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Poor Whites in the Occupied South, 1861–1865

By Stephen V. Ash

Ardently engaged in her work of educating the newly freed blacks, a northern missionary in Florida in early 1865 was struck by the concurrent unfolding of another emancipation in the South. "In the removal of slavery," she mused, "almost as intolerable a burden is lifted from the 'poor Whites' or 'Crackers' as they are called here, as from the slave. We have had considerable opportunity to see this class of people who flock in here for protection . . . . They are miserably poor and ignorant and dirty. In many instances needing as much sympathy and help as the fugitive negro."[1]

Similar sentiments, and the scenes that inspired them, were repeated wherever northern armies invaded the South from 1861 to 1865. Moreover, the seeming resemblance of poor whites to slaves was not confined to the minds of Yankee reformers: Union soldiers, southern aristocrats, and others in the occupied areas habitually spoke of both groups in the same breath and often explicitly compared them. In part this linkage reflected long-standing beliefs held on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line concerning the South's lower classes, white and black. But there was more to it than that.

The conquest of the South by northern armies during the Civil War began the liberation of the region's poor whites as well as its enslaved blacks. In pursuing the extraordinary opportunities thus

[1] Joe M. Richardson, "'We Are Truly Doing Missionary Work': Letters from American Missionary Association Teachers in Florida, 1864–1874," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LIV (October 1975), 183. The author wishes to thank the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Virginia Historical Society, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for their support of the research project of which this essay is a part; and Paul H. Bergeron, Fred A. Bailey, Steven Hahn, Wayne K. Durrill, James L. Roark, and the two anonymous readers for the *Journal of Southern History* for their helpful comments. A version of this paper was presented at the Southern Historical Association annual meeting in Norfolk, Virginia, November 10, 1988.

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presented, slaves and poor whites followed remarkably parallel—but not congruent—paths, celebrated kindred victories, and stumbled over like obstacles. Furthermore, both encountered revolutionary possibilities beyond mere liberation, only to see those possibilities eventually thwarted by powerful countervailing forces.

The dual nature of emancipation in the South that was evident to many contemporary witnesses is today largely forgotten. Historians have lavished attention on the ordeal of the slaves between 1861 and 1865 while almost ignoring that of the poor whites. To help restore a more complete picture, this essay examines the wartime experience of poor whites in the Union-occupied sections of the Confederacy—not just from their own perspective but also through the eyes of southern elites and Yankee invaders.

The Union soldiers who marched into Dixie brought along more than just their muskets and cannons and a determination to subdue rebellion. They also brought a well-defined image of southern society and the place of poor whites in it. That image had been shaped by antebellum travelers' accounts, antislavery propaganda, and decades of sectional hostility. In Yankee eyes, southern white society was an anachronism from the medieval past. It comprised but two classes: a narrow oligarchy of slaveholding aristocrats who monopolized wealth, power, and education; and a broad mass of impotent poor whites, oppressed, benighted, and degraded by the stigma attached to manual labor in a slave society. Northerners believed that poor whites, like black slaves, had grown restive under the despotism of the slaveholding elite and had looked to the North for deliverance. The aristocratic "Slave Power" had therefore conspired to take the South out of the Union as much to subjugate poor whites as to preserve slavery. Southern demagogues, playing on the passions and ignorance of the poor, had seduced many into supporting secession and war. But most of the poor remained loyal to the Union and were simply cowed into submission by Rebel tyranny. This silent majority, it was presumed, anxiously awaited the liberating armies of the North.[2]

[2] Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970), 46–48, 52, 63–65, 119–20; David Brion Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge, 1969), *passim*; Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln* (2 vols.; New York and London, 1950), I, 202–15, which discusses the influential critiques of antebellum southern society by Frederick Law Olmsted and Hinton Rowan Helper; Shields McIlwaine, *The Southern Poor-White from Lubberland to Tobacco Road* (Norman, Okla., 1939), 32–38, which deals particularly with the portrayal of poor whites in the widely read antislavery novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe and James R. Gilmore; Chester Forrester Dunham, *The Attitude of the Northern Clergy Toward the South, 1860–1865* (Toledo, Ohio, 1942), 89–93, 95–96, 191–92; Howard R. Floan, *The South in Northern Eyes, 1831 to 1861* (Austin, 1958), 26, 93, 97; Howard Cecil Perkins, ed., *Northern Editorials on Secession* (2 vols.; New York and London, 1942), I, 518, 535, II, 818–19, 839, 876–77,

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Like all stereotypes, this Yankee image of southern society distorted reality. First of all, it ignored the existence of an ample middle class of southern yeomen and herdsmen, small or middling property holders who must be regarded as distinct from the lower class of propertyless poor whites. The antebellum South's poor whites, even when broadly defined as any whites who owned no land, no slaves, no herds, and little or no property of any other sort (which is the definition employed in this essay), were in fact a minority of the region's white population—albeit a substantial minority in some sections.[3]

Moreover, the Yankee image ascribed to the poor a monolithic and class-conscious character. In a very general sense, of course, the Old South's poor whites might be considered a more or less homogeneous group, for by far the greater part of them were agricultural folk. But within that broad category could be found tenant farmers who worked the marginal lands of the plantation regions; overseers employed by the large planters; hired hands on the yeoman farms of the highlands; and squatters who eked out a bare existence on the unclaimed lands of the piney woods, the sand hills, the swamps, or the mountains. Whatever cultural traits these various groups of rural-agrarian poor whites may have shared—and historians have

922–23, 975–76; Benjamin F. Butler to E. M. Stanton, June 28, 1862, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (70 vols. in 128; Washington, 1880–1901), Ser. I, Vol. XV, 503 (hereinafter cited as *OR*; all citations are to Series I); report of Thomas M. Key, June 16, 1862, *ibid.*, Vol. XI, Pt. 1, p. 1055; and S. S. Marrett to wife, May 17, 1862, in S. S. Marrett Papers (Duke University Library, Durham, N. C.).

[3] The South's poor whites have been defined in various ways. Sociologist Mildred Rutherford Mell identified them as a nonproducing class excluded from the planter-yeoman-slave economy of the antebellum South. Historian J. Wayne Flynt emphasized not only the economic marginality and abject poverty of the poor whites but also their distinctive culture. Some historians, including Avery O. Craven, distinguished the "piney folk" and "sandhillers" from the southern yeomen but lumped them all together as poor whites. And, as I. A. Newby has shown, many of the southern people themselves, before and since the Civil War, have seen the issue as one of character and have thus discriminated between the "respectable" and the "shiftless" poor. My broad definition sidesteps questions of economic origins, cultural distinctiveness, and moral worth; but it does differentiate poor whites from the southern yeomen and herdsmen, who (as Steven Hahn has shown) had peculiar interests, goals, and worldview shaped by their role as property-owning petty producers. See Mildred Rutherford Mell, "Poor Whites of the South," *Social Forces*, XVII (December 1938), 157–60; J. Wayne Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites* (Bloomington and London, 1979), 1–10; Avery O. Craven, "Poor Whites and Negroes in the Ante-bellum South," *Journal of Negro History*, XV (January 1930), 15; I. A. Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South: Social Change and Cultural Persistence, 1880–1915* (Baton Rouge and London, 1989), 9–13; and Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York and Oxford, 1983), 15–116. For historians' estimates of the size of the poor white population in various subregions of the South see Fred Arthur Bailey, *Class and Tennessee's Confederate Generation* (Chapel Hill and London, 1987), 25, 171–72; Frederick A. Bode and Donald E. Ginter, *Farm Tenancy and the Census in Antebellum Georgia* (Athens and London, 1986), 1–10, 33–34, 116–17, 125–27, 136–37, 143–46, 203; and Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People*, 5.

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pointed especially to their traditional folkways and revivalistic religion, their ignorance and illiteracy, and their rejection of the Victorian mores of the dominant culture—it is clear that they lived under quite different circumstances from one another. Furthermore, their situations contrasted even more starkly with those of other groups of southern poor whites who have received less scholarly attention, including unskilled laborers in the towns and cities (many of whom were foreign immigrants), fishermen and deckhands on the rivers and coasts, factory workers, bound apprentices, and poorhouse inmates.[4]

Given these motley constituents, it is perhaps not surprising that historians have found little evidence of class consciousness among the poor whites of the antebellum South. Nor does there seem to have been nearly as much rebelliousness among poor whites as the Yankees envisioned in their stereotype of southern society. Although resentment and unrest within the poor-white underclass were not unknown in the Old South, overt social conflict was rare. Poor whites accepted poverty, illiteracy, social inequality, and aristocratic hegemony, historians have argued, because slavery and racism set them above the lowly blacks; or because kinship, communalism, and paternalism tied them to the slaveholders; or simply because society mostly left them alone. It is not clear, however, whether these factors bound poor whites to the slaveholders' regime or merely papered over deep social cleavages and latent class conflict.[5]

What is certain, however, is that the South's slaveholding elite grew increasingly uneasy about nonslaveholders, particularly the poor whites. Aristocrats viewed most poor whites as a people without honor or respectability, a riffraff not amenable to patriarchal example or communal coercion and thus unreliable. To their long-standing concerns about lower-class unruliness and about illicit contacts between poor whites and slaves, patricians in the 1850s added new fears about the potential appeal of abolitionist and Republican propaganda to

[4] Poor-white illiteracy, folk culture, and religion are discussed in Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People*, 8, 15–32; and Bruce Collins, *White Society in the Antebellum South* (London and New York, 1985), 147–51. Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South*, 4, 7, 11–12, points out that poor whites "openly flout[ed] middle-class notions of work, accumulation, and social discipline . . ." (p. 4).

[5] An exception to the prevailing view that poor whites lacked class consciousness is McIlwaine, *Southern Poor-White*, xvii–xxiv. For examples of poor whites' resentment toward aristocrats see Bailey, *Class and Tennessee's Confederate Generation*, 60–76. Analyses of the social bonds between rich and poor, as well as other factors that limited the poor whites' discontent, are in Paul H. Buck, "The Poor Whites of the Ante-Bellum South," *American Historical Review*, XXXI (October 1925), 52–54; Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People*, 10–14; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 91–93; and Collins, *White Society in the Antebellum South*, 6, 8, 151, 153–59.

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the nonslaveholders of the South. As historians have shown, this was a prime motive behind secession. The creation of the Confederacy failed to soothe the slaveholders' nerves, however, and the outbreak of war only aggravated their doubts about the loyalty of the yeomen and the poor whites—not to mention the slaves. As the war continued, the suffering of the plain folk—especially the poor—and their cries for relief further alarmed the apprehensive aristocrats.[6]

The anxieties of the southern elite took on a special urgency under the threat of northern invasion. When General George B. McClellan's Union army advanced toward Richmond in the spring of 1862, for instance, a Confederate commander worried that poor whites and free blacks who fished on the James River might volunteer to serve as guides for the enemy. "I shall order these free negroes to be arrested," he wrote, "and the fishing skiffs to be destroyed—those of low white men as well as those of the negroes. Some of the whites are as dangerous as the negroes." Later that year, as Union forces menaced the coast of North Carolina, one of a group of "leading farmers and citizens of Bertie County" warned that nonslaveholders might even join the Yankee army. "The substantial men of the county," he declared, "dread to see the others made their enemies."[7]

When Confederate authority collapsed in the face of advancing northern armies, elites feared the worst—and sometimes the poor whites obligingly confirmed their fears. A southern general reported that when he arrived in Nashville on February 17, 1862, a "rabble" had gathered at the wharf to loot government boats. In the following days other mobs assailed warehouses and "often had to be scattered at the point of the saber"; on February 21, 1862, the Nashville fire company was called out to hose down a violent crowd of Irish laborers

[6] The attitude of antebellum southern elites toward "poor white trash" is exemplified in D. R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New York, 1860), 250–83. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York and Oxford, 1982), 46, notes the perception of poor whites as a class without honor. On contacts between poor whites and slaves see Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 22–25, 641–42. The slaveholders' fear of an alliance between nonslaveholders (including yeomen as well as poor whites) and Republicans is analyzed in Foner, *Free Soil*, 314–15; J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterlands* (Middletown, Conn., 1985), 64–93, 137–38; and Michael P. Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia* (Baton Rouge, 1977), xx, 85–94. The aristocrats' anxieties following the outbreak of war are discussed in James L. Roark, *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 1977), 35–67.

[7] Henry A. Wise to D. H. Hill, May 30, 1862, in *OR*, Vol. XI, Pt. 3, pp. 561–62 (first quotation on p. 562); John Pool to Zebulon B. Vance, September 18, 1862, *ibid.*, Vol. XVIII, 745–47 (second quotation on p. 745; third on p. 747). See also George E. Pickett to S. Cooper, December 13, 1861, *ibid.*, Vol. V, 994; M. Lovell to G. W. Randolph, June 19, 1862, in Records of the Louisiana State Government, 1850–1888 ("Rebel Archives") (Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge).

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who were plundering the remaining commissary stores. Immediately upon the evacuation of Savannah in December 1864 there appeared what one witness described as "a lawless mob of low whites and negroes pillaging and setting fire to property . . . ." Four months later, in Mobile, poor whites rioted while carrying off supplies abandoned by the departing Rebel forces; but this outbreak, as one resident reported, was "soon quelled by the citizens, who appear[ed] with loaded guns & various weapons."[8]

Certain that such anarchy and unrest would necessarily follow in the wake of Confederate retreat, some elites took decisive action in the interim before the appearance of the Yankee army. As Union troops prepared to enter New Orleans in 1862, the municipal authorities ordered a crackdown on "the rougher elements of our population," as the *Daily Picayune* reported. The police—reinforced by a hastily organized corps of "respectable" citizens—spread throughout the city, breaking up gatherings of poor whites and arresting many for "dangerous and suspicious" conduct. The newspaper's editor, pointing to the "unsettled and tumultuous" conditions "which have loosened the bands of authority and the habits of obedience," commended the city fathers. "Extraordinary efforts are called for among the reflecting and order loving portion of the community," he said, "to repress manifestations of disorder, maintain peace and defend the rights of property." Order and property seemed secure for the moment, but at least one resident of the city wondered "how the Yankees are likely to organise matters to avoid starvation, bloodshed & general trouble amongst the lower classes."[9]

The moment of truth often arrived for aristocrats, poor whites, and Yankees alike when Union armies marched into a region of the South. For many northerners, first impressions corroborated old stereotypes about the South. A Union officer in Murfreesboro in Middle Tennessee declared in 1862 that "the poor whites are as poor as rot, and the rich are very rich. There is no substantial well-to-do middle class here." An officer writing from Island No. 10 similarly noted that in West Tennessee the wealthy citizens lived in "large ellegant Houses . . . and live well, are ve[ry] aristocratic. But the

[8] Report of John B. Floyd, March 22, 1862, in *OR*, Vol. VII, 427–29 (first quotation on p. 428; second on p. 429); James A. Hoobler, ed., "The Civil War Diary of Louisa Brown Pearl," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XXXVIII (Fall 1979), 317; report of John W. Geary, January 6, 1865, in *OR*, Vol. XLIV, 280 (third quotation); and Katharine M. Jones, *Heroines of Dixie: Confederate Women Tell Their Story of the War* (Indianapolis and New York, 1955), 389 (fourth quotation).

[9] New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, April 30 (first and second quotations), May 1 (third and fourth quotations), 1862; Charles Nathan to Loulou, May 1, 1862 (fifth quotation), in Edward Clifton Wharton Family Papers, Special Collections (Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge).

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poor are the most misserable looking thing[s] you ever saw, a great deal worse off than the negroes, ragged, and dirty, and they live in little Misserable Huts . . . ." A northern journalist who visited the Virginia tidewater region confirmed that the peculiar nature of southern society had left the poor whites "certainly as debased and degraded as the poor negroes . . . ."[10]

Northern assumptions about the unionism of the poor whites were likewise ratified by initial impressions. A newspaper correspondent aboard one of the boats carrying the first Union troops into Memphis noticed that "as their mooring-lines were thrown on shore they were seized by dozens of persons in the crowd, and the crews were saved the trouble of making fast. This was an evidence that the laboring class, the men with blue shirts and shabby hats, were not disloyal." Moreover, Yankees found evidence of the brutal oppression of the loyal poor that was an article of northern faith. A Federal soldier in Mississippi described poor women who "have had to hide for months with their families among the rocks and hills, to obtain shelter from the bitterness of their rebel neighbors." Where manifestations of unionism were absent, northerners surmised that the masses were, as one Union commander put it, still "overawed by the tyranny of [secessionist] opinion and power that has prevailed . . . ."[11]

These impressions, and the preconceptions they validated, strongly influenced northerners' relations with southern civilians throughout the war, particularly their policy toward poor whites. That policy was threefold. First, believing that poor whites had always led a precarious and marginal existence and since 1861 had endured more than their share of wartime privation, Union commanders provided direct relief to the poor. In the Department of the Gulf, for example, provost marshals were distributing rations to twenty-four thousand

[10] John Beatty, *Memoirs of a Volunteer, 1861–1863* (1879; rpt. ed., New York, 1946), 96 (first quotation); Theodore C. Blegen, ed., *The Civil War Letters of Colonel Hans Christian Heg* (Northfield, Minn., 1936), 81 (second quotation); Joel Cook, *The Siege of Richmond: A Narrative of the Military Operations of Major-General George B. McClellan During the Months of May and June, 1862* (Philadelphia, 1862), 151 (third quotation). See also Alvin Voris to wife, September 20, 1862, in Alvin Coe Voris Papers (Virginia Historical Society, Richmond); and Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers* (New York, 1988), 91, 109–12. Mitchell notes the difficulty some northerners had in judging social status in the South. Lacking, at least early in the war, an awareness of the rural middle class, they sometimes confused poor and yeomen whites. Historians using contemporary northern accounts must scrutinize them carefully to decide whether the "poor whites" described were the truly propertyless lower class.

[11] Thomas W. Knox, *Camp-Fire and Cotton-Field: Southern Adventure in Time of War . . .* (rpt. ed., New York, 1969), 182 (first quotation); George H. Cadman to Esther Cadman, November 5, 1863 (second quotation), in George Hovey Cadman Papers (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill); and D. C. Buell to Andrew Johnson, March 11, 1862 (third quotation), in *OR*, Vol. X, Pt. 2, p. 612. See also W. H. Sidell to J. B. Fry, August 1, 1862, *ibid.*, Vol. XVI, Pt. 2, p. 243.

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poor-white men, women, and children by September 1863. In many cases Union authorities raised funds for poor relief by assessing the wealthy. Moreover, northern commanders often exempted the poor from army requisitions and foraging.[12]

The belief that the majority of poor whites chafed under the despotism of the Slave Power, secretly harbored unionist sentiments, and could be won over as allies shaped the second aspect of Union policy. Occupation authorities endeavored to bring out the latent unionism of the poor whites by smiting the aristocracy with an iron fist while encouraging the poor with a velvet-gloved hand. As a Yankee officer stationed in Tennessee put it, "the bad rich men must feel our power, and the masses must be disenthralled." Furthermore, northerners deliberately stirred up class antagonism. Some weeks after the capture of Memphis, for example, the editor of the *Union Appeal* (himself a Federal officer) summoned the "working men of Memphis" to a patriotic meeting to speak out against the South's ruling elites, who "looked upon all labor as disgraceful, and the white laborer as *less* than a negro . . . . Come out, working men, mechanic and laborer; enter your protest against tyranny . . . ." A correspondent of a Nashville newspaper that was published under Federal aegis reminded his readers about life before the war, when "slaveholders possessed and exercised all social powers. A non-slaveholder was nothing but a poor white man, and his wife and daughters were nothing but poor white trash. . . . Non-slaveholders of Tennessee, . . . What have we to gain by longer remaining subservient to a heartless, domineering aristocracy . . . ?"[13]

[12] N. P. Banks to H. W. Halleck, September 26, October 15, 1863, in *OR*, Vol. XXVI, Pt. 1, pp. 735, 765; General Orders No. 25, Department of the Gulf, May 9, 1862, *ibid.*, Vol. VI, 724–25; report of A. E. Burnside, March 21, 1862, *ibid.*, Vol. IX, 200; report of Isaac S. Burrell, December 29, 1862, *ibid.*, Vol. XV, 204; W. T. Sherman to E. F. Winslow, August 8, 1863, *ibid.*, Vol. XXX, Pt. 1, p. 7; General Field Orders No. 8, Army of West Mississippi, March 23, 1865, *ibid.*, Vol. XLIX, Pt. 2, p. 67; Nashville *Dispatch*, December 14, 1862; John Davenport to E. B. Grubb, August 8, 1864, in Letters Sent, Office of the Provost Marshal General, Army of the James, E-5201, Records of the U. S. Army Continental Commands, 1821–1920, Record Group 393 (National Archives and Records Service, Washington; hereinafter cited as RG 393); Portsmouth, Virginia, City Council Minutes, October 4, December 5, 1862 (Virginia State Library and Archives, Richmond).

[13] M. Mundy to Andrew Johnson, June 8, 1862, in LeRoy P. Graf, Ralph W. Haskins, and Paul H. Bergeron, eds., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson* (8 vols. to date; Knoxville, 1967–), V, 457–58 (quotation on p. 458); Memphis *Union Appeal*, July 18, 1862; and Nashville *Daily Times and True Union*, February 22, 1864. See also Curran Pope to Andrew Johnson, April 19, 1862, in Graf, Haskins, and Bergeron, eds., *Papers of Andrew Johnson*, V, 311. Examples of the Federal policy of punishing and subjugating aristocrats are in Stephen V. Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860–1870: War and Peace in the Upper South* (Baton Rouge and London, 1988), 158–61. The lenient policy toward poor whites is illustrated in W. T. Sherman to William Vandever, August 14, 1864, in *OR*, Vol. XXXVIII, Pt. 5, pp. 502–3.

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The third aspect of Union policy reflected the growing conviction among northerners that the South's backward social system was the root cause of rebellion and therefore must be reconstructed in the image of the modern, bourgeois North. "The more we learn of the despicable social condition of the South," a Union soldier wrote from North Carolina in 1863, "the stronger appears the need of the purification which, in the Providence of God, comes of the fire and the sword." Such radical reform demanded not only the overthrow of the autocratic Slave Power but also the uplifting of the debased southern masses, particularly by means of education. The ignorance of the poor whites, it was believed, had paved the way for Slave Power ascendancy and had even enabled secessionist demagogues to dupe some poor whites into supporting the rebellion. A Federal commander in North Carolina ordered that schools be established for the poor-white children in his district as a remedy for their "vice and ignorance" and in the hope that when "properly instructed, . . . they will not in the future attempt to revolutionize the Government and destroy its noble institutions." The Reverend J. P. Thompson, president of the American Union Commission—a northern benevolent society devoted to caring for poor whites inside Federal lines—proclaimed his intention to educate all the youngsters within his power and then "sow that land of rebellion thick with these regenerated children."[14]

The South's poor whites, for their own part, spurned any passive role in the unfolding drama of invasion and occupation. Like the slaves, they became leading actors in the momentous events of 1861 to 1865, striking out on their own in ways that sometimes confirmed, sometimes contradicted, the expectations of Yankee invaders and southern elites.

In the first place, many of the poor sincerely welcomed the northern soldiers as liberators, and some poor whites aided the Union armies. A Yankee general leading his troops through hill country

[14] Corporal [pseudonym for Zenas T. Haines], *Letters from the Forty-fourth Regiment M. V. M.: A Record of the Experience of Nine Months' Regiment in the Department of North Carolina in 1862-3* (Boston, 1863), 90 (first quotation); General Orders No. 32, Army of North Carolina, March 11, 1864, in *OR*, Vol. XXXIII, 668-69 (second quotation on p. 668); American Union Commission, *Speeches . . . in the Hall of Representatives, Washington, Feb. 12, 1865* (New York, 1865), 18 (third quotation) and *passim*. See also Randall C. Jimerson, *The Private Civil War: Popular Thought During the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge and London, 1988), 131-35; Dunham, *Attitude of the Northern Clergy*, 208-11, 229-31; Olive S. Ballon to Andrew Johnson, December 5, 1864, in Graf, Haskins and Bergeron, eds., *Papers of Andrew Johnson*, VII, 331; Henry L. Swint, ed., *Dear Ones at Home: Letters from Contraband Camps* (Nashville, 1966), 104, 147; American Union Commission, *The American Union Commission: Its Origin, Operations, and Purposes . . .* (New York, 1865), *passim*; and Ira V. Brown, *Lyman Abbott, Christian Evolutionist: A Study in Religious Liberalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), 37-40.

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in Middle Tennessee in 1863 described how poor-white men who had been in hiding from Confederate conscription "rushed into the road and joined our column, expressing the greatest delight at our coming, and at beholding again what they emphatically called 'our flag'." A Union officer scouting for enemy troops in northern Virginia in 1862 reported that most of the inhabitants were disloyal and uncooperative, but "the negroes and poor whites . . . are very willing to communicate all the information they are in possession of." Especially gratifying to the Yankees was the enlistment of poor whites as volunteers. "We are getting a good many recruits from this country," an Illinois soldier wrote from northern Alabama in 1862. "All poor people, in fact that is the only kind that pretend to any Unionism here. There are now three full companies . . . and many more coming in."[15]

Furthermore, the cooperation of the poor whites with the invaders often demonstrated class resentment. A northern soldier serving in Virginia observed that "there are two classes of white people in this country—the poor class and the wealthy or aristocratic class. The poor ones are very bitter against the others; [they] charge them with bringing on the war, and are always willing to show where the rich ones have hid their grain, fodder, horses, &c. Many of them tell me it is a great satisfaction to them to see us help ourselves from the rich stores of their neighbors."[16]

To most poor whites, however, restoring Federal authority and encouraging retribution against aristocrats were less important than simply surviving; and in the occupied sections, where physical destruction and economic disruption decimated food supplies and threw thousands out of work, survival was no easy task. All southerners suffered, but the poor were hardest hit. The distribution of rations by the Union occupiers was rarely adequate, and poor whites often endured agonizing privation. A Federal officer described the Tennessee highlands in the winter of 1864, for example, as "bordering upon famine. . . . [E]ven those formerly wealthy are utterly reduced, and many of the poorer are now actually starving."[17]

The result was a perceptible and growing restlessness among the

[15] Report of J. J. Reynolds, February 10, 1863, in *OR*, Vol. XXIII, Pt. 2, p. 55; report of D. Porter Stowell, May 5, 1862, *ibid.*, Vol. XII, Pt. 1, p. 453; and Charles W. Wills, *Army Life of an Illinois Soldier* . . . (Washington, 1906), 124. On the recruitment of poor whites in another part of the occupied South see Michael K. Honey, "The War Within the Confederacy: White Unionists of North Carolina," *Prologue*, XVIII (Summer 1986), 86–88.

[16] Alfred Pleasonton to John Parke, November 20, 1862, in *OR*, Vol. XXI, 776. See also G. M. Stewart to Andrew Johnson, February 10, 1864, in Graf, Haskins, and Bergeron, eds., *Papers of Andrew Johnson*, VI, 611.

[17] Report of Henry K. McConnell, February 10, 1864, in *OR*, Vol. XXXII, Pt. 1, p. 156. See also William King Diary, August 3, 1864, in William King Papers (Southern Historical Collection); and Nashville *Dispatch*, December 7, 1862.

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poor. Numbers of them tramped through the countryside seeking work or charity. Others clustered around army posts to trade with the Yankees or to do odd jobs or scavenge at deserted campsites or just plead for handouts. Many abandoned the ravaged countryside in favor of the occupied towns, only to find worse conditions. A resident of Marietta, Georgia, behind General William T. Sherman's lines, noted that "the poor are gathering thick in and about town. May God provide for them during the winter, [my] trust in man is poor." In Gallatin, Tennessee, a civil official worried about "what is to be done with the inmates of the Poor House, they are now living on nothing but bread and . . . some of them are so naked they are very bad objects to look at and . . . [some] are going from place to place begging . . . ."[18]

Many southerners in the occupied regions viewed the restive and disaffected poor with increasing apprehension. A Virginia planter complained that "we are very much troubled in this co[unty] with deserters . . . men of the low class. . . . [T]hese scamps . . . get their living by pilfering from those who have gone to do battle." Another Virginian feared that these poor-white deserters "are ready to act as spies & emissaries, to report falsehoods on every man they dislike, & are in league with the enemy & negroes . . . . They have already carried in lists of the names of gentlemen as rabid secessionists . . . ."[19]

Alarmed and helpless in the face of lower-class unruliness, some southern property owners swallowed their pride and beseeched the Yankee occupiers for aid. In 1864 a Louisiana planter informed the local provost marshal that poor whites in his neighborhood were stealing pigs and chickens and perpetrating other mischief: "idle people of bad character," he called them, "disturbers of the peace we would be glad to be clear of." In another Louisiana parish, planters petitioned the provost marshal to form a police patrol, complaining

[18] Mary Fielding Diary, July 13, 1862 (Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery); J. W. Sturtevant to [?], May 18, 1864, in Press Copies of Letters Sent by Provost Marshal, Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, E-1480, RG 393; George H. Cadman to Esther Cadman, May 18, 1863, Cadman Papers; Nashville *Daily Times and True Union*, December 12, 1864; King Diary, August 21, 24, 29 (first quotation), 1864; John W. Brooks to E. A. Paine, February 24, 1864 (second quotation), in Andrew Johnson Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington).

[19] Daniel Jones to John Letcher, November 6, 1862 (first quotation), in Virginia Executive Papers (Virginia State Library and Archives, Richmond); Colin Clarke to Powhatan Page, n.d. [1862] (second quotation), and Colin Clarke to Maxwell Clarke, December 7, 1863, in Maxwell Troax Clarke Papers (Southern Historical Collection). See also William Stoddert to R. S. Ewell, May 24, 1865, in Polk-Brown-Ewell Papers, *ibid.*; K. H. Lewis to wife, July 27, 1863, in Kenelm H. Lewis Papers (North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh); E. H. Dean case, MM 1743, in Court Martial Case Files, 1809–1938, Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General, Record Group 153 (National Archives).

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that "there are many white Persons and Negros running about . . . without any ostensible means of a livelyhood and we are daily Robbed of our goods and chattles . . . ."[20]

As the war went on there was mounting evidence that poor whites had something in mind beyond unionism, revenge, and rowdiness. More and more, their restlessness betrayed a strong streak of opportunism. Ultimately it became clear that many of the poor were determined to use the unprecedented opportunity of invasion and occupation to secure a better life.

Significantly, despite the uncertainties of living within the Federal lines, southerners outside the lines were increasingly drawn to the occupied regions. Historians are familiar with the hegira of the black contrabands, but few have recognized the extent to which whites flocked to the Yankees. These white fugitives may well have equaled or exceeded in numbers the more familiar white refugees who fled from the advancing Union armies and sought sanctuary behind Rebel lines.

The great majority of these white refugees-in-reverse who abandoned the Confederacy were poor. Southern white yeomen renounced the Confederacy in large numbers, as many historians have noted. But because they were landholders with property to protect, yeomen for the most part remained on their farms. Many poor whites, on the other hand, with little to lose and much to gain, sought their fortune with the Yankees.[21]

No single motive drove these poor whites. Some were young apprentices fleeing servitude; others were simply helpless, such as the three women who came into the lines at Hampton, Virginia, in 1861, "alleging that they are poor, without friends or protectors." Many were escaping hard times in the Confederacy, which were especially acute in those regions bordering the Union lines. Among these was a day laborer who arrived at a Federal post in Florida in 1862: "I came to Pensacola to find work," he said, "and something to eat." A runaway slave who arrived at that post about the same time reported

[20] Adam Hawthorn to Captain Stearns, March 1864, in Letters Received and Sent by Provost Marshal, St. Mary's Parish, Louisiana, E-1519, RG 393; petition of planters of right bank, January 1, 1864, in Letters Received by Provost Marshal, Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, E-1482, *ibid.*

[21] The literature on yeoman unrest is voluminous, but see especially Georgia Lee Tatum, *Disloyalty in the Confederacy* (Chapel Hill, 1934), 3–23; Stephen E. Ambrose, "Yeoman Discontent in the Confederacy," *Civil War History*, VIII (September 1962), 259–68; Paul D. Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (Baton Rouge and London, 1978), x–xi, 104–35; Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate Nation: 1861–1865* (New York and other cities, 1979), 233–35; Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism*, 121–33; and Clarence L. Mohr, "Slavery and Class Tensions in Confederate Georgia," *Gulf Coast Historical Review*, IV (Spring 1989), 60–64. For evidence that the majority of white refugees were poor see note 24 below.

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that "the poor people [outside the lines] all want the Yankees to take the country so they can get enough to eat. They hear there is plenty of provision in Pensacola." A Union soldier in northern Alabama wrote compassionately of "the poor, wretched refugees that come here . . . . Old men and women, children of all ages, young women without clothing enough even for decency, come here daily for food . . . ."[22]

For many poor whites the Union posts were havens from Rebel oppression. "Sir you have no idea of the suffering among the poor families," an Alabama man told the governor in a letter warning about the effects of Confederate conscription: "I have known a great many men to leave & have [gone] in the Enemys lines. I have heard numbers say they would also go if they were put in the service before they made their crops." The resentment felt by poor whites was most vividly exemplified by the embittered Confederate deserters who sought refuge with the Yankees. "I have left the Rebbel army," a Louisiana man told his mother and sisters in 1864, "and I intend in a few days to Seek protection in the federal lines. . . . I will not be governed by a people where their is no justice . . . . [T]hey press Cattle and hogs and take the last feed of corn from a mans Wife and Children. . . . I am determed in my mind not to Serve them any longer they have allways made laws to oppress the poor Since this war comenced . . . ." Another deserter wrote home in 1864 to announce that he had joined the Union army: "I got tired of fighting for a lot of old Rich Planters . . . . Here I was fighting to save their negroes and property and them remaining at home, living in all the luxuries of live, and if a poor soldier went to get anything

[22] Rush C. Hawkins to John E. Wool, September 21, 1861, in *OR*, Vol. IV, 619; H. M. Burleigh to John E. Wool, October 20, 1861, in Reports Received, Department of Virginia and North Carolina, Provost Marshal Records, E-5175, RG 393 (first quotation); Journal of Events of Provost Marshal, Pensacola, Florida, June 20, July 10, 1862, and *passim*, E-1711, *ibid.*; and George H. Cadman to Esther Cadman, November 23, 1863, March 30, 1864 (fourth quotation), Cadman Papers. The extreme hardship experienced in regions just outside the Union lines, which were exposed to Confederate as well as Union impressment and pillaging, is documented in Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana, Police Jury Minutes, January 28, 1865, Special Collections (Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University); Bertie County, North Carolina, County Court Minutes, December 12, 1863 (North Carolina State Archives); petition of Tishomingo County citizens, n.d. [1865], in Charles Clark Correspondence, Mississippi Governors' Papers (Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson); C. Beckerdite to John J. Pettus, November 23, 1862, John J. Pettus Correspondence, *ibid.*; David Outlaw to George Wortham, June 26, 1864, Thomas Merritt Pittman Collection (North Carolina State Archives); S. K. Rayburn to John G. Shorter, July 10, 1862, Governor John G. Shorter Papers (Alabama Department of Archives and History); petition No. 395, n.d. [1864], in Memorials and Petitions, Legislative Records (Confederate), E-175, War Department Collection of Confederate Records, Record Group 109 (National Archives); and Malcolm C. McMillan, *The Disintegration of a Confederate State: Three Governors and Alabama's Wartime Home Front, 1861–1865* (Macon, Ga., 1986), 34, 44, 91–92.

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from them they would charge him. . . . Them are the kind of people that are here in the South."[23]

Propelled by discontent, beckoned by opportunity, and without the encumbrance of property, poor whites headed for Union-held territory. Some settled temporarily in refugee camps and then went north to work. Others found employment on plantations recently deserted by slaves. But many had a more ambitious goal: securing land of their own. Without Federal assistance or encouragement, poor whites in considerable numbers began occupying abandoned land in and near Union lines. In Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, for example, squatters took over parish-owned land behind the Mississippi River levee that had been leased to planters who had since fled. At Amelia Island, off the northeastern coast of Florida, the provost marshal took note of several farms vacated by Rebel owners: "Some have been left in the care of their negroes," he said, "while others have been farmed by white persons who have taken possession of the place." From Bolivar County, Mississippi, came a report that "refugees from the hills are flocking in & settling all the vacant places . . . . Many of them seem to have no means of livilihood. It is also said they are harboring [Confederate] deserters."[24]

The class resentment and ambition evinced by many poor whites in the wake of the Yankee invasion had their counterpart, of course,

[23] J. L. Sheffield to Thomas H. Watts, April 22, 1864, Governor Thomas H. Watts Papers (Alabama Department of Archives and History); D. W. Courtney to mother and sisters, February 7, 1864, in Joel A. Stokes and Family Papers, Special Collections (Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University); and [?] to Aunt, April 8, 1864, in Anonymous Letter, Civil War Collection (Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville). See also Blegen, ed., *Civil War Letters*, 241, 242; Statements of Escaped Union Prisoners, Refugees, and Confederate Deserters, Department of the South, *passim*, E-4294, RG 393; Statements of Rebel Prisoners and Refugees, Newport Barracks, North Carolina, *passim*, E-949, *ibid.*; and McMillan, *Disintegration of a Confederate State*, 41, 87–88.

[24] Frank A. Handy Diary, December 24, 1864 (Duke University Library, Durham, N. C.); Lucius Bright to Elizabeth Elliot, March 5, 1865, in Collins D. Elliott Papers (Tennessee State Library and Archives); Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, Police Jury Minutes, October 2, 1865, Special Collections (Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University); Charles Coolidge to post adjutant, June 13, 1865, in Letters and Endorsements Sent by Provost Marshal, Fernandina, Florida, E-1598, RG 393 (first quotation); W. E. Montgomery to Charles Clark, January 26, 1864, in Charles Clark Correspondence, Mississippi Governors' Papers (second quotation). Conditions in the overcrowded white refugee camps were notoriously bad, a problem only partly alleviated by the work of the American Union Commission and other benevolent organizations. See for example James F. Hall to W. L. M. Burger, October 25, 1864, in Letters Sent by Provost Marshal General, Department of the South, E-4270, RG 393; Memphis *Bulletin*, October 15, 1864, April 13, 16, 1865; Gerald Schwartz, ed., *A Woman Doctor's Civil War: Esther Hill Hawks' Diary* (Columbia, S. C., 1984), 111; Nashville *Daily Times and True Union*, March 14, 23, May 4, 1864; and American Union Commission, *Speeches*, 8–18. These last three sources indicate that the great majority of refugees were poor whites. Some poor whites, along with freed blacks, may have been able to purchase confiscated land very cheaply at Federal tax commission auctions. See P. J. Staudenraus, ed., "A War Correspondent's View of St. Augustine and Fernandina: 1863," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLI (July 1962), 65.

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in the dramatic self-emancipation of the slaves. While aristocratic masters and mistresses stood by impotently, poor whites and slaves alike seized the moment, defied their oppressors, proclaimed the jubilee, and voted with their feet for liberty and opportunity. Moreover, as poor whites emerged from the crumbling Confederacy brandishing their new freedom, some glimpsed more opportunities ahead. A few, determined to test the limits of their power, defiantly challenged the South's ruling class, staked a claim to its riches, and thereby threatened to transform liberation into revolution. Although that threat never became a reality, for a brief moment white society in the South seemed to stand on the brink of vast upheaval.

As the South's elite watched in horror, some poor whites, emboldened by the presence or proximity of Union troops, grew audacious and aggressive. While Sherman's troops occupied Rome, Georgia, one woman wrote, the town was engulfed by a wave of thievery, "some by the Yankees and a great deal by the poor people and negroes . . . . [T]he white women would come in Mother's yard in the broad daytime and steal peaches and apples, and she did not dare say anything to them for fear that they would tell the Yankees some great story on her. The poor people generally were 'hand in glove' with the Yankees . . . ." In another town, near the Georgia coast, gun-toting poor-white women rioted, pillaged a Confederate government warehouse, and burned houses. "[T]he people of property were much alarmed," a Confederate general wrote, "as the women boasted that they had plenty of men to back them if resisted, and they stated that there were a number of deserters in the Okefenokee Swamp who . . . would soon commence carrying off the negroes, as the Yankees had offered them $50 in gold for every negro they run off." In 1864 a witness in Orange and Brevard counties on Florida's eastern coast reported "quite an exciting time . . . , some of the citizens . . . have made arrangements to go to the Yankees . . . ." According to widespread rumor there, families would be taken into the Federal lines, would receive rations and three hundred dollars in gold for every slave they brought in, and eventually would be given land. "This is their own statement, they are to be colonized from Cape Romain to the Miami River, and are to receive protection . . . . Their plans after they become settled are, to carry all cattle and negroes they can get a hold of to the Yankees."[25]

[25] Ellen Cooley to Julia Brookes, March 11, 1865, Iveson L. Brookes Papers (Duke University Library); L. McLaws to Charles Stringfellow, June 29, 1864, in *OR*, Vol. XXXV, Pt. 2, p. 544; and M. E. Baker to Joseph Finegan, January 14, 1864, in Letters and Reports of Provost Marshal, Pensacola, Florida, E-1710, RG 393. See also Sarah R. Espy Diary, July 29, 1864 (Alabama Department of Archives and History).

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In the occupied counties of eastern North Carolina there were repeated assaults on property by poor whites who had allied themselves with the Yankees or joined the Union army. One plantation lady denounced them as "the offscouring of the people & foreigners, people who can neither read or write . . . poor ignorant wretches who cannot resist a fine uniform and . . . liberty to help themselves without check to their rich neighbors belongings." In Washington County, according to the report of a resident, "the Union men . . . united and bid defyance to ownership of property . . . and went plundering and destroying with impunity in every direction . . . ." A planter in Hyde County pleaded for the return of Confederate troops in order "to have lawless & dollarless men kept in restraint. . . . [S]ome of those fellows have already said they will cultivate any mans land they please."[26]

In 1863 in the highlands of Middle Tennessee, L. Virginia French, the wife of a wealthy landowner, described in her diary a gang of renegade Yankees and other outlaws who robbed the residents of Beersheba Springs—a resort with a large hotel and private cottages where Mrs. French was a guest. After one raid on July 25 she suspected that "the mountain people assisted too." The next day all doubts vanished. "Scenes enacted here today beggar description," French declared. "Early in the morning the sack of the place began. . . . [T]he mountain people came in crowds and with vehickles of all sorts and carried off everything they could from both hotel and cottages. . . . Gaunt, ill-looking men and slatternly, rough barefooted women stalking and racing to and fro, eager as famished wolves for prey, hauling out furniture . . . . A band would rush up and take possession of a cottage—place a guard, drive off every one else, stating that this was theirs . . . ." She spied one woman leaving a cottage laden with theology, Latin, and French books: "The woman, who did not know a letter to save her life, said 'she had some children who were just beginin' to read and . . . she wanted to encourage em!'" French concluded bitterly that "'the masses' had it all their

[26] Beth G. Crabtree and James W. Patton, eds., *"Journal of a Secesh Lady": The Diary of Catherine Ann Devereaux Edmondston, 1860–1866* (Raleigh, 1979), 242–43 (first quotation on p. 243); J. Spruill to Josiah Collins, April 22, 1863, Josiah Collins Papers (North Carolina State Archives); and James D. Limmons to J. R. Donnell, March 28, May 2 (third quotation), 1864, Bryan Family Papers (Duke University Library). See also William C. Everitt to George Wortham, May 31, 1864, Pittman Collection; Sallie B. Dillard to Priscilla Bailey, March 26, 1863, in John Lancaster Bailey Papers (Southern Historical Collection); Girard W. Phelps to Josiah Collins, March 14, 1863, Collins Papers; and Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850–1900* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 63. One of the very few in-depth studies of the wartime experience of poor whites is Wayne K. Durrill, *War of Another Kind: A Southern Community in the Great Rebellion* (New York, 1990), Chapter 2, which shows how poor whites in Washington County, North Carolina, struggled not only for property but for political power.

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own way on this memorable day,—the aristocrats went down for the nonce, and Democracy—Jacobinism—and Radicalism in their rudest forms reigned triumphant." The mountain folk continued their looting of Beersheba Springs all the next day, and depredations on a smaller scale continued through the summer.[27]

Poor-white insurgency and elite anxiety were also starkly revealed in western Mississippi's rich delta region (especially Yazoo County), where Union invasion had left many plantations abandoned. A perturbed state judge reported in 1864 that the hill country counties of the state were "emptying their filthy, base, disloyal, deserting, stealing, murdering population into Yazoo. . . . They ought to be hung. They pretend to go there to get corn to live on, but their real object is to avoid our army, steal, plunder, and be with the Yankees. I . . . know them to be a base, vile & worthless set who never made a good or honest living any where . . . ." Later he wrote that "my life is now threatened openly and violently by deserters and their sympathizers . . . for denouncing their conduct . . . . Many of them have gone from [the hill country] into Yazoo and there seized upon places & supplies at will and are exhorting all behind to follow, alledging that they can thus keep out of the army, have plenty to trade with the yankees and ultimately the yankees will reward them with the places they have thus located upon."[28]

Even as the South's elite nervously anticipated the deluge, however, the surging tide of militancy among poor whites crested and slowed, enervated by inertial forces within the poor whites themselves. Outside forces further sapped the momentum for change, until finally it broke against a granite rock of resistance.

In the first place, despite the numerous and striking instances of unionism among poor whites and heightened aspirations unleashed by Yankee invasion, poor whites as a whole did not enthusiastically embrace the Union cause and did not discern in the triumph of northern armies any revolutionary opportunities—or did not care to seize those opportunities. Certainly many were grateful for the refuge from hunger and oppression that they found in Union lines, and undoubtedly the majority cheered the downfall of the Confederacy; but such sentiments did not necessarily translate into wholehearted unionism or radical opportunism. A northerner who spoke with poor whites in Richmond just after the city fell in 1865 noted that they "talk bitterly

[27] L. Virginia French Diary, June 10, 22, July 20, 23, 25, 26, 27, October 12, December 27, 1863 (Tennessee State Library and Archives); and Herschel Gower, ed., "The Beersheba Diary of L. Virginia French," Part 1, East Tennessee Historical Society, *Publications*, Nos. 52 and 53 (1981 and 1982), 90–92 (all quotations from ms. diary).

[28] R. S. Hudson to Charles Clark, May 24 (first quotation), June 13, 25 (second quotation), 1864, in Charles Clark Correspondence, Mississippi Governors' Papers.

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about the rigors of the [Confederate] conscription" but that only a handful "are open Unionists; . . . most have a sort of sulky satisfaction in being back again under the old flag." Some poor whites viewed the war itself, not the Confederacy, as their enemy and hoped for nothing more than an end to it. One of these was a refugee woman in Virginia whom a northerner met in 1864. Her "only wish as to the war," he said, "is, that we may have peace, so that she can go home again. I do not think she cares which side conquers."[29]

The indifference of most poor whites to the cause of the Union was matched—and no doubt aggravated—by the indifference of many Yankees to the cause of the poor whites. Notwithstanding the North's sympathetic image of the poor whites and its official policy of liberating, befriending, and uplifting them, large numbers of northerners in the occupied regions came to detest southern poor whites. Scandalized by the snuff-dipping women, unwashed children, and vulgar men they found living in unspeakably wretched hovels, these prim, middle-class Yankees succumbed to culture shock and concluded that the poor whites were depraved beyond redemption and were of no use in the reformation of the South. A Union officer in South Carolina deemed them "lower than the negro in every respect, not excepting general intelligence, culture and morality. . . . They are not fit to be kept in the same sty with a well to do farmer's hogs in New England." A Yankee journalist, writing from Savannah in early 1865, likewise found the poor whites "far below the colored people in ability and force of character. They are a class from which there is little to hope. . . . It is ingrained in their nature to despise work. . . . The poor whites were in bondage as well as the blacks, and to all appearance will remain so, while the natural buoyancy of the negro makes him rise readily to new exigencies . . . ."[30]

[29] James G. Smart, ed., *A Radical View: The 'Agate' Dispatches of Whitelaw Reid, 1861–1865* (2 vols.; Memphis, 1976), II, 201; and Edward W. Morley to Sardis and Anna Morley, November 1, 1864, Edward Williams Morley Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress). See also Lyman Potter Spencer Diary, August 2, 1864, *ibid.*; report of John P. C. Shanks, March 15, 1865, in *OR*, Vol. XLIX, Pt. 1, p. 79; George R. Agassiz, ed., *Meade's Headquarters, 1863–1865: Letters of Colonel Theodore Lyman from the Wilderness to Appomattox* (Boston, 1922), 133; American Union Commission, *Speeches*, 16; and Oliver Willcox Norton, *Army Letters, 1861–1865* . . . (Chicago, 1903), 160.

[30] Richard Harwell and Philip N. Racine, eds., *The Fiery Trail: A Union Officer's Account of Sherman's Last Campaigns* (Knoxville, 1986), 102; Charles Carleton Coffin, *Four Years of Fighting: A Volume of Personal Observation with the Army and Navy, from the First Battle of Bull Run to the Fall of Richmond* (Boston, 1866), 432–33. See also A. M. Stewart, *Camp, March and Battle-field; or, Three Years and a Half with the Army of the Potomac* (Philadelphia, 1865), 168–69; R. B. Hoadley to Cousin Em, March 15, 1864, in Robert Bruce Hoadley Papers (Duke University Library); William D. Bickham, *Rosecrans' Campaign with the Fourteenth Army Corps* . . . (Cincinnati, 1863), 56; George F. Noyes, *The Bivouac and the Battle-field; or, Campaign Sketches in Virginia and Maryland* (New York, 1863), 63; and Blegen, ed., *Civil War Letters*, 114.

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Such disillusionment characterized even some of the liberal reformers who flocked south in the wake of the armies. A missionary in Florida thought it "impossible to describe the squalor and filth and indolence in which we found most of these 'low down' crackers! It is a great shame that our government should be hampered with the support of such a miserable set of vagabonds!" Moreover, she complained, they were appallingly apathetic about the opportunity for education; and she rejoiced when the post commander ordered "that all who did not clean up their quarters and send their children to school should be sent to the guard house."[31]

Even those northerners who sympathized with the poor whites sometimes betrayed a measure of anxiety about their potential for troublemaking. A particular concern was that hardship and hunger in the occupied regions might drive the poor to desperation. An officer in Tennessee worried "that in the present famine-like condition of the poor classes, many who would otherwise remain quiet and peaceable will . . . engage in robbery and every other crime . . . ." A few northerners saw the poor whites (or at least some of them) simply as vicious hooligans who must not be coddled, but controlled. General Benjamin F. Butler in New Orleans, for example, described that city's underclass as "a violent, strong, and unruly mob, that can only be kept under by fear."[32]

The result, in many cases, was a de facto Federal policy of either suppressing or ignoring the poor whites. Few among the occupation authorities encouraged the aspirations of the poor for land, while many firmly opposed their attacks on property. After the uprising at Beersheba Springs, Tennessee, for example, Union officers "denounced the sacking . . . as an outrage," according to L. Virginia French, "and said had they known [of] it they would have prevented it." Morever, Federal authorities sometimes callously exploited the poor whites under their control. A militia company organized under Union aegis in Memphis was characterized by one resident as "nothing but an engine of oppression to poor working men . . . . The rich Secessionists escape all service, and the poor Union men have to do all the hard service." The lack of concern for poor whites displayed by many northern commanders was exemplified by an officer in Wilmington, North Carolina, whose report on that recently captured city mentioned the downtrodden victims of the Slave Power only

[31] Schwartz, ed., *Woman Doctor's Civil War*, 109–11 (quotations on p. 109). See also Swint, ed., *Dear Ones at Home*, 143.

[32] W. P. Robinson to B. H. Polk, May 30, 1864, in *OR*, Vol. XXXIX, Pt. 2, p. 57; and report of Benjamin F. Butler, May 8, 1862, *ibid.*, Vol. VI, 506. See also Egbert L. Viele to John A. Dix, September 2, 1862, *ibid.*, Vol. XVIII, 384; and Special Orders No. 8, January 17, 1863, in Orders Issued by Provost Marshal, South of the Potomac, E-1461, RG 393.

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once: "Enough contrabands and poor whites are here to give us much work [*i.e.*, labor]," he wrote. "We shall soon have the city thoroughly clean."[33]

Ignored, spurned, or exploited by their erstwhile northern friends, some poor whites appealed, ironically, to the paternalism of the southern aristocracy. When Federal authorities in northern Georgia forbade the distribution of food and clothing to the needy, for example, planter William King found himself beseiged by poor-white neighbors. "They came to see me to get advice what they should do," King wrote, "as they are now, many must starve ere long." Touched by their helplessness, he gave them what provisions he could spare, offered them "sympathy and advice," repeatedly visited the post commandant to plead their case, and eventually secured an arrangement whereby they could barter some of their belongings for food at a Federal hospital. Another planter in northern Virginia advised the authorities in 1865 that "the paupers in this County are in great distress. . . . [T]he Steward . . . left the poor House the first year of the War and since that [time] I myself and some other neighbours have supplied them with the necessaries of life. . . . I am willing to do all in my power to aid them." Thus the wartime experience of some poor whites did not undermine, but in fact reconfirmed, their traditional deference and their dependence upon noblesse oblige. Such persistent paternalism may well have worked to mitigate class conflict and impede the revolutionary momentum of the war.[34]

Persistent racism operated with the same results. The Negrophobia of the poor whites, and their fervent proslavery convictions, were old facts of southern life. If anything, Union invasion aggravated their inveterate racism, for the multitudes of freed blacks who poured into the occupied towns competed with poor-white residents and refugees for scarce jobs and housing. This racial antipathy, which was mutual, precluded the development of a biracial, lower-class movement aimed at fulfilling aspirations that many blacks and poor whites shared, including the acquisition of land and education.[35]

[33] French Diary, August 12, 1863; J. B. Bingham to Andrew Johnson, November 25, 1864, in Graf, Haskins, and Bergeron, eds., *Papers of Andrew Johnson*, VII, 315; and Joseph R. Hawley to J. A. Campbell, March 20, 1865, in *OR*, Vol. XLVII, Pt. 2, p. 927.

[34] King Diary, July 19, 23, 25, August 3, 21, 25, 1864; and Arthur Evans to F. H. Pierpont, July 17, 1865, in Francis H. Pierpont Executive Papers (Virginia State Library and Archives). See also Harry to Willis Claiborne, October 16, 1862, in John Francis Hamtramck Claiborne Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).

[35] On the racism of poor whites see Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, 273–74, which also notes the contempt of slaves for poor whites; and Stewart, *Camp, March and Battle-field*, 168 Competition between poor whites and runaway slaves for jobs and housing in the occupied towns is reported in New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, June 10, 1862; and James H. Kile to Andrew Johnson, April 23, 1864, in Graf, Haskins, and Bergeron, eds., *Papers of Andrew Johnson*, VI, 684.

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A cogent example of the power of racism as a hindrance to the advancement of poor whites occurred in Jacksonville, Florida, where northern missionary Esther Hill Hawks established a school in 1864. The first day she had twenty-nine poor-white students and one black, but on the second day of classes sixteen more blacks enrolled. The white parents objected, but Hawks insisted on an integrated school, whereupon the white parents began to withdraw their children. Indeed, one who attended in spite of orders from home was physically removed by his parent with a threat to "'break his bones'." Six weeks later only one white student remained. Now, Hawks reported, "The streets are full of white children . . . . [They] come about the door looking wistfully in, but if I ask them to come in, they invariably say, 'Ma won't let me come'."[36]

Racism not only drove a wedge between the white and black lower classes (to the disadvantage of both), it also bound upper- and lower-class whites in a Procrustean unity. This unity was strengthened, not weakened, by the Yankee invasion and the subsequent liberation of the slaves. In southeastern Virginia, for example, poor whites ambushed a party of runaway slaves, killed one, and returned another to his master—an act that one aristocrat pronounced "commendable." Northerners were often astounded to learn how racism encouraged some poor whites to identify with the slaveholding elite. One Yankee recounted a discussion about the war with a poor-white woman in Mississippi who had never owned a slave "or ever expected to do so": "We-uns didn't want to fight, no-how," she told him. "You-uns went and made the war so as to steal our niggers."[37]

Constrained by the paternalism of aristocrats, northern indifference and hostility, and their own racism and apathy, the tide of the poor whites' militancy ebbed even as the war raged on. Whatever force it retained was inadequate to overcome the powerful obstacles that reared up when the conflict ended in the spring of 1865. Ironically, although Appomattox marked the downfall of the ruling elites behind Confederate lines, it marked the resurgence of those in the occupied regions. Ever since the blue-clad regiments marched in, these aristocrats had lived in a world turned upside down, subjugated and humiliated by the Yankee invaders, while blacks and poor whites reveled in their freedom. Now, with the return of peace, southern elites were determined that the top rail must be restored to its accustomed place.

The immediate postwar months witnessed a series of counteroffensives against the most aggressive poor whites and a concerted effort

[36] Schwartz, ed., *Woman Doctor's Civil War*, 79–80*n* (quotations on p. 80*n*).

[37] Archibald Atkinson to John Letcher, August 21, 1862, in Virginia, Executive Papers; and Knox, *Camp-Fire and Cotton-Field*, 221–22 (quotations on p. 222).

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to bring them all, along with the freed slaves, once again under elite control. Just two months after the reestablishment of local government in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, for example, civil officials ordered the "squatters and settlers" who had taken over parish land during the war to leave the land and prepared, "in case of neglect or refusal on the part of said squatters, to take the necessary legal steps to enforce their departure from said lands." In another Louisiana parish a planter called on the provost marshal to help restrain the poor whites who paddled up the bayou in their pirogues to sell whiskey to the blacks at his plantation: "They are a set of thieves and rascals," he said, "and if we can sweat [*i.e.*, punish] one or two of them it will be a good lesson for them." Federal authorities generally watched the postwar conflict passively. At Amelia Island, Florida, for instance, property owners returned in the summer of 1865 and demanded that the provost marshal evict the poor whites who had seized their land; when that official queried his superiors for instructions, he was told merely to use his own judgment.[38]

In September 1865 John T. Trowbridge visited the area around Fredericksburg, Virginia, the scene of several hard-fought battles and widespread devastation. The account he later published vividly illustrated the predicament of the poor whites as the occupied South moved from war back to peace. At Chancellorsville he examined holes where the poor had dug up the skeletons of army horses in order to sell them to a local "bone-factory." On the battlefield of Spotsylvania he saw women combing the woods, gathering what he took to be chinquapin nuts; on closer inspection they proved to be bullets, picked up by the bushel and peddled as scrap. He learned that many families had survived the war years by selling fragments of soldiers' clothing they had found at abandoned campsites or had stripped from the dead on battlefields.

Trowbridge hired a guide, a fifty-year-old poor white named Elijah, and talked with him as they toured the battlefields in a wagon. Elijah confessed that he was "right ignorant; can't read the fust letter; never went to school a day." Caught up in the excitement of secession, he had volunteered for the Confederate army: "Then, when I had time to reconsider it all over, I diskivered we was wrong." He had spent seven months in the guard house for threatening to desert.

Elijah was optimistic about the future of the South and his own prospects. "I reckon thar's go'n' to be a better chance for the poo'

[38] Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, Police Jury Minutes, October 2, 1865; Oliver Richardson to W. H. Van Ornum, August 11, 1865, in Letters Received by Provost Marshal, St. Charles Parish, Louisiana, E-1515, RG 393; Charles Coolidge to post adjutant, June 13, 1865, and endorsement, in Letters and Endorsements Sent by Provost Marshal, Fernandina, Florida, E-1598, *ibid.*

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man after this. The Union bein' held together was the greatest thing that could have happened for us." Before the war, he explained, rich planters had monopolized land and refused to sell any to the common folk: "They'd say they didn't want no poo' whites around 'em . . . ." But now, hurt financially by the loss of their slaves, they were anxious to sell off excess acreage; and therein lay opportunity. "The emancipation of slavery . . . is wo'kin' right for the country mo'e ways 'an one." But, he hastily pointed out, "I'm no friend to the niggers . . . . They ought all to be druv out of the country. They won't wo'k as long as they can steal."

Trowbridge left his guide in Fredericksburg and traveled on to Spotsylvania Court House. There he spoke with the clerk of the county court, who, in contrast to Elijah's view from the bottom of white society, offered Trowbridge the view from the top. This official's biggest complaint was that the Federal authorities were providing free rations to fifteen hundred people in the county, four-fifths of them white. "The system encourages idleness," he said, "and does more harm than good." Many of those on the dole were "shiftless whites," he insisted, "steeped in vice, ignorance, and crime of every description. They have no comforts, and no energy to work and obtain them. They have no books, no morality, no religion; they go clothed like savages, half sheltered, and half fed,—except that [the] government is now supporting them." The court clerk's firm opinion was that poor relief should be put in the hands of the civil authorities.

Finally, Trowbridge interviewed a Union officer at Spotsylvania and asked him why the county officials were "so eager to save the government expense in feeding their poor." "It is very simple:" the officer replied, "they wish to get control of the business in order to cut off the negroes. . . . It is their policy to keep the blacks entirely dependent upon their former masters, and consequently as much slaves as before."[39]

What this man said was undoubtedly true as far as it went. However, given the sentiments of the court clerk concerning poor whites and the fact that only one-fifth of those persons receiving Federal rations were black, it is clear that the larger objective of the elites of Spotsylvania County was to ensure the dependency of the poor whites. But the Yankee officer, oblivious or indifferent to the plight of the poor whites, spoke only of the freedmen.

[39] J. T. Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour of Its Battle-fields and Ruined Cities* . . . (Hartford, 1866), 115–22, 133–38, 141 (quotations appear on pages 121, 116, 117, 118, 134, 135, and 137).

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Trowbridge's colorfully limned characters epitomize the forces at work across the occupied South in the years after Appomattox. The spark of hope kindled by the Yankee invasion remained alive in many poor whites, such as Elijah, but the eventual extinction of that spark was already foreshadowed in the early months of Reconstruction. Debilitated by poverty, ignorance, and racism, poor whites confronted a resurgent elite, stripped of its slaves but still powerful—and grimly determined to reclaim its old hegemony. Without active and continued Federal intervention, poor whites could not prevail against the forces of reaction. When that intervention was not forthcoming, they were doomed to subjugation, penury, and impotence—a fate ultimately shared by the freed blacks, whose path the poor whites had paralleled ever since the first Union soldiers marched triumphantly into Dixie.[40]

[40] The extreme destitution of poor whites in the early postwar period is further documented in Ira R. Foster and J. H. R. Washington to James H. Wilson, May 24, 1865, in *OR*, Vol. XLIX, Pt. 2, p. 890; and Thomas B. Cooper to Lewis Parsons, July 19, 1865, in Provisional Governor Lewis Eliphalet Parsons Papers (Alabama Department of Archives and History). Robert Arthur Gilmour, "The Other Emancipation: Studies in the Society and Economy of Alabama Whites During Reconstruction" (Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1972), 12, 63–111, shows that in the postwar years poor whites continued to move from the hill country to plantation areas seeking opportunity; but with the failure of the Federal government to redistribute land, such opportunity was limited to farm labor, tenancy, and sharecropping.

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