in the antebellum south. David Brown's article, "A Vagabond's Tale: Poor Whites Herrenvolk Democracy, and the Value of Whiteness in the Late Antebellum South" from the *Journal of Southern History* argues that new findings regarding poor whites refute the concept of a herrenvolk democracy. Poor whites, who were pushed to the margins of society, were not respected as a typical white person, and did not obtain the same racial privileges as the middle class. Brown explains that, "It was yeomen, not poor whites, who generally rubbed shoulders with the planter elite and benefited from their patronage."<sup>10</sup> This directly challenges the idea of a Herrenvolk democracy, and flips the concept of whiteness in the antebellum South on its head. He goes on to state that, "The herrenvolk thesis contends that white southern men enjoyed equality on the basis of their skin color. In reality, the potency of whiteness was significantly diminished for some poor whites by the eve of the American Civil War."<sup>11</sup> Brown argues that whiteness provided poor whites some privileges over free and enslaved black people; but as income inequality increased over the years in the antebellum South, the poor white's racial privilege diminished dramatically. The institution of slavery harmed poor whites economically and socially.

Merritt's book *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* argues that towards the dawn of the Civil War, it was becoming more and more apparent to poor whites, and the master class alike, that the institution of slavery pushed poor whites to the margins of society socially and economically. Through new findings, twenty-first century historians

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<sup>10</sup> David Brown, "A Vagabond's Tale" 805.

<sup>11</sup> David Brown, "A Vagabond's Tale" 840.

provided poor whites a new identity in southern history. Upon discovering new information, historians are now reevaluating the antebellum south's social hierarchy, sense of class consciousness, and the overall value of whiteness in southern society. Merritt claims that scholars ignored poor whites as having a distinct class for so long because "this tendency likely originally stemmed from the infamous pro-slavery arguments, wherein slaveholding masters denied the existence of poor white Southerners altogether."<sup>12</sup> As time goes on, more information will likely be revealed about this understudied group.

### **Defining the southern "poor white"**

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, the definition of who would be classified as a poor white has evolved significantly over time. To this day, it is difficult to classify who might be considered a poor white, and who was not. In order to define who the poor white was, it is necessary to analyze different forms of primary sources, supplemented with secondary sources, to gain a holistic understanding of the poor white and their role in society.

One primary source that is particularly revealing of who poor whites were in antebellum southern society are Olmsted's travelogues. Frederick Olmsted was a prominent travel writer, and a critic of the economic structure of the antebellum south. Olmsted was not an abolitionist, per se, but he did believe that slavery was extremely detrimental to the south's economic system, and to the nation as a whole. Throughout his travels in the antebellum south, Olmsted stayed with a variety of people from different social classes, which included the homes of poor whites. Historian David Cox explains,

For Olmsted, nonslaveholding whites in the South are, by definition, lazy, stupid, practically worthless, and poor. Olmsted thus managed to indict both groups of southern

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<sup>12</sup> Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 17.

whites: those who own slaves and those who don't. Some, he argues, are vagabonds and move too much, while others are shiftless and don't move enough.<sup>13</sup>

Olmsted's definition, curiously enough, seems to leave out the commonly covered 'yeoman farmer' that historians previously focused on. Instead, Olmsted saw all southern white people that did not own slaves as poor and socially abhorrent. However, he does make the interesting distinction between the 'vagabond' and the stationary poor white. Some poor whites, also known as the vagabonds, would travel around consistently, gambling and committing crimes to make ends meet. Other poor whites lived with very little, and spent their days drinking and sleeping at home, working very little. Overall, it would be too generalized to accept Olmsted's definition of a poor white, because he grouped all poor whites as people who did not own slaves. This dismisses white people in southern society who would be classified as a 'yeoman farmer', and would be socially accepted.

Olmsted's vagabond distinction is made in secondary source scholarship as well. David Brown argues that there were two forms of propertyless whites: "one with yeoman aspirations; the other wedded to a culture of crime, backwoods fighting, and interracial fraternization that distanced them from the mainstream."<sup>14</sup> The latter of the two groups would be considered a "vagabond" in southern society. These white men "fought, gambled, stole and freely associated with slaves and free blacks".<sup>15</sup> Brown also argues that, "it is essential to separate poor whites from yeomen. Not doing so denies the reality of distinct class differences at the lower levels of white society and feeds into elite myths of white male equality."<sup>16</sup> The distinction between the yeoman farmer and the poor white is an important one. By including these distinct groups in the

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<sup>13</sup> John David Cox, *Traveling South: Travel Narratives and the Construction of American Identity* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 157.

<sup>14</sup> David Brown, "A Vagabond's Tale" 806.

<sup>15</sup> David Brown, "A Vagabond's Tale" 807.

<sup>16</sup> David Brown, "A Vagabond's Tale" 811.

same category, it dismisses the concept of a social hierarchy within white antebellum society based upon socioeconomics and slavery. However, Brown's argument that poor whites either had to have yeoman aspirations, or adopted a vagabond lifestyle is too generalized and lacks complexity. The south's "poor white" could be a law-abiding frontiersman, a mechanic, or stationary, only getting by on seasonal work and odd jobs. The term "poor white" will be applied very broadly in the context of this thesis because a widespread group of people fell within a low social and economic status in antebellum society. A formal definition for the southern "poor white" will be provided at the end of this section.

On a side note, it is important to recognize that the vagabond types were not inherently bad people. Merritt explains,

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...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.<sup>17</sup>

In reality, poor whites, who often could not find jobs due to the institution of slavery, resorted to committing crimes, or becoming vagabonds, in order to make ends meet.

Jeff Forret in *Race Relations at the Margins* reaffirms Brown's analysis of separating the aspiring yeoman farmer from other poor whites. He states, "Most antebellum southerners made the sophisticated definition between whites who were poor and "poor whites." Whites who were poor suffered merely from depressed economic circumstances; "poor whites," usually but not necessarily quantitatively poor, possessed deficiencies in moral character, such as drunkenness or laziness."<sup>18</sup> Although the poor white versus yeoman distinction is important, all white people

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<sup>17</sup> Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men* 5.

<sup>18</sup> Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum South Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 9.

who were poor suffered greatly because of the labor crisis brought on by the institution of slavery. A major aspect of the degradation of the poor whites' moral character was due to job unavailability and frustration with their hierarchical role in society. The elusive "poor white," who lacked moral character, was widespread by the late antebellum period. At the brink of the Civil War, those that were white and poor, but still respected in society, were becoming increasingly slim.

Another set of primary sources that provides clues into who the poor whites were, was from the antebellum "master class" themselves. The slaveholding master class in the antebellum south did not think highly of the poor whites. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that some slaveholders in the antebellum south did not recognize poor whites as racially white at all. Merritt explains that,

More affluent whites attempted to categorize poor whites as a separate race. To the southern gentry, poor whites may have been white in appearance, but they did not act white. Therefore, they did not completely qualify as members of the master race.

Sometimes the differences between "respectable" whites and poor whites were blamed on pseudo-scientific theories of racial hierarchy, blood quantum, and the like. To other observers, however, poor whites were completely to blame for their station in life, as they frequently appeared to choose leisure over hard, grueling work.<sup>19</sup>

Ironically enough, the master class appears to, in many ways, see the poor whites as genetically inferior to other white people in the antebellum south, or label them as lazy and to blame for their economic circumstances.

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<sup>19</sup> Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men* 109.

Interestingly enough, there were even instances in the 1840s and 1850s of poor whites being sold to white planters in Ohio because of their accrued debts and criminal offenses.<sup>20</sup> One southern report from Grenada, Mississippi commented, “We won’t sell you, however, for being poor white men; but we will sell you, if anybody will buy you, *for stealing for your living*; aye, for living on splendid fortunes accumulated by pilfering from the people, the poor and the industrious who pay taxes.”<sup>21</sup> The concept of selling poor whites into servitude demonstrates that the master class did not see poor whites as one of them. If genetic racial superiority were to exist, which many proslavery advocates used to justify the enslavement of black people, then the concept of selling a white man into servitude would be ridiculous. In this case, the master class either used this racial justification as an argument, but did not truly believe it, or they did not see poor whites as racially white, or genetically superior.

Abolitionist authors take a different approach to who the poor whites were, and if they were responsible for their plights. Hinton Helper, an abolitionist author from North Carolina, blamed the poor white’s lack of moral character, education and wealth on the slaveholding class. Helper referred to the poor whites as suffering from a “second degree of slavery” in his book *The Impending Crisis of the South*.<sup>22</sup> Helper, alongside other notable abolitionist authors such as Frederick Douglass and William Jay, felt sympathy for poor whites, and did not blame them as individuals for their circumstances. Instead, these men argued that the institution of slavery created the labor crisis that poor whites were suffering from. Because of this, the only true way to be set “free” of the second degree of slavery that they were facing was through abolition.

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<sup>20</sup> “Selling Poor White Men”, *Republican Banner* (1837-1875), June 25, 1840, Nashville, TN.

“Selling Poor White Men for Debt”, *Republican Banner* (1837-1875), February 3, 1841, Nashville, Tennessee.

<sup>21</sup> “A Striking Analogy Under Like Circumstances”, Southern Reporter, *Republican Banner*, Nashville, Tennessee, July 8, 1840.

<sup>22</sup> Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (New York: A.B. Burdick), 1857, 32-33.

Historian Stephen V. Ash defined poor whites in a broader way by classifying them as “any white who owned no land, no slaves, no herds, and little or no property of any sort.”<sup>23</sup> This definition can include the vagabond, alongside poor whites who lived off little to nothing, working in agriculture or the industrial sector. Ash provides a definition of the poor white that is all encompassing. Regardless if the poor white committed crimes, was stationary, or worked in the industrial or agricultural sector, they are still a poor white, and are still applicable to this thesis.

Due to the complexities and struggles of the poor white, adopting a broader definition of who a poor white was allows for a more holistic view of the labor crisis in the antebellum south and subsequent abolitionist and proslavery literature revolving around poor whites. Stephen Ash’s definition of the poor white includes any white person who owned no land, herds, slaves or little to no property of any sort.<sup>24</sup> By adopting Ash’s definition, this project includes the vagabond, the stationary poor white, the poor white “mechanic,” and those who scrambled for work in the agricultural sector. This broad definition casts a wider net for research of abolitionist and proslavery literature regarding the poor white.

### **The poor whites’ role in southern society**

The poor whites’ role within southern society was widely accepted amongst proslavery sympathizers and abolitionists alike. In recent studies of the antebellum south, it is widely accepted that southern society was undoubtedly hierarchical. The planter, oligarchical class sat at the top of the system, as they had accrued the most wealth and power. From there, power and wealth trickled down within white society, eventually ending with the poor white. Finally, below the poor white, were free and enslaved black people. Brown argues,

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<sup>23</sup> Stephen V. Ash, “Poor Whites in the Occupied South. 1861-1865” (*Journal of Southern History* 57, February 1991), 39-62.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen V. Ash, “Poor Whites in the Occupied South. 1861-1865” 39-62.

Second-class citizenship at best applied at the lowest levels of southern society by the 1850s. The value of whiteness varied dramatically according to wealth, family connections, and community standing as whiteness proved to be a remarkably flexible commodity in the decade before the Civil War. Rather than being a resource that anyone with a white skin could universally claim, deciding who was white was dependent on social dynamics within specific communities.<sup>25</sup>

The concept of universal white superiority and privilege in antebellum society is heavily challenged through the examination of the poor white class. Both slavery and abolition advocates recognized the poor white class as socially abhorrent, and looked down upon in antebellum society. The largest difference between proslavery and abolitionist advocates' viewpoints was within the reasoning regarding why poor whites were at the bottom of white society's hierarchical system.

Southern elites did not think highly of the poor white class whatsoever. One key way to view the elite's discontent with poor whites in southern society is through fictional southern literature. Authors like William Gilmore Simms and John Pendleton Kennedy forged a genre of fiction called "the plantation novel" which portrayed poor whites as villains in antebellum society. The protagonist of these novels would typically be from the planter class, and they would defend a planter class woman from the brutal poor white criminal.<sup>26</sup> Simms described the vagabond poor white as "Rude, irregular, untrained and lawless..the swarthy outlaws...were a fearless gang of blackguards. They could fight better than pray; could more easily strike than serve; their laws readily yielded to their moods."<sup>27</sup> Simms also thought poorly of the law-abiding

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<sup>25</sup> David Brown, "A Vagabond's Tale" 813.

<sup>26</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 55-56.

<sup>27</sup> William Gilmore Simms, *Eutaw* Reprint. (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1856/1882).

poor whites. He described them as “squatters chiefly without means, tastes, education or sensibility; rough, rude people; a people particularly fitted for the conquest of savages and savage lands.”<sup>28</sup> Portrayed as the villains in antebellum society, poor whites were often labeled as savages, criminals, squatters, and trash. Rather than acknowledging why poor whites were poor and resulted to committing crimes in the first place, proslavery advocates created their own ideas of why poor whites were socially inferior.

The proslavery advocates' argument justifying the poor whites' role in society was two fold. First, as Matt Wray in *Not Quite White* argues, southern elites “insisted that poor white trash had only themselves to blame for their condition. If certain whites had sunk below the level of social respectability, it was due to their own physical and moral laziness, a laziness that, many would eventually argue, was less cultural than physical or biological in origin.”<sup>29</sup> This argument pinned poor whites as responsible for their own misfortune because they lacked the drive and moral characteristics to succeed in southern society.

The second argument that proslavery advocates used to justify the poor whites' role in society was that they were genetically inferior to more successful whites in the antebellum south. In fact, as mentioned by Merritt, some southern elites did not see poor whites as racially similar to them at all. Sociologist turned confederate officer Daniel Hundley made an argument like this in *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, in which he dedicated an entire chapter to “poor white trash”. Hundley argued in this chapter that the “natural cause of the existence in the south of a class of lazy vagabonds known as Poor Whites” was clear: they were genetically inferior to other whites in the antebellum south. He claims that poor whites descended from “those paupers and convicts whom Great Britain sent over to her faithful Colony of Virginia...those indentured

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<sup>28</sup> William Gilmore Simms, *Eutaw*.

<sup>29</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 48.

servants....or those who followed their masters, the Cavaliers.”<sup>30</sup> By commenting that poor whites were descendants of indentured servants during the colonial era, Hundley justified the ways in which poor whites descended from a socially inferior class for generations. This argument suggested that poor whites were genetically inferior to the wealthy planter class. Regardless of whether or not southern elites believed that poor whites were genetically inferior or physically and morally lazy, it is apparent that poor whites were socially inferior to other white people throughout southern society.

Abolitionist advocates also did not think highly of poor whites and recognized their poor social status within southern society. Harriet Beecher Stowe, the famous author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, commented that poor whites were a “miserable class of whites [that] form, in all Southern states, a material for the most horrible and ferocious of mobs. Utterly ignorant, and inconceivably brutal, they are like some blind, savage monster, that, when aroused, tramples heedlessly over anything in its way.”<sup>31</sup> Quaker Bayard Taylor in his 1861 lecture entitled “The American People” stated,

The white trash of the South represented the most depraved class of whites I have ever seen. Idle, shiftless, filthy in their habits, aggressive, with no regard for the rights of others, these barbarians seem to have united all of the vices of the negro with those of their own race, and they almost shake our faith in the progressive instinct of the Anglo Saxon.<sup>32</sup>

Stowe and Taylor, alongside other abolitionists, saw the poor white social class as deplorable and similar to slaves. However, instead of blaming poor whites for their social impropriety on their

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel R Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1860/1979), 225.

<sup>31</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents upon which the Story is Founded Together with Collaborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work* (London: Clarke, Beeton & Co, 1854), 368

<sup>32</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White* 59-60.

genetic makeup or laziness, abolitionists sought to find a reason for the south's stringent hierarchical system. They identified the source of the issue being institution of slavery. The institution of slavery produced an oligarchy of wealthy whites who were able to afford land and several slaves. The poor whites, who had little to no financial opportunities to advance in society, were forced to work alongside slaves in the agricultural and industrial sector. By being forced to work alongside the slave class, poor whites were looked down upon in southern society. Hinton Helper, author of *The Impending Crisis* explains,

In the South, unfortunately, no kind of labor is either free or respectable. Every white man who is under the necessity of earning his bread, by the sweat of his brow, or by manual labor, in any capacity, no matter how unassuming in deportment, or exemplary in morals, is treated as if he was a loathsome beast, and shunned with the utmost disdain.<sup>33</sup>

Frederick Douglass asserted a similar justification for the treatment of poor whites in southern society. He stated, "by encouraging the enmity of the poor, laboring white man against the black, [the slaveholder] succeeds in making the said white man almost as much a slave as the black slave himself."<sup>34</sup> The abolitionist reasoning regarding the poor whites' social status is an interesting one. By blaming the institution of slavery for the poor whites' social and economic misfortunes, the abolitionist promoted the argument that poor whites would ultimately benefit socially and economically from the abolition of slaves. Stowe argued just this when she stated, "The institution of slavery has produced not only heathenish, degraded, miserable slaves, but it produces a class of white people, who are, by universal admission, more heathenish, degraded

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<sup>33</sup> Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South* 41

<sup>34</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892), 180

and miserable.”<sup>35</sup> This argument sets a very dangerous narrative for the slaveholding master class on the cusp of the American Civil War.

Both abolitionist and slaveholding southern elites had their own justifications for why poor whites were at the bottom of the social ladder in the old south. Regardless of this, it is clear to everyone in American society that poor whites were socially and economically at the bottom of white society. Abolitionists’ contentions regarding poor whites within the south’s slave economy coincided with political conflict revolving around slavery nationally.

### **National Political Conflict Over Slavery**

Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, national conflict regarding slavery was reaching its destructive peak. In 1850, in an attempt to prevent a civil war, Congress passed the Compromise of 1850. This compromise “consisted of five laws that dealt with the issue of slavery and territorial expansion.”<sup>36</sup> The compromise was created due to California requesting to join the Union as a free state, which would have upset the delicate balance between free and slave state representation in Congress. As part of this compromise, Congress amended the Fugitive Slave Act, abolished the slave trade in Washington D.C. and California was admitted into Union.<sup>37</sup> The compromise defused civil war tensions temporarily, but it did not provide a permanent solution to the conflict. In 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe published her world famous novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. It sold over 300,0000 copies in the United States in its first year of publication. The novel created significant controversy by emboldening abolitionist work, and enraging proslavery advocates. In 1854, in an attempt to subdue violent conflict, Congress passed the

Kansas-Nebraska Act, which allowed the settlers of Kansas and Nebraska to decide whether they

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<sup>35</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents upon which the Story is Founded Together with Collaborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work* (London: Clarke, Beeton & Co: 1854), 365

<sup>36</sup> Ken Drexler, “Compromise of 1850: Primary Documents in American History” (The Library of Congress, April 11, 2019), <https://guides.loc.gov/compromise-1850>.

<sup>37</sup> Ken Drexler, “Compromise of 1850.” Library of Congress.

would allow slavery or not in the new territories. The Act unfortunately backfired and led to a violent conflict between anti-slavery “Free-staters” and proslavery “Border Ruffians” that lasted for several years in Kansas. This violent conflict became known as the Border War, or Bleeding Kansas. Tensions continued to rise when the Dred Scott decision, *Scott vs. Sandford*, was made in the U.S. Supreme Court. The ruling determined that no one of African descent could qualify for U.S. citizenship. This decision created more outrage amongst abolitionists. In 1859, John Brown led a band of 20 radical abolitionists to raid the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in hopes to set off a slave revolt. This plan failed and Brown, alongside several of his followers, were executed. In 1860, various Southern states were already threatening to secede from the Union if Abraham Lincoln won the presidential election. When Lincoln did win the election, eleven states seceded through 1860 and 1861, which began the American Civil War.<sup>38</sup> Events of political conflict throughout the 1850s and into the 1860s heightened tensions between slave states and free states to the brink of civil war. These tensions were felt strongly throughout the antebellum south.

Amidst national political conflict regarding slavery, proslavery advocates also had to worry about the rising tensions between poor whites and the slave-owning class. As tensions were rising nationally throughout the 1850s, tensions were also rising at home amongst the poor white class. By the brink of the Civil War, wealth disparity and income inequality was at an all time high in the antebellum south. For the poor white class, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the institution of slavery was preventing them from excelling economically and socially. Proslavery advocates began to fear poor whites, who had nothing to lose if the abolition of slavery occurred.

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<sup>38</sup> The Library of Congress, “The Civil War: The Nation Moves Towards War, 1850-61”, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/civil-war-the-nation-moves-towards-war-1850-to-1861/>.

## **Labor Crisis in the Antebellum South**

Alongside political conflict regarding slavery in the 1850s and early 1860s, a labor crisis within the antebellum south was reaching its inevitable peak. There are two reasons this labor crisis was in full effect. First of all, the institution of slavery limited job availability for poor whites. Second, when jobs did become available, poor whites would only take them if they were absolutely desperate. Class consciousness among poor whites was at an all-time high in the 1850s and early 1860s. Poor whites knew that working alongside slaves was socially disreputable and shameful. Therefore, many poor whites were unwilling to work in jobs that slaves were also forced to do. This section examines the labor crisis that poor whites suffered from in the decades leading up to the American Civil War, and examines their attempts of unionizing for better pay and job availability.

The labor crisis that poor whites suffered from in the antebellum south was a direct effect of the institution of slavery. Before the labor crisis, generations of poor whites had spent their lives working in agriculture. In the late-antebellum period, as the cotton industry grew and became prominent in southern states, poor whites found that their services were no longer required. This forced poor whites to survive off of odd jobs, or seasonal agricultural work. These odd and seasonal jobs forced poor whites to live off of little to nothing. Some poor whites, in response to the labor shortage, decided to drop out of white society altogether, committing crimes and intermingling with free and enslaved black people.

It is evident from testimonies of poor whites that they were aware that slavery had a profound effect on their lives. One poor white confederate veteran, named Robert Lackey, observed these class divisions within the antebellum south. He stated, “Them that was able had slaves to work for them but the poor class of people was almost slaves themselves – had to work

hard and live hard.”<sup>39</sup> Another poor white by the name of Isaac Grimes remembered that employment was “awful scarce. Couldn’t hardly get work [and] wages [were] so low – I have worked that time for \$5.00 a month and board. Worked with oxens, all [I] could get for work.” 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.”<sup>40</sup> Through these testimonies, it is clear that the poor white class were aware of the labor crisis they were facing in the antebellum south, and that they also recognized that slaveholders and the institution of slavery caused it.

As slavery emerged as the most common form of labor, many poor whites refused to work alongside slaves, or avoided it as much as possible. This was due to the fact that poor whites had a clear sense of class consciousness, and recognized that working alongside slaves made them as socially unacceptable as a slave. The *New York Times* reported in 1854 that, “As soon as” poor whites earn “any money, they quit, and will not go to work again until they have spent it.” One immigrant mechanic living in South explained why poorer whites turned down the prospect of work: he stated, “no man will work along side of a nigger, if he can help it. It’s too much like as if he was a slave himself.”<sup>41</sup> With poor whites equating labor to slavery, the labor crisis produced the so-called stationary poor white, who refused to work alongside black people because it was socially taboo.

Other poor whites, specifically those in the industrial sector, attempted to unionize and strike in an effort to decrease or eliminate slave competition. Merritt explains that throughout the 1840s and 1850s,

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<sup>39</sup> Elliot and Moxley, Tennessee, Vol. 4, 1316. As cited in Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*, 66

<sup>40</sup> Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., Vol. I, 13; Conway, Testimonies, 121; “The South,” (New York Times, Jan. 26, 1854). As cited in Merritt, Keri Leigh. *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* 71.

Lower-class whites were attempting to distance themselves as much as possible from the brutalized, unfree labor of blacks. Forming loosely organized labor unions, groups of mechanics began demanding non-competition from both slaves and free blacks. These laborers seemingly became more aggressive and vocal throughout the 1850s, as some unions even threatened to withdraw their support of slavery altogether.<sup>42</sup>

As tensions produced by the labor crisis increased, poor whites became angrier with their economic situation. The unions typically originated from poor white “mechanics”. In the late-antebellum period, a “mechanic” was essentially anyone who worked with tools in a non-farming job, regardless of skill. These poor white mechanics would do construction work, lay railroad tracks, dig canals, or work in factories.<sup>43</sup> Sometimes these unionization efforts were quashed by southern elites by pitting poor whites and blacks against one another. In one strike in 1856 Savannah, Georgia, several hundred white dock workers were immediately fired for striking, and replaced with slaves.<sup>44</sup> However, with the increasing tensions between poor whites and the slaveholding class, southern elites truly began “fighting a two-front war, protecting slavery from forces both within and without the South.”<sup>45</sup> The institution of slavery was being heavily criticized amongst abolitionist writers in the north and by the poor whites of the south. These criticisms sparked serious debate about the ways that the institution of slavery affected southern poor whites.

### **Proslavery Solutions**

In conjunction with the national political conflict over slavery, proslavery advocates had to think of some way to prevent the unionization efforts of poor whites. There were two popular

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<sup>42</sup> Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men* 92.

<sup>43</sup> Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men* 99.

<sup>44</sup> Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men* 99.

<sup>45</sup> Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men* 102.

“solutions” that southern elites came up with. One solution was to confine free and enslaved blacks to plantation work. This would allow the poor white “mechanic” to operate without competing with slaves. H.F. Hopkins, a judge in Mobile, Alabama, commented,

Many white mechanics have had good cause for complaining of the antagonism of labor growing out of the competition of so unpleasant companionship with negro mechanics. He must work as cheap as the slave, and associate in unnatural competition, which is degrading, and entirely at variance with out vaunted notion of the superiority of the race.<sup>46</sup>

Through this solution, it is evident that southern elites recognized how working alongside slaves was degrading and looked down upon in southern society.

Another solution that slaveholders contemplated was reopening the slave trade. If the slave trade was reopened throughout the south, the price of slaves would become cheaper and more affordable for the non-slaveholding class. This ‘solution’ is particularly interesting because if the slave trade reopened, it would be at the economic loss of slaveholders due to slave property dropping in value. This idea highlights how desperate the master class was to preserve the institution of slavery.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, it demonstrates that slaveholders saw the non-slaveholding white class as a threat to their way of life.

## **Conclusion**

Although looked down upon in society, the poor white was a pivotal subject of contention in abolitionist and proslavery debates in the late antebellum period. Although they did not face the brutality that enslaved black people faced, poor whites were viewed as second-hand victims to the institution of slavery. In conjunction with the labor crisis happening within the south and

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<sup>46</sup> “Negro Mechanics,” *Southern Federal Union*, July 23, 1861. As cited in Meritt’s *Masterless Men*, 103.

<sup>47</sup> Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* 105.

national political conflict, southern elites found themselves having to defend the institution of slavery within and outside the south. Abolitionist authors began to push the narrative that the poor whites' financial and social struggles were caused by the institution of slavery. Proslavery advocates and sympathizers blamed poor whites' struggles on their genetic inferiority, or lack of moral character.

In Chapter Two, this thesis will continue to explore the arguments made by abolitionist authors that used poor whites as a point of contention for the abolishment of slavery. Chapter Two will also explore how southern elites responded to abolitionists' arguments, and how slaveholders argued that poor whites would be worse off if slavery was abolished. Deemed wretched and lacking morality by abolitionists and proslavery advocates alike, the poor white could be considered an important aspect of the national debate over slavery.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Poor Whites in Abolitionist and Proslavery Slavery Debates**

#### **Introduction**

Because antebellum southern poor whites were mostly illiterate, a lot of what historians know about the social class are from the writings of educated, wealthy people from the northeast and south. Chapter two of this thesis covers the rhetoric created by abolitionist and proslavery authors regarding poor whites in slavery debates. Although looked down upon in society, the poor white was a pivotal subject of contention in abolitionist and proslavery debates in the late antebellum period. While poor whites were not often the center of an antislavery or proslavery advocate's argument, they were frequently referred to and argued about between the two groups. The general trend in this literature is that antislavery authors often initially started arguments regarding poor whites in the slavery debate, and proslavery authors reacted to these arguments. Although they did not face the brutality that enslaved black people faced, poor whites were viewed as a second hand victim to the institution of slavery by many abolitionists. For other antislavery authors, the situations of poor whites were used to highlight the immorality of slaveholders. In conjunction with the labor crisis happening within the south and national political conflict revolving slavery, southern elites found themselves having to defend the institution of slavery within and outside the south. Some proslavery advocates and sympathizers blamed poor whites' struggles on their genetic inferiority, or lack of moral character. On the other hand, other proslavery authors tried to ignore the problem altogether, acting as if nonslaveholders and slaveholders worked as a unified racial front in the south. This chapter attempts to navigate the different arguments that abolitionist and proslavery authors have when discussing poor whites, and analyze the role poor whites had in strengthening each author's

argument. It will first cover the arguments made by abolitionist authors that reference poor whites because antislavery authors tended to bring the poor white argument up first. Then, it will explore the responses that proslavery advocates had against the abolitionists' poor white argument. Poor whites were primarily used in these debates to progress each author's argument in one way or another. The existence of southern poor whites, as analyzed in Chapter One, was viewed as a deplorable 'problem' for the antebellum south. Highlighting their poverty, illiteracy, and terrible living conditions, antislavery authors used this 'problem' to advance their arguments to end slavery. Following this, proslavery authors doubled down, either justifying why the poor white 'problem' existed by shifting blame onto genetics or other internal factors, or attempting to minimize the problem altogether. The presence of poor whites in the antebellum south gave both abolitionists and proslavery advocate important arguments in regards to the slavery debates. However, each author used poor whites to assert different points in different ways.

### **Abolitionist Debates Regarding Poor Whites**

Many prominent abolitionist authors referenced poor whites in their literature in different ways. While those references are often short and concise, they are used to build evidence for a greater narrative. Numerous antislavery authors used poor whites in their writings in passing but they did not agree on the precise relationship between the poor whites and slaveholders; and they argued about poor whites in different ways. Some abolitionist authors used the situations of poor whites to highlight the greediness and selfishness of slaveholders, and highlighted how slaveholders were unwilling to help their own men that were suffering in poverty. Other antislavery authors emphasized the antebellum poor whites' unwillingness to listen to abolitionist arguments because they prioritized their social standing as a white person over fighting the horrors of slavery. Some antislavery authors even speculated how the institution of

slavery systemically harmed the financial and social well being of poor whites, making them essential slaves to the slaveholders as well. These arguments differ wildly from one another, and demonstrate how complex the antislavery argument on poor whites really was. Regardless of the argument, however, there is one greater narrative that stands out amongst all abolitionist arguments regarding poor whites. The antislavery authors of the 1850s and 1860s used anecdotes about poor whites to attack the concept of white southern unity in the antebellum south, and debunk the idea that the institution of slavery elevated the social and economic status of all white people in the antebellum south. This analysis will address each abolitionist author that references poor whites, explain their argument, and demonstrate how poor whites were used to strengthen this argument.

Charles Grandison Parsons references poor whites in his book *Inside View of Slavery*. Charles Grandison Parsons was an abolitionist physician from Windham, Maine. Parsons, in collaboration with Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Inside View of Slavery*, to document his experiences traveling through the southern states in 1852 and 1853. Through his travels, Parsons described his visits and interviews people from across the south, who live in various different circumstances. While these ‘interviews’ cannot be authenticated, it is clear that the stories he chooses to tell from his travels create a narrative that negates the common conception that all white individuals in the south are viewed as equals and as united. He characterized slaveholders as heartless and cruel towards nonslaveholding whites, while building up an argument that the dehumanizing institution of slavery made them that way. This is done partially through the examination of and commentary on poor whites throughout the book.

An example of this is when Parsons interviewed a poor white man named William Hardison. William Hardison was born into a wealthy, slaveholding family. Unfortunately, his

father lost most of their money and they were forced to sell all of their slaves except for one elderly slave. Eventually, the family lost everything when their last slave killed Hardison's father's favorite dog. His father was furiously angry and forced the slave to eat the dog's hind leg raw as a punishment, which killed the slave shortly after. Following this event, the family became extremely impoverished which resulted in his father dying soon after. Hardison reflected on this experience and tells Parsons that,

I went to a slaveholder one day, – a neighbor who was always kind and obliging, while we were slaveholders, – and informed him that we had nothing to eat; and I asked him if he would give my mother and the children some bread. 'No' said he, 'I don't want you around here, troubling me; I have niggers enough to eat my corn'...This family always exchanged visits with us in our prosperous days, and nothing ever occurred to create the least disaffection, or occasion the slightest neglect, until we lost caste by become poor and losing our slaves.<sup>48</sup>

Parsons included this story intentionally to highlight how slaveholders do not have compassion for the sick or the poor because of the institution of slavery. The slaveholder neighbor Hardison went to had lost compassion for his family once they lost their money and social status. The neighbor also seems to equate Hardison's family to slaves because they were reaching out for help. This story also demonstrates the cruelty slaveholders had towards slaves through the story of Hardison's father. Parsons emphasized this experience, alongside many other people's, to emphasize the cruel, greedy attitude the insitution of slavery produces in slaveholders in order to build a moral argument against slavery. Hardison went on to state, "Instead of showing favor to non-slaveholding whites, the slaveholders oppress them in every posible manner, without regard

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<sup>48</sup> Charles Grandison Parsons, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Inside view of slavery, or, A tour among the planters* (J.P. Jewett and Co, 1855; *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive*), [link.gale.com/apps/doc/CY0106421777/SAS?u=knox61277&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=c0841bca&pg=290](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CY0106421777/SAS?u=knox61277&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=c0841bca&pg=290), 293.

to their legal rights. If they want to drive a poor man out of the neighborhood, they will buy the land on which his shanty sits, and then burn it.”<sup>49</sup> This quote was included by Parsons to further emphasize the slaveholder’s heartlessness to nonslaveholding whites but also to quash the rhetoric of white unity. The concept of white unity is often used by proslavery advocates to show southern society in a positive light. Proslavery advocates like De Bow, who will be mentioned in the next section, attempted to portray nonslaveholders and slaveholders as allies in southern society. Parsons, in this work, attempted to do the opposite. He demonstrated division between the slaveholding and nonslaveholding classes, and emphasized the slaveholders’ lack of generosity and care for those poorer than him.

Another example of Parsons using testimony about poor whites to strengthen his position as an abolitionist was through an interaction he had with the wife of a slaveholder who he called Mrs. A. While Mrs. A and her husband owned slaves, she expressed feelings of sympathy towards her slaves when talking to Parsons, especially when her husband, Mr. A, was cruel to them.<sup>50</sup> Throughout her conversation with Parsons, she voiced her discontent with slavery and her husband’s treatment of them. Mrs. A told Parsons that “slavery ruins the temper of everybody connected with it.”<sup>51</sup> With this point, she went on to argue that the slaveholders’ wives and daughters suffer greatly at the hand’s of slaveholders because the institution of slavery makes the slaveholders lose their temper.<sup>52</sup> It seems that Mrs. A is alluding to abuse in her household at the hands of Mr. A, and is describing a greater problem of temperament and abuse amongst slaveholders in her community. Shockingly, she also claimed that if the women of Georgia could decide the question of slavery that there would no longer be slaves.<sup>53</sup> Mrs. A’s

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<sup>49</sup> Charles Grandison Parsons and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Inside view of slavery*, 293-294.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Grandison Parsons and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Inside view of slavery* 210-211.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Grandison Parson, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Inside view of slavery* 214.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Grandison Parsons and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Inside view of slavery* 214.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Grandison Parsons and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Inside view of slavery* 214.

testimony is a great way for Parsons to strengthen his argument about slavery. Her testimony, alongside Hardison's suggests a problem of morality in the southern states that seems to be occurring because of the institution of slavery. After Mrs. A describes her personal experiences with slavery, she brings up southern poor white people. Parsons wrote,

She then spoke of the poverty and wretchedness of the poor white people in the South.

‘Are the whites so poor and destitute that they frequently suffer from hunger?’ I inquired.

‘No one has any idea,’ she replied, ‘of the poverty of this class; and nobody seems to care for them.’ ‘I have always heard,’ said I, ‘that slaveholders are proverbially benevolent and hospitable, even to strangers; and therefore I supposed that they would not let their neighbors suffer from any want in their power to supply.’ ‘They are hospitable to each other, and to strangers,’ said Mrs. A. ‘But the poor at their own doors, if not slaveholders, are left unnoticed, and uncared for.’<sup>54</sup>

This interview with Mrs. A reaffirms the experiences of William Hardison, that the slaveholding class is unwilling to help poor whites in southern society. Parsons, through these stories and interviews, negated the misconception that southern slaveholders are benevolent and generous through examining and discussing the lives of poor whites. Parsons seemed to focus less on the poor whites' condition as impoverished, and more on the lack of generosity seen in the slaveholding class. It is difficult to decipher whether Parsons truly cared about the situations poor whites were in, or if he was using the elusive poor white stereotype as a way to demonstrate the slaveholder's immorality.

Cowles Horace Atwater was another prominent abolitionist who incorporated the suffering of poor whites into his critique of slavery. Atwater was born in Homer, New York in March of 1819. He attended Yale College and Yale Divinity School, and graduated in 1845.

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<sup>54</sup> Charles Grandison Parsons and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Inside view of slavery* 214-215.

Atwater was a Methodist and Presbyterian minister throughout his life, as well as an abolitionist.<sup>55</sup> Atwater wrote a book called *Incidents of Southern Tour*, also known as *The South, as seen with Northern eyes*. Comparable to Parsons, Atwater traveled to the southern states to get an up close view of southern society. In chapter seventeen of this book, entitled “Something More Strange,” Atwater discussed poor whites and their positions on slavery. At the beginning of this chapter, Atwater stated,

Perhaps nothing in my Southern tour, astonished me more, than to find, universally, that the poor class of whites, upon whom the curse of Slavery seems to rest with greater weight, than even on the slaves themselves; bearing its burthens, but enjoying none of its advantages, should be the most ferocious, and vehement advocates of Slavery to be found. The situation of tens of thousands of slaves, so far as physical comforts are concerned, is altogether preferable. The poor whites are ground to powder, between the upper and nether millstones of its power. And yet, of all persons, they are least disposed to listen to any argument for the abolishing of Slavery.<sup>56</sup>

Through this quote, Atwater expressed his bewilderment and frustration that poor whites will not listen to arguments regarding the abolishment of slavery. Shockingly, he suggested that poor whites even had it worse than slaves in regards to physical discomforts. He stated this to emphasize how badly poor whites had in southern society. Oftentimes, poor whites could not find work and, as a result, might not even be able to feed themselves. At the end of the quote, he uses an intriguing analogy that poor whites are ground to powder between the upper class and the slave class. This analogy suggests that poor whites are stuck in the middle between an elite class

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<sup>55</sup> East Tennessee State University. “Atwater, H Cowles (Horace Cowles, 1819-1879.” *Archives of Appalachia*. <https://archives.etsu.edu/agents/people/359>.

<sup>56</sup> Horace Cowles Atwater. *Incidents of a Southern tour; or, The South, as seen with Northern eyes* (J.P. Magee, 1857: *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive*) [link.gale.com/apps/doc/O0100018530/SAS?u=knox61277&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=ca02ed44&pg=10](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/O0100018530/SAS?u=knox61277&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=ca02ed44&pg=10), 68.

and a slave class, and with that, they do not have an established sense of power or identity.

Although it goes to their disadvantage, poor whites, by Atwater's perspective, still continually choose to support the institution of slavery, even though it is not to their advantage.

He then provided Harriet Beecher Stowe's reasoning behind poor whites backing slavery. She stated,

They [poor whites] feel the scorn of the upper classes, and their only means of consolation is, in having a class below them, who they may scorn in turn. To set the negro at liberty, would deprive them of this last comfort, and, accordingly, no class of men advocate Slavery with such frantic and unreasoning violence, or hate abolitionists with such demoniac hatred.<sup>57</sup>

Stowe's position seemed to be that poor whites do not want slaves to be set free because they would no longer have a class below them, and therefore, would lose the remnants of social status that they currently have. There are likely some truths to Stowe's opinion as poor whites were already looked down upon with the institution of slavery. However, Atwater, and many other antislavery activists took a different turn with their arguments.

Atwater disagreed with Stowe's viewpoint and found it to be an unfavorable view of human nature.<sup>58</sup> Atwater stated that slaveholders have worked diligently to make poor whites believe that their lives would be significantly worse if slaves became free. He supported his argument by citing a proslavery advocate, De Bow, who claimed that, if slaves were emancipated, that the life of a nonslaveholder would be worse than death.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, Atwater believed that poor whites were afraid of the unknown behind emancipation because they were deceived by the slaveholders. He continued,

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<sup>57</sup> Horace Cowles Atwater, *Incidents of a Southern tour; or, The South, as seen with Northern eyes* 68.

<sup>58</sup> Horace Cowles Atwater, *Incidents of a Southern tour; or, The South, as seen with Northern eyes* 69.

<sup>59</sup> Horace Cowles Atwater, *Incidents of a Southern tour; or, The South, as seen with Northern eyes* 68.

But it is a sad sight, to see these poor whites, in utter ignorance of the blessings of Free Soil, and Free Labor, toiling, to make stronger, their own fetters, and to increase the weight of those burthens, which are crushing them to the earth. Their condition is now, the worst possible, for they are, in a certain sense, the slaves of slaves.<sup>60</sup>

Through this quote, Atwater asserted that poor whites are only making their situation worse by siding with slaveholders. Once again, like Parsons, it is hard to say whether Atwater truly wanted to help poor whites or whether he is using them as a mechanism to criticize the slaveholding class. Stowe's viewpoint of poor whites, however, was altogether negative. She did not believe that they were deceived, as Atwater did, and therefore, they could not be convinced.

Finally, Atwater wrapped up his chapter by giving the opinion of a poor white from North Carolina that he interviewed. The man, according to Atwater, stated,

‘Well, I’ll tell you what I think on it; I’d like it, if we could get rid on ‘em to yonst; I wouldn’t like to have ‘em free, if they was going to hand around. They ought to get some country, and put ‘em war thoy would be by themsleves...Now suppose they was free, you see, they’d think themsleves just as good as we; of course they would, if they was free. Now, just suppose you had a family of children, how would you like to have a nigger feelin’ just as good as a white man?’<sup>61</sup>

This is the only quote Atwater included in this poor white chapter from a poor white person. First, it is interesting that Atwater incorporated an accent into the man's quote. This type of accent is commonly used in writings throughout the 1850s and 1860s to mark the speech of enslaved people. He did not use this accent to illustrate Stowe's or De Bow's arguments. He incorporated this accent for the poor white individually specifically in order to demonstrate the

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<sup>60</sup> Horace Cowles Atwater, *Incidents of a Southern tour; or, The South, as seen with Northern eyes* 69.

<sup>61</sup> Horace Cowles Atwater, *Incidents of a Southern tour; or, The South, as seen with Northern eyes* 69.

man's lack of education and his social upbringing. Atwater attempted to place the poor white man on a similar level to a slave in illiteracy and lack of education. Second, this quote seems to back up parts of both Stowe's and Atwater's argument. The man wanted slaves to be free, however, he did not want them free in the United States. Throughout Atwater's book, readers see poor whites being placed into the argument to highlight their ignorance and how they can be easily deceived, but can have good intentions.

Many other major abolitionists and abolitionist newspapers wrote on poor whites. For example, Frederick Douglass argued that a large reason why poor whites did not want to work alongside slaves is because there was a power dynamic attached to it. He stated in the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* that, "by encouraging the enmity of the poor, laboring white man against the black," the slaveholder "succeeds in making the said white man almost as much a slave as the black slave himself."<sup>62</sup> Douglass's argument rationalized why poor whites did not want to work alongside slaves. But in many aspects, Douglass believed the poor white is a slave himself. He also went on to state, "The difference between the white slave, and the black slave, is this: the latter belongs to one slaveholder, and the former belongs to all the slaveholders, collectively...Both are plundered, and by the same plunderers."<sup>63</sup> Douglass provided a strong argument by claiming that poor whites are slaves to the slaveholders, who bind them to the institution of slavery with racism, fear, and socioeconomic inequality.

Hinton Helper, a southern abolitionist, wrote a similar argument in his book *The Impending Crisis*. Unlike northern abolitionists, Helper lived in the south, and witnessed the experiences of poor whites firsthand in his own community. He stated,

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<sup>62</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co.: 1892), 180.

<sup>63</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co.: 1892), 180.

In the South, unfortunately, no kind of labor is either free or respectable. Every white man who is under the necessity of earning his bread, by the sweat of his brow, or by manual labor, in any capacity, no matter how unassuming in deportment, or exemplary in morals, is treated as if he was a loathsome beast, and shunned with the utmost disdain.<sup>64</sup>

Helper, similar to Douglass, highlighted the class disparity in the antebellum south and its impact on poor whites particularly. However, unlike the other abolitionist authors mentioned in this chapter, Helper specifically addressed poor whites in his book at certain points and even provided them a call to action. Granted, the majority of poor whites in the antebellum south were illiterate and would have never read Helper's work; it is still interesting to see him speaking with them directly through his arguments. He stated,

Non-slaveholders of the South! Farmers, mechanics and workingmen, we take this occasion to assure you that the slaveholders, the arrogant demagogues whom you have elected to offices of honor and profit, have hoodwinked you, trifled with you, and used you as mere tools for the consummation of their wicked designs. They have purposely kept you in ignorance, and have, by moulding your passions and prejudices to suit themselves, induced you to act in direct opposition to your dearest rights and interests. By a system of the grossest subterfuge and misrepresentation, and in order to avert, for a season, the vengeance that will most assuredly overtake them ere long, they have taught you to hate the abolitionists, who are your best and only true friends. Now, as one of your own number, we appeal to you to join us in our patriotic endeavors to rescue the generous soil of the South from the usurped and desolating control of these political vampires.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (New York: A.B. Burdick: 1857), 41.

<sup>65</sup> Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (New York: A.B. Burdick:1857), 120-121.

Through this quote, Helper directly addressed non-slaveholders of the south to work with abolitionists to end slavery. Employing an argument similar to Atwater, Helper highlighted that the southern poor white class had been deceived by the slaveholders, and that the abolition of slaves would only help the lives of non-slaveholders. From there, Helper directly called nonslaveholders into action with the abolitionist cause. Helper is certainly unique in directly conveying his argument to the poor white's interest, rather than only targeting his argument towards other northerners and international abolitionists. His arguments catered majorly to these audiences but readers see a different approach with his catering towards poor whites specifically.

*The North Star*, a famous abolitionist newspaper, also referenced poor whites in this way in an article entitled "The Poor Whites of the South," on March 1, 1850. The newspaper stated, "Fearfully as slavery bears upon the blacks of the South, its effects upon the vast majority of the whites is no way less dreadful. Slavery degrades all labor, and with all its laborers."<sup>66</sup> Similar to the previous two authors, *The North Star* emphasized that poor whites suffer greatly from the institution of slavery because it forced them into an impoverished state of being with poor education and social status. Slavery degraded all labor in southern society, while, in the north, labor is expected and not looked down upon. Through this argument, abolitionists use poor whites to critique the social hierarchy of southern society.

Overall, abolitionists used the penurious situation of poor whites across the antebellum south to strengthen their arguments against slavery. Although poor whites were only briefly mentioned by these notable authors and newspapers, the stories, situations and rhetoric revolving around poor whites produces a strong argument for abolitionists. Parsons used stories revolving around poor whites to demonstrate how slaveholders were unwilling to help out nonslaveholders, and were even cruel enough to burn down the homes of poor whites. Atwater discussed poor

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<sup>66</sup> "The Poor Whites of the South," *The North Star*, March 1, 1850.

whites to highlight how they have been deceived by the slaveholding class into believing that they are better off with the institution of slavery still intact. Abolitionist authors and newspapers like Frederick Douglass, Hinton Helper, and *The North Star*, argued that poor whites are practically slaves themselves as they suffer from low social status, intense labor, and poverty. Although each of these authors used the situation of poor whites to their advantage in different ways, it is clear that poor whites played a major role in the discussion of slavery, even though they were often included in that discussion themselves. Similar to the abolitionists, many prominent proslavery advocates discussed poor whites in their literature. However, unlike abolitionists, proslavery advocates mostly rebutted the abolitionist arguments about poor whites, rather than making up their own.

### **Proslavery Debates Regarding Poor Whites**

Proslavery authors also used poor whites in their arguments. Instead of highlighting the situations of southern poor whites to accelerate their arguments, proslavery activists used poor whites in rebuttal to defend the institution of slavery. In their analysis of southern poor whites, proslavery advocates used their references to poor whites to either shift the blame of poverty onto those already impoverished or to promote white unity across the south. Either way, similar to the abolitionist's arguments on poor whites, the proslavery arguments regarding poor whites served one unified purpose. Each of the arguments proslavery authors used regarding poor whites was intended to negate the antislavery notion that poor whites were an example of white disunity and inequality in the antebellum south, and that this was a problem for southern society.

One prominent proslavery author from the antebellum south, Daniel R Hundley, wrote an entire chapter regarding poor whites in his book *Social Relations in Our Southern States*. This was likely in response to the increasing number of arguments revolving around poor whites

amongst the abolitionist community. However, dedicating an entire chapter to poor whites was quite rare for both abolitionist and proslavery authors. While poor whites were referenced frequently amongst each group, they were typically only written about for a page or two. This makes Hundley's book *Social Relations in Our Southern States* a particularly important source when analyzing rhetoric made about poor whites. Hundley was born into a slaveholding family in north Alabama. As he came of age, Hundley went to college in Kentucky, attended Harvard Law, and eventually moved to Chicago.<sup>67</sup> In 1860, he wrote *Social Relations in Our Southern States* in response to the labor crisis, in which poor whites were pushed out of the market due to slave labor. Hundley attempted to provide an analysis of the South from a southerner's perspective, calling himself the "interpreter of the antebellum south".<sup>68</sup> Historian William J. Cooper Jr. explains that the goal of Hundley's book was to analyze the South from a southerner's perspective to inspire northerners and Englishmen to view Southern society 'rationally' and to realize they had nothing to fear from it.<sup>69</sup> In the book, Hundley catalogued southern people into eight "social types": "Southern Gentleman," "The Middle Classes," "Southern Yankees," "Cotton Snobs," "Southern Yeoman," "Southern Bullies," "Poor White Trash," and "Negro Slaves." These social types were explored in individual chapters, which were arranged hierarchically and in descending order.

In his "Poor White Trash" chapter, Hundley referenced and attempted to rebut abolitionist arguments regarding poor whites. Abolitionists, as mentioned in the previous section, suggested that poor whites suffer from the institution of slavery and were essentially secondary slaves themselves. Abolitionists also used the situation of poor whites to demonstrate how slaveholders

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<sup>67</sup> Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press: 1979. Originally published 1860), xv-xvii.

<sup>68</sup> Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* Introduction.

<sup>69</sup> Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* xxiv.

were selfish and did not care about their fellow men. Hundley responded to these arguments by stating,

The denouncers of the slaveholders were forced to change their tactics, so they began a new species of agitation. They now acknowledge that to the owners of negroes the system of labor peculiar to the South is beneficial, but is, they contend, a terrible curse to the non-slaveholding whites, and ought to be abolished on account of the latter.

From this excerpt, it appears that Hundley believed that abolitionists can no longer argue that the institution of slavery is not economically beneficial to the south so they had to devise a new “tactic”. This new tactic insisted that the institution of slavery harmed poor whites. Hundley’s argument attempted to attack abolitionists’ credibility by labeling them as feeble in their arguments. However, this argument was not a new tactic, as seen in the previous section. Abolitionists frequently used the negative economic impact that the institution of slavery had on poor whites as a supplement to their more central argument for the abolition of slaves. After this misrepresentation, Hundley continued by stating,

Look at the Poor Whites of the South, cry these wiseacres, and behold the fruits of slavery. And in the same breath they exclaim, Down with the Oligarchs! Down with the Chivalry! They do not trouble themselves to inquire what are the natural causes of the existence in the South of the class of lazy vagabonds known as Poor Whites, or how great the number of these may be, but rush 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.<sup>70</sup>

In this quote, Hundley suggested that abolitionists have jumped to an incorrect conclusion when arguing about poor whites. Hundley appears to be responding to the abolitionist critique that the

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<sup>70</sup> Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* 254.

south is an oligarchy that puts down slaves and poor whites alike. He responded to this critique by claiming there is a natural cause for why poor whites are impoverished, lazy and uneducated. Hundley goes off this point to address three misconceptions he believed abolitionists authors had regarding southern poor whites. First, he argued that abolitionists cannot blame the institution of slavery for the struggles of poor whites because poor whites can be found struggling in northern states and poor houses in England as well.<sup>71</sup> Matt Wray in *Not Quite White* cites this as a common argument amongst slaveholders. He states,

Secessionists argued that a key piece of evidence exonerating the slave system was to be found in studies showing poor white trash could be found in free states as well. These southerners 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.<sup>72</sup>

With this argument, Hundley attempted to remove the slaveholder's responsibility for the suffering of poor whites because poor whites exist in other regions of the United States. Second, he attempted to deny the abolitionist argument that slaveholders pushed poor whites to the fringes of society, to live on hilly unproductive land. He claimed that this is untrue because some land with high quality soils have never been touched and are still sold at government prices.<sup>73</sup> While there is potential for this claim to be true, it ignores the systemic poverty poor whites faced in the antebellum south that may prevent one from purchasing land, even at government prices. Third, he rebutted the abolitionist argument that poor whites do not want to work alongside slaves, which is why poor whites refuse to work and remain in a cycle of poverty. He

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<sup>71</sup> Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* 257-58.

<sup>72</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 49.

<sup>73</sup> Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* 258-59.

claimed that poor whites do not object to working alongside slaves because the Southern Yeomenry, a working class, work habitually with slaves.<sup>74</sup> This is in contradiction to a later argument that Hundley makes in which he states that poor whites seldom interact with slaves at all but they are still proslavery in sentiment.<sup>75</sup> How could poor whites be okay with working alongside slaves if they rarely interact with slaves at all? Fourth, Hundley argued that poor whites are genetically inferior to the slaveholding and yeomen classes and that is why they are impoverished, lazy and unintelligent.<sup>76</sup> Overall, Hundley made excuses regarding the impoverished condition of poor whites to mask abolitionists' arguments by denying the legitimacy of their claims and chalking up the poor white condition to genetics, rather than a systemic issue.

Another prominent proslavery piece regarding non-slaveholders comes from the Presses of Evans and Cogswell. The Evans and Cogswell Company was a South Carolina publishing company that printed Confederate currency throughout the Civil War.<sup>77</sup> They also printed various proslavery pamphlets under the name the Presses of Evans and Cogswell. One major pamphlet they released in 1860 was called, "The interest in slavery of the southern non-slaveholder: The right of peaceful secession. Slavery in the Bible". Abolitionist Horace Cowles Atwater, who was covered earlier in the chapter, suggested that J. De Bow's arguments in this pamphlet "produced the strongest argument for Slavery, of any that we have seen."<sup>78</sup> De Bow ran a very prominent periodical entitled *De Bow's Review*, which ran from 1846 to 1884. *De Bow's Review* was used as a key outlet for proslavery writers to publish their defenses on slavery through the 1850s.

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<sup>74</sup> Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* 259.

<sup>75</sup> Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* 273.

<sup>76</sup> Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* 255.

<sup>77</sup> South Carolina Picture Project. "Old Confederate Printing Plant".

<https://www.scpictureproject.org/richland-county/old-confederate-printing-plant.html>.

<sup>78</sup> Horace Cowles Atwater, *Incidents of a Southern tour, or, The South, as seen with Northern eyes* (J.P. Magee, 1857: *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive*), [link.gale.com/apps/doc/O0100018530/SAS?u=knox61277&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=ca02ed44&pg=77](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/O0100018530/SAS?u=knox61277&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=ca02ed44&pg=77), 68-69.

Throughout the first section of the pamphlet, which was written by James Dunwoody Brownson De Bow, De Bow delved into his ten reasons that the institution of slavery benefitted the non-slaveholder. Similar to Hundley, De Bow seemed to be writing this paper in response to abolitionist discourse, even though he did not explicitly reference any particular abolitionist author. Throughout the paper, he referenced arguments that abolitionists had used to argue that the non-slaveholding class did not benefit from the institution of slavery.

De Bow opened his argument by stating that non-slaveholding white people in the antebellum south were deeply patriotic and would be willing to protect the southern lifestyle. He stated, “I think it is but easy to show that the interest of the poorest non-slaveholder among us, is to make common cause with, and die in the last trenches in defence of, the slave property of his more favored neighbor.”<sup>79</sup> This quote is particularly interesting because De Bow seems to have intense confidence that the non-slaveholding class would defend the slaveholder so that he could maintain his slaves. But, if the institution of slavery truly did benefit the non-slaveholder, it could be reasonable to assume that the non-slaveholder would defend the slaveholders way of life. He also went on to state that “a class conscientiously objecting to the ownership of slave-property does not exist at the South....”<sup>80</sup> Throughout this argument, it is evident that De Bow wanted to assert to anyone reading this letter that there are no class differences in opinions of slavery, and that all southerners are united on that front. The emphasis on class unity in this sense might be due to the fact that the letter was written in 1860, the year Abraham Lincoln was elected as president and South Carolina seceded from the Union. During this time, there would have been a true fear amongst slaveholders that war was approaching, and they desperately needed poor whites to help defend their cause.

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<sup>79</sup> J. De Bow, “The interest in slavery of the southern non-slaveholder: The right of peaceful secession. Slavery in the Bible.” (Charleston: Presses of Evans and Cogswell, 1860), 5.

<sup>80</sup> J. De Bow, “The interest in slavery of the southern non-slaveholder”, 5.

De Bow then gets into the main points of his argument. First, he rebutted the abolitionist argument that non-slaveholders must compete with slave labor, and therefore, have a difficult time finding work. This argument was later corroborated by post Civil War interviews from poor whites and historians, as referenced in Chapter One. However, in 1860, De Bow argued that this competition simply did not exist. In order to back this claim, De Bow mentions how the institution of slavery produces the products that merchants sell, which provides jobs for the clerk, the drayman and the laborers the merchant employs.<sup>81</sup> He even referenced poor mechanics, who were at the head of the Labor Crisis in 1860. He stated that,

If the poor mechanic could have ever complained of the competition, in the cities, of slave labor with his, that cause of complaint in the enormous increase of value of slave property has failed, since such increase has been exhausting the cities and towns of slave labor, or making it so valuable that he can work in competition with it and receive a rate of remuneration greatly higher than in any of the non-slaveholding towns or cities at the North.<sup>82</sup>

With this argument, De Bow attempted to flip the abolitionist argument on its head by stating that the ever increasing value of slave property should result in white laborers getting higher pay because the cost of slave labor had increased. He tried to back this claim with evidence demonstrating that southern laborers and tradesmen received higher wages than northern workers by using a table. In the southern category, he used wages for Bricklayers, Carpenters and Laborers in New Orleans, Charleston and Nashville, and in the northern category, Chicago, Pittsburgh and Lowell, Massachusetts. Based on this table, which may or may not be accurate, the wages for bricklayers and carpenters appeared significantly higher in the southern cities than

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<sup>81</sup> J. De Bow, "The interest in slavery of the southern non-slaveholder", 5.

<sup>82</sup> J De Bow, "The interest in slavery of the southern non-slaveholder" 5-6.

in the northern ones. The laborer rate, which, as a profession, made up the majority of poor whites, are essentially the same in both regions.<sup>83</sup> This argument is particularly interesting because, as stated in the first chapter, there was an entire labor crisis happening in the south at the time this piece was written. De Bow completely ignored this and instead suggested the institution of slavery had increased pay for non-slaveholders. He went on to claim that non-slaveholders had it much better in the south than as laborers in the north because they did not have to “find employment in crowded cities and come into competition in close and sickly workshops and factories, with remorseless and untiring machinery.”<sup>84</sup> Throughout his argument, De Bow dismissed the struggles of non-slaveholders by suggesting that their struggles would simply be worse in the north. Furthermore, De Bow tried to highlight how the institution of slavery is necessary in order for the United States to thrive. He stated, “Without the institution of slavery, the great staple products of the South would cease to be grown, and the immense annual results, which are distributed among every class of the community, and which give life to every branch of the industry would cease.”<sup>85</sup> Essentially, De Bow attempted to argue that the American economy would collapse without the institution of slavery.

Another common theme throughout De Bow’s argument is that non-slaveholders are equal to slaveholders based upon race but not necessarily by class. He stated,

The non-slaveholder of the South preserves the status of the white man, and is not regarded as an inferior or a dependent...He (non-slaveholder) is a companion and an equal. When in the employ of the slaveholder, or in intercourse with him, he enters his

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<sup>83</sup> J De Bow, “The interest in slavery of the southern non-slaveholder” 7.

<sup>84</sup> J De Bow, “The interest in slavery of the southern non-slaveholder” 7.

<sup>85</sup> J De Bow, “The interest in slavery of the southern non-slaveholder” 10.

hall, and has a seat at his table. If a distinction exists, it is only that which education and refinement may give, and this is so courteously exhibited as scarcely to strike attention.<sup>86</sup>

This statement continued to emphasize the proslavery argument that there was racial unity within all the white social classes and dismissed arguments regarding class differences in the antebellum south. In this, De Bow's perspective was drastically different from Hundley's. Hundley attempted to completely distance himself from poor whites as a white person. De Bow, on the other hand, claimed that all southern white people are equally united on a racial front, regardless of slave ownership. This argument, however, continues to ignore the clear socioeconomic divisions between nonslaveholders and slaveholders that antislavery authors highlight.

The next argument De Bow made is that the non-slaveholder, with hard work and dedication, can move up in society and become a slaveholder himself. The institution of slavery was not a setback for the non-slaveholder but an outlet for opportunity.<sup>87</sup> Interestingly enough, in sharp contrast to Hundley, De Bow stated, "Nowhere else in the world have intelligence and virtue disconnected from ancestral estates, the same opportunities for advancement, and nowhere else is their triumph more speedy and signal."<sup>88</sup> Hundley put a lot of emphasis on ancestral ties and argues that success in the antebellum south is defined by hereditary factors. While De Bow, on the other hand, suggested that ancestry and genealogy are unimportant in the south, and suggests that any white person can succeed.

Finally, De Bow concluded that,

If emancipation be brought about as will undoubtedly be the case, unless the encroachments of the fanatical majorities of the North are resisted now the slaveholders, in the main, will escape the degrading equality which must result, by emigration, for

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<sup>86</sup> J De Bow, "The interest in slavery of the southern non-slaveholder" 8-9.

<sup>87</sup> J De Bow, "The interest in slavery of the southern non-slaveholder" 9-10.

<sup>88</sup> J De Bow, "The interest in slavery of the southern non-slaveholder" 10.

which they would have the means, by disposing of their personal chattels: whilst the non-slaveholders, without these resources, would be compelled to remain and endure the degradation...Low as would this class of people sink by emancipation in idleness, superstition and vice, the white man compelled to live among them, would by the power exerted over him, sink even lower, unless as is to be supposed he would prefer to suffer death instead.<sup>89</sup>

With this statement, De Bow tried to turn the argument back on abolitionists by claiming that if emancipation of slaves were to occur, abolitionists would not harm the slaveholding class, they would only harm the non-slaveholders. This argument is particularly striking because he first suggested that if emancipation was to occur, the slaveholding class would emigrate.

Fascinatingly enough, emigration of the upper slaveholding class actually did happen in some circumstances. In 1865, roughly 10,000 confederate southerners moved to a small city in Brazil called Americana. To this day, these confederate expats still recognize and celebrate their 'heritage'.<sup>90</sup> Secondly, he claimed that the plight of the non-slaveholding class would be so terrible that they would prefer to suffer death than to live among emancipated slaves.

From the arguments of Hundley and De Bow, historians are able to analyze two drastically different arguments regarding poor whites that serve the same purpose. Hundley suggested that the emancipation of slaves would not help poor whites because they are poor and unintelligent based upon their genetics and no other outside factors. Through his analysis of poor whites, Hundley tried to distance himself from "poor white trash" at all costs, even questioning their whiteness at times. De Bow, on the other hand, grouped poor whites in with all non-slaveholders and emphasized unity amongst all white people. He emphasized how

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<sup>89</sup> J De Bow, "The interest in slavery of the southern non-slaveholder" 11.

<sup>90</sup> Melia Robinson, "The American Confederacy is still alive in a small Brazilian city called Americana." *Business Insider*; <https://www.businessinsider.com/photos-us-confederacy-americana-brazil-2017-5>.

non-slaveholders could aspire to be and work up to being slaveholding members of society with hard work. From these two men, readers can see poor whites being portrayed in two very different ways. One author saw poor whites as genetically inferior and helpless in their situation. In turn, his argument appealed to elitist audiences in the north and throughout Europe. The other portrayed poor whites as their equal, and believes that there are ample opportunities for poor whites to own slaves themselves and become successful. De Bow's argument appealed to individuals within the south, alongside northerners. Interestingly, both authors appear to be responding to abolitionist rhetoric they had heard about poor whites. Although they did not directly quote any particular abolitionist, they reference abolitionists generally in their arguments. This highlights the important role poor whites held in these debates. On both sides, authors appear to be well read on the topic of poor whites and how the social class ties into the slavery debate.

## **Conclusion**

The back and forth rhetoric between the abolitionist and proslavery authors regarding the antebellum southern poor white demonstrates many things. First, it shows the prevalence of the topic in slavery debates. The situation revolving around poor whites was continually brought up by major authors from both sides of the debate. Abolitionists used poor whites to strengthen their argument against slavery; and proslavery authors saw these arguments as a threat to their argument so they felt the need to respond to them. Second, these debates demonstrate that the life circumstances for poor whites were substandard and downright terrible. Some of the authors equated poor whites with a similar condition to slaves. Proslavery authors operated on poor whites' fears and suggested their life situations would be even worse if the emancipation of slaves occurred. Third, it is very evident from these debates that poor whites were negatively

affected by the institution of slavery, as it was corroborated by many historians and abolitionist authors. Finally, although poor whites did not have a voice in the slavery debate, they were used as a contention point for getting each side's points across. This leads to an important question that chapter three will address: why poor whites? Chapter three will attempt to answer why poor whites, a social class that rarely ever gets to speak for itself in southern society, is frequently brought up in the slavery debates. Chapter three will also address if the situation of poor whites improved in the aftermath of the Civil War; and finally, how the poor white stereotype is still perpetuated throughout American society into the modern day.

## **Chapter 3: Why Poor Whites Were Included in These Debates**

### **Introduction**

Throughout Chapter One and Chapter Two, it has been made evident that southern poor whites were frequently referenced by both antislavery and proslavery activists but also by authors removed from the slave debates throughout the United States. With this, it has been made apparent that poor whites played an important role in southern society, even if that role was overwhelmingly negative. Chapter Three of this thesis leads to a final question: Why were poor whites incorporated into antislavery and proslavery debates in the first place? How can a social class, who is illiterate and unable to speak for themselves, play a role in such an important and divisive debate? There are three main reasons that the poor white social class was included in these debates. First, although poor whites were largely unaccounted for amongst rising tensions between the north and the south in the 1850s and 1860s, they had a vital role in the southern labor crisis and poverty in the antebellum south. Second, poor whites played an important role for abolitionists to debunk the myth of white unity in the antebellum south. Finally, poor whites were viewed as a “problem” by both proslavery and antislavery authors alike that needed to be addressed. This sparked debates on both sides about how the situations of poor whites either should be fixed by the abolition of slavery or if the problem should be dismissed altogether.

### **Reason One - An Unaccounted Social Class Amongst Rising Tensions in the 1850s and 1860s**

The first reason that poor whites found themselves included in slavery debates is due to their role in rising tensions in the antebellum south in the 1850s and 1860s. Firstly, poor whites, as illustrated in Chapter One, played a key role in the labor crisis in the antebellum south. Southern poor whites fell victim to the labor crisis, in which there was limited job availability

across the antebellum south. The institution of slavery created an economy in which slave labor was prioritized over hired labor. Because of this, poor whites were often unable to find jobs, and were often subjected to dangerous labor, such as mining, when they were able to find work. Through this change in work culture, any type of physical labor was seen as shameful in southern society because the agricultural, and even industrial field, was dominated by slaves. As cited by Merritt in Chapter One, this led to poor whites, mainly characterized as “mechanics”, forming loosely organized labor unions in which they demanded non-competition from slave labor.<sup>91</sup> In fact, this labor crisis and poor whites' reactions to it created such an issue in the antebellum south that slaveholders began suggesting solutions to addressing the labor crisis for poor whites. Because the labor crisis was angering poor whites and recognized by the slaveholding class, it is safe to assume that this was a relevant issue in American, or at least, southern politics at the time. In turn, this crisis paved the way for abolitionists to politicize the sufferings of the poor white class because it was a weak point against proslavery advocates and the institution of slavery. The labor crisis is one of many factors that exerted poor whites into political discussions across the nation.

Secondly, slaveholders were not the only Americans noticing the suffering of poor whites in poverty. Antislavery advocates and travelers alike began writing about the southern poor white class as featured in both Chapter One and Chapter Two. In conjunction with the labor crisis, poor whites began to be featured more in literature created by both Europeans, Northerners, and Southerners alike throughout the 1830s to the 1860s. Literature revolving around poor whites highlighted the social class's poverty, lack of education, and lack of moral character. Attempting to find an explanation for the suffering and deplorable conditions southern poor whites found themselves in, antislavery authors placed blame on the elite slaveholding class. In this way, poor

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<sup>91</sup> Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men* 92.

whites were inserted into antislavery debates in order to create evidence of responsibility on slaveholders for creating a aristocratic society based upon the institution of slavery. Abolitionists, such as Helper and Douglass, directly blamed slaveholders for the suffering of poor whites, and advocated that the abolition of slavery would improve poor whites social and economic standing in the antebellum south.

Finally, poor whites were thrust into slavery debates by proslavery advocates as tensions between the north and south rose throughout the 1850s. Many slaveholders desired to gain favorability and control over poor whites as the threat of the American Civil War continued to rise. Many proslavery pamphlets, such as De Bow's in the *Presses of Evans and Cogswell*, as analyzed in Chapter Two, tried to promote the idea of white, racial unity in the antebellum south, and incite fear that if the institution of slavery were to fall, that poor whites would suffer more than ever before. Slaveholders tried these tactics to attempt to get southern poor whites to fight for their proslavery cause, even if the system truly did not benefit them.

While poor whites did not hold much power in southern society, they appeared to be sought after to convince in proslavery and antislavery debates. This is, in part, due to the fact that the opinions and stances of poor whites were largely unaccounted for by both sides of the slavery debate. Due to their illiteracy and inaccessibility to politics, poor whites served as a figurative wild card as tensions rose revolving slavery in the 1850s and 1860s. Proslavery advocates hoped that poor whites would be on their side if war was to occur. They employed fear tactics and the concept of white unity to try to get poor whites on their side. Antislavery advocates, on the other hand, recognized that poor whites suffered from the institution of slavery, and emphasized this fact in their literature. Whether these arguments were geared towards convincing poor whites or

not, it is evident that both sides tried to write about the social class in their favor. Poor whites were viewed as a “problem” that both sides needed to address in one aspect or another.

### **Reason Two - Debunking the Myth of White Unity and Equality in the Antebellum South**

The second reason poor whites were included in the slavery debates was because the social class provided evidence for antislavery advocates that the myth of white unity and equality in the antebellum south was false. Due to the fact that poor whites were impoverished, uneducated and illiterate, the social group was the biggest wrench in the slaveholder’s argument that the institution of slavery unified and benefitted all white people in the antebellum south. It went to the antislavery advocate’s advantage to reference poor whites, and how the institution of slavery harmed them, in order to combat the concept of white unity in the antebellum south.

### **Reason Three - Poor Whites Made People Uncomfortable in Their Sense of Whiteness**

The third, and final, reason that poor whites were included in the slavery debates was because poor whites, and their lifestyles, were viewed as a “problem” to antislavery and proslavery writers alike. The conditions and behaviors of poor whites were so socially deplorable that they made white literate elites, often the ones making arguments revolving around slavery, significantly uncomfortable. This uncomfortability is evident through authors from both sides of the debate when they attempt to degrade poor whites in their descriptions of the social class. As referenced in Chapter One, abolitionist and proslavery authors described poor whites as idle, shiftless, stupid, barbaric, aggressive, savage and lazy. In Chapter Two, Atwater, an abolitionist author, quotes a poor white he interviewed in a similar accent to one used to quote slaves in literature. The abolitionists’ arguments often straight up compare poor whites to slaves as similar in social status and mannerisms. These comments were often unnecessary to the slavery based argument authors were trying to make but they are still used on both sides of the slave debate.

This reasserts the idea that poor whites were discussed in such a way because this social class made literate, often wealthy white people uncomfortable across the nation. Matt Wray, the author of *Not Quite White*, reaffirms this conclusion when he states,

Despite their radically different conclusions, proslavery apologists, abolitionists, and secessionists agreed on three key assumptions: first, that poor, nonslaveholding whites of the South constituted a group or class of individuals that was socially and culturally distinct; second, that what was most distinctive about the group was its degeneracy (although there was profound disagreement about the cause); finally, that poor whites were a social problem that must in some way be addressed in order to space the nation and the white race from internal corruption and decay.<sup>92</sup>

Wray reiterates that elites, on both the antislavery and proslavery side, perceive poor whites as a “problem” and a threat to white society. It is no wonder, because of this, that poor whites became a topic of debate amongst elites across the nation.

## **Conclusion**

In all, poor whites were included in proslavery and antislavery debates because they were at the forefront of the southern labor crisis and rising political tensions in the United States; they were used as a mechanism for northerners to debunk white equality and unity in the Antebellum South and, finally, southern poor whites made elites across the country uncomfortable in their sense of whiteness. These are the reasons why poor whites frequently come up in proslavery and antislavery debates.

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<sup>92</sup>Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 63.

## Conclusion

In all, this thesis tied socioeconomic and sociological factors together in order to provide a better understanding as to why an undervalued, underrepresented social class got the attention it did throughout the 1850s and 1860s in slavery debates, and how the inclusion of poor whites elevated antislavery and proslavery arguments. This thesis analyzed arguments made about poor whites in the slavery debates of the 1850s and 1860s. With poor whites being briefly mentioned in most proslavery and antislavery literature, the social class has often been overlooked in historical research regarding the slavery debates. In Chapter One, this project looked at southern poor whites holistically through historiography analysis, examining the poor whites' social role in southern society, and how poor whites fit into the national political conflict on slavery and the southern labor crisis. Chapter One served as a foundation to arguments made in Chapter Two and Chapter Three. Chapter Two of this paper studied how poor whites were incorporated into antislavery and proslavery debates, and compares and contrasts how each author uses the social class to their argumentative advantage. While this type of analysis has been seen before in historical literature, this thesis addresses how poor whites improved each author's argument, and explored the intention behind including poor whites in the first place. Finally, Chapter Three provided a new perspective to the topic by explaining why poor whites were included in proslavery and antislavery rhetoric in the first place. This analysis has never been the sole focus for historians examining this topic. Throughout the intensive research this project demanded, it was able to produce three main reasons as to why proslavery and antislavery authors used poor whites in their slavery related arguments. Firstly, poor whites made up a social class that was largely unaccounted for amongst rising tensions in the 1850s and 1860s. Poor whites were illiterate and largely unconnected with the political debates revolving slavery. However, due to

their unique position of being the forefront victims of the labor crisis, the would-to-be majority of a future Confederate army, and the eyesore of white community in the antebellum south, the poor white class became a group that both stances of the slavery debate wanted on their side. Secondly, antislavery advocates used poor whites to debunk the myth of white unity and equality in the Antebellum South. This argument strengthens the antislavery stance by critiquing the perfect southern society rhetoric proslavery advocates tried to push. Thirdly, proslavery and antislavery authors used poor whites in their debates because they saw the very existence of poor whites as a threat and a problem to white society. This reasoning justifies why both sides sought to degrade and demoralize the social class in their descriptions of poor whites. Poor whites did not fit into the mold of what they perceived as “white”, which also explains why poor whites were frequently compared to enslaved black people. The arguments used by both sides attempt to distance themselves from poor whites by incorporating demeaning language, while also occasionally giving out sympathy to their situation.

While this thesis brought new perspectives to the topic of southern poor whites, there is still significant research to be done about this elusive, misunderstood social class. For so long, southern poor whites were neglected in historical research from this time period, even though they made up a large portion of the southern population at that time. The study of poor whites, especially in regards to their interactions with white elites and enslaved peoples, can provide historians and sociologists more context on the value of race and whiteness in the antebellum south and in the United States as a whole. Research revolving around antebellum southern poor whites is important because it provides historians with more context on racial identity and the value of whiteness that still carry on to this day. After all, the terms “white trash”, “cracker”, and “redneck” are still commonly used in the south today to degrade and demoralize impoverished,

rural white people. This thesis proves that words can have significant meaning, have important social implications, and often carry a history with intention behind them. The study of antebellum southern poor whites will forever be important to how historians understand the antebellum south, and understand the concept of whiteness in America.

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