The Laboring Family through Rebellion and Reconstruction

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Historians studying women and gender during Reconstruction have uncovered a wealth of connections between society, culture, politics, labor, and economics. One theme has emerged as crucial through many of these works, yet has no single study considers how the relationship between labor and the family was transformed by war, the emancipation of slaves, and reconciliation. How did emancipation and the rise of a pseudo-capitalist labor system in the South transform the ways families supported themselves? To what extent was self-sufficient agriculture transformed by the introduction of millions of potential landowners into an agricultural economy? Most historians take for granted the importance of family in the subsistence of its members in their attempt to better understand other relevant aspects of history such as politics, race, or labor. I argue that the ability of the households to subsist through slavery, civil war, social upheaval, wanton violence, exploitative employers, and other destructive forces warrants a closer look.

In an effort to avoid lengthy discussion of what exactly the term describes, I have chosen a broad definition of family, which will be used interchangeably with the term household.[1] Because this study focuses so much on slaves and freedpeople, it is wrong to say that

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[1]Certain sources, such as census records, differentiate the two. Usually a household is a single physical dwelling that can harbor multiple families. But a good many census takers were careless in their counts, not noting the difference at all or assuming that most families lived in households that consisted of just their own family (close and extended). Often, fictive kin were denoted by census takers as "adopted" and are considered family within the bounds of this analysis.

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family is merely an assembly of blood kin. Adapting in ways that softened the sharp edges of the peculiar institution, slave families (and later, freed families) often adopted distant relatives or unrelated individuals who remained part of that group for the entirety of their lives. Thus, extended family, fictive kin, and entire households are taken together as "families." The crucial analytical focus of this study is the shared experience of subsistence and the factors that facilitated or hindered it. Family is a group of people—close friends, kin, and acquaintances—who live within the same household and share with each other the burden of the self-sufficiency of the entire group. Individual families, though, are rarely isolated, making their experience within a larger community of households (blood-related or otherwise) equally important within the confines of this historiographical analysis. Thus, disruptions in mobility, local trade, and other community-wide efforts to help each other are also taken into account.

For the sake of brevity, this treatment will limit itself to four main themes and two specific groups. First, of course, is time, which will be used to discuss change during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Second, regional variation (space), when noted in the secondary sources reviewed, will be discussed in order to point out the many spacial differences within the South. The next two elements are virtually inseparable as analytical themes: race and class. Southern blacks and poor whites have always had (and probably will always have) a love-hate relationship and have been foiled in efforts to come together as much by outside forces as by their own deep seated animosities toward each other. The specific groups around which these themes will be discussed are small farmers (yeomen)—with or without slaves—and the slaves themselves. Avoiding discussion of planters, urban slaveholders, merchants, and free blacks admittedly fails to tell the entire story, but the focus of this paper is on those who would come to be described as the "underclass" of America; or, as Jacqueline Jones describes them, those who existed in seeming opposition to the upper-classes, "the denizens of the underworld . . . the lower orders and the dangerous classes" whose "*wanderlust*" tendencies were feared by the economically stable middle- and upper-class elite.[2]

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[2]Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclass from the Civil War to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 9.

Family Economics in the Antebellum South

Southern white populations in the antebellum period were incredibly diverse and complex in their familial and community relationships. "Not at all the stripped-down world of great planters, slaves, and a few marginalized poor whites," wrote Stephanie McCurry in *Masters of Small Worlds*, "white society in the rural Low Country [of South Carolina] included small planters with fewer than twenty slaves, great ones with more than one hundred slaves, and planter-merchants with all manner of property; tenant farmers, laborers, overseers, and all kinds of poor whites; and, as elsewhere in the South, a substantial class of yeoman farmers." For the yeomen she described, efforts toward subsistence were directed inward, taking place primarily on the farm or within the household. Lacking slaves, "familial and productive relations were virtually indistinguishable," and the work toward subsistence was completed by all members of the family. That did not mean that domestic labor was any less vital than farm labor, as women's work—which developed only a loose distinctiveness in poor families in the antebellum period—was crucial to household survival. Women's responsibilities included the home manufacturing of clothing, provisioning of goods to market, cooking, and cultivating small gardens for supplemental food. Planters' reaction to flexibility in the sexual division of labor roles in the households of their yeoman neighbors reflects the gulf between rich and poor white in the antebellum South. "Women's work in the fields, although customary," wrote McCurry, "was customarily ignored and even denied." To planters, separate spheres of household labor were clearly defined along the lines of both gender and race, with mistresses confined to the domestic sphere and slaves to the fields. Such a division of labor was precipitated by a gradual withdrawal from field work of nearly every non-slave member of the planter's household. As their slaveholdings increased and the plantation's production was able to sustain non-laboring members, lines between male and female and black and white labor sharpened.[3] For yeomen, however, the lines were not as clear.

Despite the familial differences, in the South Carolina Low Country an uneasy symbiotic relationship between yeomen farm-

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[3]Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 47, 72-85, 80-81.

ers and planters developed based around their status as masters of independent households. That is, male household heads of each class controlled the labor output of the household's constituent members. Yet, economic interests placed yeomen families within the realm of plantation families, a seeming threat to their household independence. Planters were vital sources of supplemental slave labor, credit, cotton gins, food, and market access. But the relationship was reciprocal, with yeomen supplying their skills, their wives' skills, or some other good or service in exchange for the benefits of market and resource access planters afforded. Beyond economics, the two were also bound together by the political and social defense of slavery and the white race. In essence, economic aid came, for some yeomen families, at the expense of a truly independent vote. According to McCurry, "[o]ut of the personal nature of the ties that bound them, out of their common respect for private property and property in man, and out of the social and political imperatives of slave society, yeomen and planters in the South Carolina Low Country forged a workable alliance."[4]

Steven Hahn offered another angle in analyzing the relationship between poor whites and planters in *The Roots of Southern Populism*. Characterized by a strong penchant for communal interdependency, poorer farming families in the Georgia Upcountry owned fewer slaves, farmed smaller plots, and grew less cotton than their Black Belt neighbors. While a sporadic few were afforded access to larger markets, most were not. Resulting from low population densities, few well-traveled waterways, and a dearth of railroad track, most economic activity was confined to local markets. Subsistence was not just a familial effort, but was shared through community labor and food exchanges throughout the year, most noticeably during corn schuckings, log-rollings, or other special events. Just as farmers in the South Carolina Low Country, males in Georgia Upcountry households were masters of their own worlds, but they were by no means the household's only laborers. Women, children, and the elderly were essential for survival. One crucial regional difference between the Georgia Upcountry yeomen and the South Carolina Low Country yeomen, however, was in field labor. While Hahn conceded that only harvest time brought women to the fields, McCurry pointed out that women in the Low Country were needed in the fields almost year

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[4]Ibid., 112.

round.[5] While neither of the region's yeomen grew all that much cotton—most grew more food than staple—and both had similar statistics for the number of farmers who grew it in 1860 (about two-thirds), the smaller average farm size in the Georgia Upcountry probably explains this differences in women's labor. Hillier and less conducive to large farming operations, the upcountry environment would have limited the field work of women compared to those in South Carolina, where many women "worked in the fields steadily from May until December."[6]

However, the type of crop being cultivated could also play a part in the field labor of women. In the South Carolina Low Country and much of the South, cotton was the dominant staple and required constant care and careful attention throughout the growing season. Harvest was made difficult by the delicacy of cotton bolls which needed to be selectively picked as to only pick those in full bloom. Women, children, and sometimes local hired hands would be required in the fields year round in large cotton fields, but the harvest season required the most amount of labor. Corn, on the other hand, is a much more hearty crop that requires relatively little attention, and families that undertook extensive corn cultivation could afford fewer hands and shortened hours for their women and children. Whatever the differences, it is clear that the yeomen women of both the Georgia Upcountry and the South Carolina Low Country contributed to the household economy in fundamental ways that plantation mistresses did not.[7]

Driving the self-sufficiency of plantation families, of course, were slaves. Due to the complexities of slavery, describing the slave family, its definition, and its meaning has become something of a subfield of its own. One enduring work on the subject is Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. In his carefully argued survey of several antebellum plantations, Gutman found a complex yet distinct slave family which challenged the boundaries and assumptions of slavery just as much as (if not more then) than slavery molded those boundaries. For instance, while

[5]Ibid., 83; Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 30.

[6]Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, 44; McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 55.

[7]See, Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 3-4.

some slaveowners notoriously exploited slave familial bonds to co-
erce, Gutman found that many slaves leveraged the labor output of
entire slave households to negotiate garden plots, extra rations,
stays of sale for children, friends, or relatives, and other incentives
that aided in survival.[8] So while they were undoubtedly (and often
exploitatively) hindered by their status as unfree laborers in creat-
ing and maintaining familial connections, slaves were nevertheless
able and willing to do so by their own volition, and (crucial to Gut-
man's thesis) in ways distinct from white families in adaptability
and structure.[9] Jacqueline Jones, in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sor-
row*, found that antebellum slave women played important roles in
the nurturing of slave families through their work outside of their
master's control. Feeding runaways, locating and bringing together
separated families, supplementing household subsistence through
their own labors (churning butter, sewing, cooking, growing food,
etc.), and taking on "fictive kin" were but a few of the ways women
were able to help strengthen the bonds that brought together slave
families. Slave men and children also supplemented the meager ra-
tions supplied by their owners by building furniture, hunting, forag-
ing, and even (if their owner consented) hiring themselves out.[10]

But because Jones was speaking in broad generalizations, her
analysis lacked important nuance. Regional variations abound
within the peculiar institution, as the work of Leslie Schwalm on sla-
very in the South Carolina's rice-growing regions has shown.[11] Her
book, *A Hard Fight for We*, offered a refreshing refutation of com-
mon assumptions about freed black women and their families after
emancipation, but her chapters on the laboring slave family before
the war were essential. The constant care and burdensome labor re-
quired of rice cultivation played a crucial role in both the formation
of the labor system and in creating the social space with which to

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[8]Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*
(New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 79-80.

[9]For instance, Gutman argued that enslaved black families in South Carolina
were much less likely to practice endogamy (cousin marriage) than white families.
To him, this practice demonstrated both the adaptability of black familial norms—
as this practice would have expanded the size of kinship networks—and its roots in
various West African cultures. *Ibid.*, 89-91.

[10]Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work,
and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), ch 1.

[11]See also Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Sla-
very in North American* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,
1998); Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*
(Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

form and nurture slave families. In an effort to maximize labor output, rice planters were forced to give up the gang labor system for the task system, which afforded slave families more direct control of work pace, and thus, the definition of their own social space. Since speeding up or slowing down labor was a primary mechanism by which slaves could assert themselves within the system, however, gender differentiations in labor roles were diminished, as slave women on rice plantations became crucial elements in the cultivation of rice. The labor of children, too, was used, beginning as quarter or half hands until they were old enough to become full hands; all the while they worked within the household cleaning, carding cotton, or keeping the fire. For some slave families, utilizing the combined output of an entire family could yield incentives such as their own crops, livestock, or even the opportunity to hire themselves out. In short, the living space afforded by slavery in the South Carolina rice regions created "a unique plantation regime in the slaveholding South," set apart by "the wealth of its planters, by unusually large and relatively stable plantation communities, and by a regional population that was predominantly black and heavily infused with the African heritages of its enslaved immigrants."[12]

In contrast, however, is the slave population described by Steven Hahn in the Georgia Upcountry. While not his focus, his work revealed the varying ways poor whites interacted with slaves. Isolated from larger slave communities and concentrated in small groups, upcountry slaves were closely watched and lacked the broad kinship networks and negotiable living space of those in areas with large concentrations of slaves. In the upcountry, slavery fit especially well within the household hierarchy, increasing the social interaction between slaveowning families and their (usually one or two) slaves. Slaves became almost like family members. But while those caught up in the system "shared a close [but separated] living environment, worked side by side at similar tasks, might attend the same church, and could engage in casual fraternization . . . [slavery] nonetheless occupied the extreme end of a racially mixed continuum." Yet, it was a continuum in which slaves "could never expect, through the live cycle or inheritance, to attain independence," and they were always transient property with little to no connection to

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[12]Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 15. Spatial nuance is also the dominant theme of the recent works of Ira Berlin. See fn 11.

the land. Their connectedness to white families was by no means a boon, either. Historians have found that the isolation and surveillance indicative of upcountry slaveholding facilitated a harsher brand of slavery than in those areas with large, deeply rooted slave communities.[13]

On the other hand, in the South Carolina Low Country, Stephanie McCurry found the relationship between yeomen and slaves a mixed one, filled with secretive trading that could result in animosity between poor whites and their elite neighbors, vigilante violence, and white supremacy (which also raised planter concerns when it threatened the labor output of slaves).[14] That such interracial interaction evoked significant reactions from planters serves to remind us that the antebellum South was a complex system, filled with contradictions and spatial nuance, a myriad of interarticulations between race, class, labor, and family, and an ever-evolving social structure. However tight planters believed they were able to knit their society, the Civil War would demonstrate the fragility of that society by destroying the glue that held it together, and emancipation and war would prove just as disastrous for some as glorious for others.

A GLORIOUS DISRUPTION: THE CIVIL WAR AND EMANCIPATION

The Civil War dramatically altered household roles and re-shaped families of all classes and races. For white families, the exigencies of war brought class differences in family subsistence to the fore, and few studies are as attentive to this as Drew Gilpin Faust's *Mothers of Invention*. While her focus was on slaveholding women during the war, she never lost focus of the larger picture, of how her subjects differed from white women of poorer families. For example, the term *refugee* had different connotations for women of the lower classes than it had for those of upper classes. Those with means used flight as a tool to preserve and "reinforce class perceptions and identity," taking their slaves, possessions, and considerable wealth out of harm's way. Smaller slaveholders and poor farmers, like Nancy Mae Jett, whose Georgia home lay directly in General Sherman's path to the Atlantic, could do little but "stay at

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[13]Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, 30-32. See also, Wilma A. Dunaway, *Slavery in the American Mountain South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[14]McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 118-121.

home and take whatever Providence may send."[15] Jett's experience highlights how class as well as location—in this case, proximity to military forces—could dramatically alter the fate of families in the Civil War South.

Just as their wealth increased their chances to survive the Civil War, a good number of slaveholding families were introduced (or reintroduced) to home manufacture when supplies dwindled and naval blockade stymied market access. Weaving and sewing by definition threatened to blur the lines between upper and lower-class families, especially as their women struggled to feed and clothe themselves in similar fashion. But poorer women still operated under disadvantages compared to their upper-class neighbors. For all the ebullience and propaganda surrounding the potential of women's home production, Faust found the efforts were of minor significance and most privileged households "coped by importing cloth through the blockade or purchasing it behind enemy lines in trips to occupied areas such as New Orleans." In contrast, "Less fortunate southerners made do by recycling bed or table linens, curtains, and discarded garments."[16] So while nearly all women in the Confederacy were forced to work harder toward their own subsistence, women in poor families had been doing so for years and had little money or produce saved to cushion against wartime difficulties.

Food was the most pressing concern for white families during war, especially to those with few or no slaves and whose laboring men—the backbone of field labor in many households—were conscripted into the Confederate military. Contemporary discourse necessitates discussing conscription through the lenses of class and household subsistence, as the three were nearly always linked by contemporaries discussing the exemption and substitution clauses that explicitly differentiated planter families from those of poorer farmers. As slaveholders persuaded the Confederate congress to enact provisions that allowed them to remain on their plantations, the rhetoric for substitutions and exemptions was usually centered around fears of slave revolt, food shortages (planters were also sometimes the largest food producers in an area), plantation mismanagement, and miscegenation between slaves and the family's white women. As a result, conscription policies favored large slave-

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[15]Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 40-45.
[16]Ibid., 45-51.

holders and the political elite, and poorer families came to bear the brunt of the war's hardships. Disenchantment mounted, and Confederate policy makers gradually restricted exemptions in an attempt to quell unrest that came in the form of food and draft riots.[17] But at the time, discrepancies in family subsistence were dramatic, and many men of poor families were forced to abandon their post and return to their homes. Divisions within the Confederacy were never fully healed. "Poor women accused elite families of abandoning their responsibilities to the less fortunate," wrote Faust, "even while 'the rich livs as well as ever tha did'; respectable middle- and upper-class females were both frightened and appalled by rioters' abandonment of deference and propriety, even when they felt pity for their desperate plight."[18]

Steven Hahn found that unfair conscription practices inspired a great deal of unrest in the Georgia Upcountry. Because the area contained a disproportionate number of the state's poor and middling white families, the conflict was also sectional, but not one taken lightly by contemporaries. The Georgia Upcountry eventually became filled with fugitives from conscription officers, whose numbers only increased as food and clothing deficits worsened and Confederate officials demonstrated their unwillingness to aid families of known deserters and objectors. Impressment, disease, hunger, and death devastated the region, fomenting dissent and eventually open resistance to the Confederacy. While most of the South suffered in some form over the course of the war, the severity of destitution in the Georgia Upcountry (and probably most of those regions containing people who had always lived near to the edge of subsistence) was much more pronounced than in regions where large-scale agricultural production cushioned shortages and displacement. "Although the war effort brought privation throughout the South," wrote Hahn, "nowhere did the repercussions hit more

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[17]Ibid., 55-56.

[18]Ibid., 246. For Faust, interestingly enough, class conflict sealed the fate of the Confederacy. Other historians, however, have disagreed, finding disenchantment more localized and dependent mainly on recent wartime events that did little to subvert the overall southern war effort. See, for instance, Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). Probably the best treatment by those who see class conflict as a serious threat to Confederate aims is Armstead L. Robinson, *Bitter Fruits of Bondage: The Demise of Slavery and the Collapse of the Confederacy, 1861-1865* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005). The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. Morale and class conflict were, as most admit, affected by a wide variety of variables, including most obviously local military activity and events in the course of the war.

severely than in nonplantation areas. Unable to depend on slave labor, many families faced great difficulties when husbands and sons marched off with the army."[19] Eric Foner's *Reconstruction* found the pattern of Upcountry disillusionment and eventual open dissent consistent across much of the South. Content with their insubordinate position before the war—as long as "planter rule did not interfere with the yeomanry's self-sufficient agriculture and local independence"—the war would prove most devastating to families in upcountry areas like eastern Tennessee, northern Alabama, and West Virginia, where food shortages, unequal and intrusive Confederate policy, and destitution weighed heaviest.[20]

For white families, the Civil War brought social upheaval, but for African Americans war symbolized the opportunity to seize what they had been systemically denied in the antebellum South: their freedom. The coming of war saw many slaves take flight from their plantations, seeking freedom, reconstituting their families, searching for food and employment, and otherwise strengthening the fragile bonds bringing together slave families. Self-emancipation is one of the most spatially and individually nuanced aspects of slavery's end, affected by local military activity, proximity to Union lines, access to vital information concerning the course and aims of the war, and personal circumstances of individual slaves, such as conditions under slavery or makeup of (and proximity to) one's family. One of the most important works addressing this was the first volume of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project's *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, entitled *The Destruction of Slavery*, which detailed how slaves took it upon themselves to destroy the institution by taking control of their lives, their families, and their futures. The introduction by Ira Berlin made it clear that the agency of slaves played a key role in ending the peculiar institution, even as several obstacles stood in their way. Confederate impressment, early Union policy that mandated turning them away, racism by many Union commanders, and food shortages hampered fugitive slaves and freedmen near those areas initially held by Union forces. But as officers like Benjamin Butler and Samuel Curtis saw the utility of slave labor and how freeing or at least accommodating fugitive slaves could weaken Confederate war efforts, Union policy became increasingly liberal toward them.

[19]Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, 124.
[20]Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 11-18.

As blacks flooded Union lines, commanders eventually established refugee camps, offering freedmen employment in the Union military and eventually recruiting them into the United States Army. The camps offered some of the first opportunities for many black families to work together toward subsistence as free laborers. Still, Berlin was mindful of the assumption that emancipation was "bestowed" upon slaves. While admitting that a good number of slaves (especially those in peripheral regions of the war) *were* forced to wait until the Freedmen's Bureau or Union soldiers liberated them, he reminded us that the origins of the legislation and military orders that facilitated the destruction of slavery by slaves "could [not] be found in the seats of executive and legislation authority from which the great documents [were] issued. Instead, they resided in the humble quarters of slaves, who were convinced in April 1861 of what could not be fully affirmed until December 1865, and whose actions consistently undermined every settlement short of universal abolition."[21]

This theme was echoed in Steven Hahn's groundbreaking examination of black politics, *A Nation under Our Feet*. Hahn saw black resistance through a political lens, describing the breakdown of slavery as a vital continuation of political negotiations between masters and slaves complicated by the rise of the Republican party and the outbreak of civil war. Indeed, he finds that the escalating expectations and involvement of slaves and freedmen in the destruction of slavery was a "moment of political redefinition and transformation for people of African descent in the South."[22]

Those slaves able to flee (i.e., those living near Union lines) used a variety of methods to feed their families. Federal refugee camps

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[21]*Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867*, series 1, volume 1, *The Destruction of Slavery*, ed. Ira Berlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 55.

[22]Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 114. Some scholars have taken issue with an entirely bottom-up interpretation of emancipation. This historiographical debate is complex. Of course, no recent study stresses the top-down aspects of emancipation, but there are many who find that, without support from the top levels of government, slaves would have had a much more difficult time (and may not have been successful in) destroying slavery. This position is probably most eloquently (and succinctly) described in, James M. McPherson, "Who Freed the Slaves?," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 139 (March 1995): 1-10. See also, Foner, *Reconstruction*, 1-11. On the other side of the argument are a plethora of more recent works stressing black agency during slavery's downfall. The most enduring has been, Berlin, *Destruction of Slavery*. One of the more recent is, Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, chs 2, 3. Of course, one could easily argue that without *both* parties actively working to end slavery it may have persisted much longer into Reconstruction than it did.

were magnets for slaves in the vicinity, distributing food, clothing, and fuel and offering various opportunities for employment. Conditions, of course, varied from camp-to-camp, ultimately meaning that some freed families suffered worse in them than they would have on plantations. Still, if they chose to stay, slaveowners had no incentive to treat their slaves any better than when the Old South way of life was not in danger, and some—especially the rebellious or family of known Union soldiers—found survival as slaves even more difficult during war.[23]

In Leslie Schwalm's (1997) South Carolina things were a bit different, as is almost always the case with that state. Having a majority black population and huge networks of actively communicating kin, the foundations of slavery rapidly dissolved in the face of Confederate impressment, military activity, slave resistance, and, later, Union activity. Shortages that bore heavily on slave families only increased unrest. Forced to do without so their owners' families could survive, some slaves took it upon themselves to provision their own families through theft, forage, and the renegotiation of labor arrangements. Shortages eventually worsened, and slave men were impressed to labor on Confederate lines, sending many of them (whose working conditions were deplorable) or their families (whose rations at home decreased as the intensity of labor increased) to starvation and even death. In response, slave women and their families began to steal even more to survive, insist on better working conditions and remuneration, increase the frequency of work stoppages and other forms of resistance, and eventually take flight. The situation became untenable for thousands of planters, many of whom fled to the South Carolina interior. As a result, many plantations came to be occupied by large groups of fugitive slaves who worked together to fight off depredation and cultivate an existence in the midst of upheaval. Union forces likewise threatened to undermine fugitive slave and freed family subsistence efforts—especially after General Sherman's march through South Carolina in which much productive land was burned, forage, livestock, and food stores pillaged. Thousands of slaves were forced to then rely on Union officials for subsistence. Slaves, too, participated in the looting and pillaging of a world that once subjugated them, procuring food, shelter, implements, and other goods that used to belong to those who used to hold over them the fear of the lash. The fall of sla-

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[23]Berlin et al., *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), ch 2.

very in a state that once boasted of its model labor system was dramatic.[24]

But the Union army did much more than dole out rations or facilitate the destruction of slavery; their wartime programs to create free labor systems marked the beginning of Reconstruction experiments in the Confederacy and foreshadowed postwar patterns of familial labor and subsistence. As fugitive slaves poured into Union lines, their presence became a logistical nightmare. Eventually, freedpeople were employed as cooks, nurses, and construction laborers, some paid in wages, others in rations and shelter for their families. Pay, however, was low even when it arrived, below what white men of equal employ received and not sufficient for the survival of an entire family. As available positions dwindled (despite the military use of blacks), the number of families that required support increased, and the Union army came to control a growing number of abandoned plantations, the federal government enacted a program under which they would rent out plantations to entrepreneurs who would then pay freed families to occupy them. The program was designed to kill a number of birds with one stone: restart southern cotton production; answer at least partly the "negro question"; and begin reconstructing the southern economy. The fate of these programs, of course, depended on the leadership of those who oversaw them, the proclivities of the renter, and the crop indicative of the region. Still, their existence offered a quasi-minimum wage that generated competition in a society not used to the principle, allowing many blacks to subsist at least through the war. But while these programs proved a useful wartime expedient that aided thousands of refugees, they did little to improve the long-term economic viability of ex-slave families. To Berlin and others, this was because wage labor did little to improve their chances of actually procuring land of their own. And even though he found that about 474,000 freed people participated in free labor in the Confederacy during the war, Berlin admitted that only a tiny fraction of a percentage (mostly on the South Carolina Sea Islands) were able to buy land.[25] Historian Eric Foner emphasized the positive aspects of plantation labor experiments, but he ultimately considered the "Rehearsal for Reconstruction" a failure that highlighted fundamental differences in the definition of freedom between freedmen and United States

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[24]Schwalm, *Hard Fight for We*, pt 2.
[25]Berlin, *Slaves No More*, ch 2.

policy makers. That so many slaves were "self-supporting," as Berlin put it, was beside the point; their role in the southern economy was essentially the same, only this time organized around yearly contracts instead of slave labor.[26]

As the Civil War came to a close and black southerners came to see what freedom would mean without true social reconstruction, they were faced with the immediate problems of wartime devastation: labor shortages; farm destruction; an economy in ruin; and a reordered political system. Families, white and black, who survived would be tasked with rebuilding the South while those who controlled the section's most important remaining resource, land, would end up directing and benefiting from it. On the surface, the situation was not entirely bleak, as poor white and freed families seemed to share economic commonalities that could portend interracial cooperation. Conscription, loss of land, and privation had devastated the household economies of yeomen farmers almost as much as slavery had hindered black families. But rather than beginning on an equal footing, ex-slaves were at an immediate disadvantage, lacking (for the most part) land on which to build a future or the requisite wealth with which to buy it. It would be up to northerners to elevate freedmen's socio-economic status while nurturing the commonalities between ex-slave and poor white that could through political cooperation help prevent the planting elite from reestablishing their traditional economic and political dominance.

RESTORING AND REBUILDING: RECONSTRUCTION

Postwar labor arrangements in the South were defined by a transition from free and contract labor experiments to family-based tenantry and sharecropping. A whole host of arrangements were tried, discarded, reconfigured, and negotiated, only becoming recognizable as the tenant-based system generally associated with postwar southern agriculture after nearly a decade of experimentation. During that time, black and white families struggled against landowners, the lack of credit, often oppressive local governments, and each other as they tried to eke out an existence in a war-torn, underdeveloped economy. Blacks, thrust into competition on an unequal footing, faced the burdens of adjusting to their altered position in the southern economy. Their status, however,

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[26]Foner, *Reconstruction*, 50-60.

was further exacerbated by the lack of meaningful federal aid and (often violent) contempt from poor whites, who saw their position in society threatened by the lack of a codified, easily-identifiable working-class population. To them, postwar subsistence would be hindered by a tragic contradiction in allegiances, an irony that would characterize southern history well into the twentieth century.

Because of the perception that the Civil War's fundamental contribution to American history was the end of slavery, the fate of poor whites during Reconstruction has been the subject of fewer studies than that of freedmen. Part of this is probably due to their conspicuous absence from contemporary discourse regarding their fate in a dramatically altered economy. In her description of America's perpetual "underclass," *The Dispossessed*, Jacqueline Jones carefully described the nuances of race and class that dramatized the plight of the emerging white underclass, noting this lack of contemporary acknowledgment. "Poor-white native-born laborers," she wrote, "violated the cultural and political sensibilities dictated by a caste-bound society," forcing their needs into the periphery of the debate.[27] While their trajectory in a "caste-bound society" seemed to put them a step ahead of poor blacks, the war's dislocation, death, and destruction ensured that their families would suffer similar hardships in the postwar rearrangement of labor. In fact, antebellum assumptions about poor whites persisted in the war's aftermath through the language and actions of Freedmen's Bureau agents and planters. For white families, stable employment or tenantry arrangements were hindered by attempts to attract native freedmen, white immigrants, and other non-native non-whites. Blacks and immigrants, believed planters and Bureau agents, had a history of hard field labor, whereas poor whites seemed content to live on the edge of subsistence, expending only the bare minimum amount of labor required to survive. But in Jones' narrative, these hardships were compounded by a lingering sense of white privilege that combined with the Jeffersonian meritocratic ethos to instill within whites a disdain for wage labor, especially when said work involved working side-by-side with blacks. Thus, they entered gradually into the same family-based tenant and sharecropping arrangement into which freed families were also forced, privileged only marginally by their race (usually in status of tenantry). Land ownership and the autonomy it af-

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[27]Jones, *Dispossessed*, 47.

forded plummeted in the postwar economy, enlarging the white underclass in ways that would fundamentally alter their household economies.[28]

Shedding further light on this transformation for whites was Steven Hahn's *The Roots of Southern Populism*. The war hit the Georgia Upcountry particularly hard. Agricultural production had been devastated, and the region's farms were in utter disrepair. Lacking currency and credit with which to repair their farms and put forward as collateral toward the next year's crop, landowners were forced to turn their efforts and the efforts of their tenants from mixed agriculture to cotton cultivation for commercial markets in an effort to generate capital. As a result, self-sufficiency gradually ended as food production dropped. By 1890, cotton acreage would for the first time surpass corn acreage in the Georgia Upcountry. As debts for smaller landholders accrued in the later decades of the nineteenth century, they defaulted on their loans, leading to a consolidation of land among fewer and fewer holders. Thus, tenancy and sharecropping increased, as did cotton and market dependency for poor families.[29]

But for all of its changes, the new, more oppressive labor arrangements did little to alter household labor roles for poor whites. Gendered divisions of labor had little bearing in a world in which an even greater number of poor households were forced to rely on staple production. If anything, as land consolidated and the number of white tenants and sharecroppers rose, the number of white women laboring in the fields and outside of the household increased, as did the duties of those unable to perform manual labor. But this is hardly conclusive, as few in-depth analyses of poor white families during Reconstruction have been undertaken. Laura Edwards, in her discussion of race and class in postbellum Granville County, North Carolina, found that for common white women, labor outside of the household became relatively common as an expedient to reduce dependency on tobacco and contribute to household subsistence. Similar antebellum household work roles persisted for farm women (cooking, sewing, laundry), to be sure, but their importance in tobacco cultivation increased as the staple came to dominate the county's agriculture. Thus, at least in Granville County, a successful household depended even more on the work of not just women after

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[28]Ibid., ch 2.
[29]Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, ch 4.

the Civil War, but all members of the household, including children and the elderly.[30]

There is little to suggest that it was much different elsewhere. Steven Hahn found a similar pattern in the Georgia Upcountry. "Having once embraced the dominant social relations by virtue of its own division of labor, control of productive resources, and orientation to self-sufficiency," he wrote, "the yeoman household remained the basic unit of production while at the same time moving toward specialization as a whole through its growing dependence on a market mediated by merchant capital." As a result, home manufactures declined, presumably forcing all members of the household to concentrate more on cotton, a marked departure from antebellum patterns.[31] Jacqueline Jones discovered a similar pattern across the entire rural South. Nearly every family member of the underclass household increasingly spent the little time off of the fields either fishing, hunting, chopping wood to sell, searching for or peddling forage, or hiring themselves out for meager wages—all crucial to supplementing the family's efforts toward self-sufficiency.[32]

For African Americans, freedom offered only a temporary respite from a life of toil. With the Freedman's Bureau's stated goal of reviving the southern economy, it stood to reason that contemporaries assumed that meant reviving the plantation economy. As a result, the Bureau—tasked with the contradictory duties of uplifting the socioeconomic status of former slaves while restarting the region's plantation economy—came to represent the very failures of Reconstruction foreshadowed by wartime plantation experiments. Described by Gerald Jaynes in his underappreciated work on the rise of the black working class, *Branches Without Roots* (1986), the new labor system was complex, its contours shaped by economic necessity, compromises between blacks and whites, and the sensibilities of poor and elite whites. The Bureau, most famously, was beset by weaknesses of the men who ran it. Commissioner Oliver Otis Howard's claim that too much direct federal aid would lead to a class of welfare dependents in the former Confederacy was reflected in the Bureau policy of encouraging freedmen sign contracts with

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[30]This did not mean women were not more associated with domestic labor. This debate will be addressed further below. See Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 148-152.

[31]Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, 201.

[32]Jones, *Dispossessed*, 89-95.

planters. The Bureau originally sought to organize freedmen into work gangs, but objections by freedmen (who associated gang labor with slavery and wanted fuller control over their families) and planters (who wanted to utilize the labor of entire family units) forced a move to family-based sharecropping and tenantry arrangements. As a result, the centralized discipline and production so essential to slave-based labor systems gave way to decentralized agriculture in the decade after the Civil War.

Decentralization placed the onus of household sufficiency squarely upon the shoulders of the freed family. The process occurred unevenly and varied depending on individual circumstances, agricultural staple, and extent of Bureau authority in the region, but Jaynes found that the system became ubiquitous by the mid 1870s. To him, the differences between gang and family units fostered a sort of household collective dependence that was fundamentally more exploitative, allowing planters to increase production at the expense of individual families. In a gang system, there was little incentive to work to the best of one's ability, and the result was "a great of amount of labor stinting, dissension within the work gang, and an overall smaller crop for both the labor gang and the employer."[33] With family-based, decentralized units that paid in shares, on the other hand, "the profit incentive and the sociology of work relations called for a greater supply of labor from the entire family."[34] While it was a seemingly harmless compromise by even Jaynes' admittance, it was one with onerous future implications for the survivability of black households.[35]

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[33]Gerald David Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862-1882* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 159.

[34]Ibid., 187.

[35]Ibid., chs 8-12. Several important works essentially corroborate Jaynes' narrative describing the transition from contract wages to decentralized sharecropping and tenant farming. Jaynes, though, was quite critical of Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch, who, he believed, argued "that by 1867 or 1868 sharecropping by tenant families was the dominant form of labor organization on cotton plantations." But this is a bit of a misreading. Ransom and Sutch did not argue that sharecropping came to dominate by 1867 or 1868. They merely argued that "by 1868 this new system began to gain wide popularity." Jayne's work, however, has proved lasting, appearing as a crucial element in Steven Hahn's discussion of freed politics in *Nation under Our Feet*. Jones, *Dispossessed*, 158; Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 88; Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 170.

Historians of gender, who have debated over the role of freed-women in postbellum households, have allowed us to observe how this reliance on family labor effected all members of a household. Originally, much historical analysis centered around freedwomen's tendency to withdraw from the fields in an effort to separate themselves from slavery while better supplementing their household's domestic economy. For the first scholars studying freedwomen in the 1980s, it was hard to look through contemporary arguments about labor shortages; that is, that black women were retreating from the fields in a "naive" attempt to better their living environment. Historians such as Jacqueline Jones and Gerald Jaynes implicitly accepted this assumption when they argued that freedwomen's retreat from field work was not because they were lazy or attempting to fashion a model Victorian household, but instead because their domestic labor was crucial to household self-sufficiency and autonomy from white control. Jones, for example, argued that their retreat was part of the process by which "[b]lacks struggled to weld kin and work relations into a single unit of economic and social welfare so that women could be wives and mothers first and laundresses and cotton pickers second."[36] Gerald Jaynes argued the case a bit differently. As an economic historian, he found that women withdrew from the fields as their wages decreased compared to men, and as rational agents retreated to an arena where their labor produced higher returns for the family unit: the household.[37]

Because both Jones' and Jaynes' studies lacked much regional nuance, the truth has since become more complicated. Leslie Schwalm has argued that black women on rice plantations in South Carolina did not withdraw from field work, but that their importance to the cultivation of rice, the black family, and extended kinship networks was marked by continuity from slavery to freedom.[38] Laura Edwards, on the other hand, found an entirely different and much more complex development in the tobacco-dominated county of Granville, North Carolina. In essence, while poor women (white *and* black) did not withdraw wholesale from the fields or other forms of labor outside of the household, there developed a sexual division of labor over time that emphasized women's role in the household and men's role outside of it. For Edwards, this approach

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[36]Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, ch 2, p 46.
[37]Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots*, 228-232.
[38]Schwalm, *Hard Fight for We*, chs 6, 7.

was necessary in a society structured around what Stephanie Mc-Curry described as the "small world" unit of political and economic privilege marked by male-dominated households. By consciously submitting to the ideals of male privilege and traditional masculine-feminine labor paradigms, poor women "opened the possibility for greater equality outside the private household."[39] Whatever the circumstances, it is clear that women's role in family subsistence became crucial to the freed family as tenantry and sharecropping developed.

The transition from slave to free, gang to tenant was dramatic for black households. In the early years of freedom, many freed families turned to the Freedman's Bureau for aid. But as policy quickly turned toward encouraging and enforcing labor contracts, freedmen came to rely on employers to subsist. But, as has been seen, freedmen were not entirely helpless in the process. Their insistence on greater control of their families allowed them to negotiate—often with the aid of sympathetic Bureau agents—better contract terms and eventually settle on a compromised labor system.[40] However, black families had several things aligned against them. The first, was the apprenticeship system in which white elites would literally kidnap black children for their own employ. Harsh vagrancy and childcare laws targeted either specifically at or enforced unevenly against blacks reinforced the legitimacy of the practice, which seemed to many contemporaries an attempt to reestablish slavery. As long as kin had to devote significant amounts of time fighting for what was basically the emancipation of loved ones, postwar involuntary servitude symbolized a substantial threat to household subsistence, not to mention familial autonomy and cohesiveness.

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[39]Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion*, ch 4, p 6. Edwards' argument was extremely complex, incorporating elements of race, class, and gender that cannot be discussed here. If anything, her analysis demonstrated that women's roles in the family after war were anything but simple, and probably varied significantly from region to region. For a more extensive overview of gender and Reconstruction, see Jeannie Whayne, "Southern Women during the Age of Emancipation" in Lacy K. Ford, ed., *A Companion to the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 403-422.

[40]Labor decentralization and the rise of tenant farming as (relatively fair) compromises is a theme advanced by Eric Foner, Roger Ransom, Richard Sutch and many others. To them, it was less inherent deficiencies in the organization of labor as it was the oppressive crop lien system that emerged to fill the credit needs of the region. Since blacks were nearly *all* concentrated at the bottom and de jure and de facto racism precluded much vertical economic mobility, they were disproportionately affected by it. See, for example, Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 105; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 406-408. This will be discussed in further detail below.

Another side effect of apprenticeship and vagrancy laws in the early days of Reconstruction was the de facto walling off of blacks from the land and enforcement of black labor stability. With the threat of arrest, violence, and involuntary servitude, fishing, hunting, marketing goods, and foraging was a much more dangerous prospect for freedman than for poor whites. Only with the repeal of the harshest Black Codes after the advent of Radical Reconstruction were black families allowed to travel relatively freely throughout much of the South, though some forms of subjugation would continue without formal codification.[41]

Racial interaction that threatened black familial subsistence did not end there—in fact, did not even begin there. The systemic, violent oppression of black economic advancement has a long history in the American South, and the Emancipation Proclamation signaled only a change in the nature of violence rather than a revolution in race relations. "The Reconstruction [Ku Klux] Klan was widely viewed," wrote Steven Hahn in *A Nation under Our Feet*, "especially by African Americans, as a reconstitution of the old patrol system."[42] Increasing as blacks received citizenship and voting rights and began to otherwise benefit from their status as free men, racial violence compromised whatever idea northern Republicans had of a free labor system in the South. Republican prominence in the electoral process threatened the traditional divide between poor whites and blacks, leading to elite appeals to a white solidarity that were met with surprising enthusiasm. The arguments were made even more powerful when they took on an economic tone. Successful black landowners, tenants, sharecroppers were frequent targets of intimidation and violence. As Eric Foner found, "[p]robably the largest number of violent acts stemmed from disputes arising from black efforts to assert their freedom from control by their former masters." By insisting on economic autonomy—by "attempting to leave plantations, disputing contract settlements, not laboring in the manner desired by their employers, attempting to buy or rent land, and resisting whippings"—freedmen challenged the mores of a society that was supposed to have been bested by war. But as they found, many remnants of the Old South were alive and well.[43]

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[41]Jones, *Dispossessed*, 24-27; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 200-203, 208-209.
[42]Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 270.
[43]Foner, *Reconstruction*, 121. For the economic aspects of violence, also see Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots*, 255-257; Jones, *Dispossessed*, 25-26.

Eric Foner and Steven Hahn have seemingly varying interpretations of the source of white violence (i.e., economic or political), but it seems their differences arise mainly out of focus rather than disagreement. Foner, a political and labor specialist, emphasized the white reaction to black participation in the southern electoral political system and their competitive position (in relation to poor whites) in a fundamentally altered economy. Hahn, in *A Nation under Our Feet*, focused on "Black Political Struggles," using an inclusive definition of politics that includes elements such as "kinship, labor, and circuits of communication and education (especially rumor)," which could be used as foundations for collective vertical movement.[44] In essence, Hahn described white violence principally as a backlash against black political organization and autonomy, including efforts to come together in hopes of realizing economic gains. Thus, the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Foner left much interpretive room when he added that insurrection panics seemed to underscore "what might be called the 'politicization' of everyday life that followed the demise of slavery."[45] Anything from Union League meetings to actual union meetings met the definition of "political" to contemporary whites. White violence and intimidation would undermine black "political" organization during Reconstruction, but the most devastating impact was the walling off of avenues of economic advancement.

Poor whites played a tragically principle role in blocking black families' paths to economic prosperity. That efforts to heal divisions between blacks and poor whites utterly failed signaled but one of Reconstruction's many failures. According to Gerald Jaynes, this failure was not surprising given the section's rocky (to say the least) history with interracial organization. "With racism so deeply embedded in [southern] society, the mass of laborers, white and black, were, in 1865, probably incapable of taking a stance toward one another other than one of conflict."[46] Racism had played a prominent role in southern labor since slaves were first introduced in the South. Colonization movements before and after the war retained similar goals regarding economic competition between races. Antebellum efforts to distance whites and blacks through rhetoric were bolstered in the postbellum South by attempts (some successful) to spatially separate the two, and the

[44]Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 7.
[45]Foner, *Reconstruction,* 122.
[46]Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots*, 255.

white patrols that socially divided them in slavery were replaced after emancipation by marauding paramilitary groups.[47]

Other historians, however, have offered an alternate explanation.[48] J. Mills Thornton advanced another possible reason for common white disenchantment with Radical Reconstruction, taxation. It too separated common white families and freedpeople, the vast majority of whom owned no land and very little taxable personal property. Wartime devastation and the transfer of an entire racial group to federal and state jurisdiction placed an enormous strain on local infrastructure and civic institutions. Thus, state and local taxes faced inevitable increases. But bondage left blacks little taxable wealth, leaving a good portion of the remaining tax burden to fall on the masses of common whites. Moreover, because of the lack of currency that plagued the postwar South, budgets were proportionally lower, meaning state and local services were noticeably worse despite the tax increases. From the perspective of the average poor white family, they were the ones sacrificed at the alter of civil war and emancipation; they were the ones lined up and filed into the lower ranks alongside the newly freed slaves whom they were forced to toil alongside, compete against, *and* support. Planters, motivated by their own fiscal concerns, led the charge against tax rates, a charge that, for wildly different reasons, common whites were more than willing to support politically and paramilitarily.[49] Thus, the viability of household subsistence for poor white families is inseparable from that of freed families, for they competed for the many of the same re-

[47]The rhetoric that distanced white and black household heads was defined by whites identifying themselves as "Masters of Small Worlds," of their own households, including their slaves. Slaves, on the other hand, were differentiated by their inability to be masters of anything. See McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*. Racism as a theme in the development of the postwar labor system is best described in Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots*; Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*.

[48]The reasons for postwar racial violence, of course, were legion, but only those that had demonstrable affects on black and common white families will be discussed here. The most comprehensive treatment of the failures of southern Republicanism (the lens through which most interracial cooperation is viewed during Reconstruction since it offered a few realized instances of success) is Foner, *Reconstruction*.

[49]J. Mills Thornton, III, "Fiscal Policy and the Failure of Radical Reconstruction in the Lower South" in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 349-394. Taxes were also a crucial theme of Foner's interpretation of the period. See, for example, Foner, *Reconstruction*, especially, 327-330, 588-589.

sources—or, more appropriately, for the limited access to toil on but not substantially gain from those resources.

A final crucial element that weighed heavily on both black and white families was the oppressive crop lien system that arose to meet the South's dire credit needs. In essence, merchants or individual planters (the line between them would eventually dissolve) would advance either the supplies or the credit required to purchase them to tenant families so that they could cultivate the next year's crop. The lender would be paid at the end of the year a specified amount of either cash or that year's harvest. Because staples like cotton and tobacco offered the readiest form of marketable agricultural produce, farmers were increasingly forced to turn to them, eventually ending for most the ability to self-sustain. While different staples varied, generally as acreage planted and yields increased, prices in turn decreased, forcing a cyclical dependency on staple production. Planters and merchants fostered increasing debts through usury, higher prices on goods purchased on credit, and unfair crop settlements. Thus, at the end of the year, many small farming families found themselves unable to pay off outstanding debts, defaulting on what little land they owned. As a result, many thousands of small southern landowners lost their land, became mired in perpetual debt cycles, and developed into what Jacqueline Jones described as the South's rural proletariat, its own perpetual underclass. Differentiations between the working classes that developed in the aftermath of the Civil War—small farmers, sharecroppers, renters, wage tenants—blurred until the bottom seemed to fall out, resembling an endless pit with no visible means of climbing up or out. Social and economic advancement became virtually impossible; America had its underclass.[50]

Differences between poor black and white families eventually became less rigid as both groups became mired in debt, dislocation, and poverty. In order to subsist, families turned to any and every means they could in order to survive. Foraging, hunting,

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[50]Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, chs 6-8; Jaynes, *Branches Without Roots*, chs 9, 14; Jones, *Dispossessed*, pt 2. There was considerable physical mobility in the South after the development of sharecropping, but it was mostly within the South, rather than outside. See, for instance, William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991); Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

fishing, peddling, and wage labor were not uncommon for the members of sharecropping and tenant families whose tobacco or cotton crop produced very little income on which to survive. While these methods of household subsistence were hardly different from before the war, their necessity to the family was dramatically increased. Because they grew smaller amounts of food, some families were only able to survive using these methods of scrimping and scrumping, marking a dramatic turn from antebellum subsistence patterns. Dreams of Jeffersonian subsistence farming drove many farming families before the Civil War, but with the destruction that resulted from warfare, the capital liquidation that resulted from emancipation, and the injection of four million new laborers into an isolated (not to mention completely undeveloped) labor market, that dream was forced to an abrupt end. Artificially propped up by slavery, it could only really thrive where population growth was small and land was abundant and cheap.[51] As small landowners lost their land and more of the landless turned to tenantry, cash hunger forced a dramatic increase in staple production that would define the contours of household subsistence for rural southern families well into the twentieth century.[52]

FORWARD INTO POVERTY: THE LEGACY OF RECONSTRUCTION

For all of Reconstruction's lofty goals and easy to overstate accomplishments, it is hard to consider the full breadth of the era without feeling supremely let down by the outcome. As a challenge to a deeply rooted caste system based on slavery, civil war certainly mobilized the radical action required to forcibly end slavery. But even as military troops remained in the South until 1876, a lack of focus, political timidity, recalcitrance among the majority of southern whites, and a tragic shift in national focus all contributed to the ultimate failure of what could have been one of the greatest moments in American history. Unwilling to overstep the boundaries of constitutionality, northerners and southern Republicans proved unwilling or unable to enact any sort of lasting land redistribution policy that could have healed the vast economic discrepancies within southern society brought about by a century of slavery, a dramatically segregated caste system, and a devastating

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[51]By "artificial," I mean that it precluded over four million southerners from owning land, which deflated land prices.

[52]See Jones, *Dispossessed*, ch 3; Wright, *Old South New South*.

civil war.[53] Instead, the South was left to stew in a caustic mixture of unprecedented political and economic power, white elite continuity, waning national interest, and an increasingly despondent underclass. As local elites gradually redeemed their states and localities, racial appeals and harsh reaction subverted attempts at interracial organization, in effect reconstituting the antebellum caste system within a society without slavery. Even if some antebellum elite did not survive the change in regime, those who persisted and those who rose to the top held positions of power and prestige comparable to—if not more powerful—than those of the antebellum elite. At the same time, national politics were undergoing a shift in focus toward the issues of electoral reform, fiscal conservatism, economic progress, and party politics. If Hayes' 1876 presidential victory was not technically the end of Reconstruction (it continued on a local basis under ongoing black political participation until disfranchisement in some areas), it definitely signaled the end of its promise as a means of reforming the Old South.[54]

The plight of the southern poor did not end with Redemption. Throughout the South at the end of the nineteenth century, several states enacted fencing laws that further hindered the ability of poor families to supplement their households with the benefits of an open range. In Georgia's Upcountry and Wiregrass regions, Steven

[53]Michael Les Benedict, for example, has argued that several elements of Radical Reconstruction had a distinctly conservative basis. Michael Les Benedict, "Preserving the Constitution: The Conservative Basis of Radical Reconstruction," *Journal of American History* 61 (June 1974): 65-90.

[54]Foner, *Reconstruction*, chs 11-12, epilogue; Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Era of Good Stealings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). The debate on continuity between the antebellum and postbellum elite is a longstanding one within the Reconstruction historiography. Most importantly, C. Vann Woodward argued for discontinuity of leadership between the two periods. More localized studies, however, have found that the actual circumstances varied from state-to-state. What is most important, however, is that in whatever way society was reordered, a group of people (many the same people or at least from the same family, some entirely new to the South) stood atop society, wielding a disproportionate amount of economic and political power over the rest of society in much the same way that the antebellum southern elite wielded over their world. See, for example, C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); Jonathan M. Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Carl H. Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas: Persistence in the Midst of Ruin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994).

Hahn and Mark Wetherington found patterns of separation of the lower classes from their own land followed by separation from surrounding (common right) lands through minor but ultimately catastrophic changes in local and state law. Particularly in the Wiregrass region, the practice of free-range livestock was cut off by laws that mandated that herders fence in their stock rather than force farmers or railroad companies to fence out roaming animals, meaning that small farmers and tenants with little land could no longer allow their animals to roam free and neither could they afford to let them graze on what little (decreasing) land they cultivated. As landholdings consolidated and the South became enclosed, common access to the natural resources became increasingly restricted. For many poor families, this loss signaled but another push toward a greater vulnerability to national and international markets, which, combined with the rise of staple production, would lead to further southern dislocation and poverty.[55]

As the nineteenth century rolled to a close and the twentieth emerged, it became obvious that the underclass of the American South would not gain the political voice or economic strength necessary to challenge impediments to the vertical social movement necessary to break the cycle of poverty. The promises and programs of the New South failed to uplift the region's poor, benefiting only northern industrialists and their local allies. Populism, a ray of hope in an otherwise dreary period for underclass southerners, crumbled in the face of racial appeals and political fusion. The status of southern blacks as a perennial underclass of American society was codified under Jim Crow and disfranchisement laws.[56] Even the New Deal and commercialization of agriculture failed to take poor white and black families into account for the most part, forcing their concerns even farther into the periphery.[57] World War II and the civil rights movement seemed catalysts for great change in the South, but hindsight has shown that, while quality of life has risen across the board, commercialized agriculture and the economic promises of the Sunbelt South have only marginally narrowed the gulf be-

[55]Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, ch 7; Steven Hahn, "Common Right and Commonwealth: The Stock-Law Struggle and the Roots of Southern Populism" in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction*: 51-88; Jones, *Dispossessed*, 78; Mark V. Wetherington, *The New South Comes to Wiregrass Georgia, 1860-1910* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994).

[56]Woodward, *Origins of the New South*; Robert C. McMath, *American Populism: A Social History, 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

[57]Daniel, *Breaking the Land*.

tween rich and poor, and suburbanization has actually increased the spatial and political dislocation between race and class.[58] Many programs merely transplanted the people and institutions of rural poverty into northern or midwestern ghettos, problems to be solved at some unspecified point in the future.[59] The failure of Reconstruction was not just a southern failure to realize that such problems could be confronted; it was a distinctly American failure that has shaped the political and economic contours of the white and (particularly) black underclass to this very day.

[58]Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority, Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); David E. Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer: People, Power, and Planning in Appalachia*, rev. ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994).

[59]Jones, *Dispossessed*, pts 3-4.