Enslaved to the Cause: The Poor White Southerner's Support for Slavery and Secession

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> "Our peculiar institution: African slavery…This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution. Jefferson in his forecast, had anticipated this, as the 'rock upon which the old Union would split.' He was right. What was conjecture with him, is now a realized fact."[1]
>
> -- Alexander Stephens, 1861

To Alexander Stephens, vice president of the Confederacy, speaking before the crowd assembled in the Savannah Athenaeum, the cause of the conflict which would become the Civil War was clear: slavery. The so-called "peculiar institution" of the South had created a society bent upon the continuation and expansion of slavery. But, while the leading members of southern society may have viewed the issue thus, what of the average southern man and woman? What were the reasons and motives for the poor white Southerner to take up arms in allegiance with a system built upon the subjugation of an entire race? Through an examination of the writings of poor southern soldiers and civilians, the messages preached to them in their churches, and documents from all over the southern United States, one comes to a singular conclusion that sheds a more empathetic light upon human beings who lived a century and a half in the past. The average poor Southerner's support of the institution of slavery stemmed primarily from fear and complacency. Fear of "amalgamation" based on pseudoscience, fear of slave revolts, fear

of losing the economic and social backbone of society, and complacent religious justifications all played their part in convincing the poor white Southerner to take up arms to willingly defend slavery, an institution they saw as "the most auspicious that ever waited upon earthly government."[2]

Some context, however, may be helpful when examining poor white southern support of slavery. The institution of slavery had existed in the American colonies since 1619, when enslaved Africans descended from the *White Lion*, an English privateer, to begin their new lives of servitude in the Jamestown colony.[3] The *1619 Project* famously enumerates the history of African slavery in America, though the source is flawed in part. The important subtlety, which the *1619 Project* lacks, comes in the difference in character between American slavery in its beginning and the entirely different entity which it grew into. In the Colonial Era the main economic crop of the South was not cotton, as it would become later, but rather tobacco.[4] King Charles remarked that the colony of Virginia was "founded upon smoke," and the centrality of that crop to the early southern economy cannot be understated.[5] Tobacco is a labor intensive crop, needing many hands for efficiently growing, cutting, and drying the leaves. A surplus of enslaved labor to produce tobacco in the American South commended itself to the production of another, much more profitable crop: cotton.

With the proliferation of Eli Whitney's cotton gin after 1793, cotton became by far the most efficient cash crop to grow in the southern climate, and the amount of cotton production reflects this. Before 1790, the entirety of the United States produced less than 5,000 bales of cotton per year. On the eve of war in 1860, more than half a century later, the cotton-centered economy of the antebellum South produced approximately 5,000,000 bales per year.[6] The production of cotton was essential to the southern economy and provided wealth for many leading families. Slavery became so ingrained in southern life that the demarcation of "free-state" and "slave-state" became everyday terminology to refer to northern and southern states. Cotton sales fueled the campaigns of southern politicians, who in turn enacted laws to perpetuate and bolster the system which had gained them their position. A prime example of this cycle is the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which gave southern slave catchers the right to enter the sovereign territory of free states to

apprehend escaped slaves.[7] In practice, this law enabled enslavers to imprison Black men and women without any evidence and sell them into southern slavery. Such a gross violation of the sovereign rights of free states became increasingly common as the attitude of the South toward its "peculiar institution" became more aggressive and expansionist.

One starting premise must be understood: due to the dissemination of Lost Cause ideology, or the belief that the causes of the Civil War were noble and unrelated to slavery, postbellum southern whites did not view slavery as the primary and immediate cause of secession. The discrepancy, however, between postbellum perception and antebellum reality is essential to understand: to all levels of southern society in 1861, secession was for the express purpose of supporting slavery's continual flourishing and expansion. One need only look to the declaration of secession from South Carolina, the first state to secede:

> Those States have assume the right of deciding upon the propriety of our domestic institutions; and have denied the rights of property established in fifteen of the States and recognized by the Constitution; they have denounced as sinful the institution of slavery; they have permitted open establishment among them of societies, whose avowed object is to disturb the peace and to eloign the property of the citizens of other States. They have encouraged and assisted thousands of our slaves to leave their homes; and those who remain, have been incited by emissaries, books and pictures to servile insurrection.[8]

Clearly the first state to declare secession did so expressly to preserve slavery and reject equality racial equality. Mississippi's declaration puts it more plainly still: "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery.... We must either submit to degradation, and to the loss of property … or we must secede from the Union framed by our fathers, to secure this as well as every other species of property."[9] When this essay argues about the motives for southern support of slavery, it also contends that such support necessarily championed secession from the Union: the two are inextricably linked. John Stuart Mill summarized the subject perfectly, albeit verbosely, in 1862, saying:

> The world knows what the question between the North and South has been for many years, and still is. Slavery alone was thought of, alone talked of. Slavery was battled for and against, on the floor of Congress and in the plains of Kansas; on the slavery question exclusively was the party constituted which now rules the United States: on slavery Fremont was rejected, on slavery Lincoln was elected; the South separated on slavery, and proclaimed slavery as the one cause of separation. [10]

Such is the consensus among historians, but it is lamentably still very much contested within the public sphere. With a better understanding, one can now delve into the reasoning and motives of those involved.

The first significant reason poor southern whites supported slavery was the view of racial purity which pervaded life and thought. The greatest example of this was the fear of what was termed "amalgamation" at the time or the mixing of the races. This was based on pseudoscientific theories of the age about the supposed inferiority of non-western traits like larger noses, more pronounced jaws, and dark hair and skin. Such racist beliefs were not merely leveled against Black people, but also against Irish and Asian groups, who were deemed as lesser than the Anglo-Saxon. These ideas were crystallized by the work of French anthropologist Arthur de Gobineau and his book, *The Inequality of Human Races*, in which Gobineau blames "degeneration" as the only source of societal problems and collapse.[11] He goes on to define "degenerate" as "[of a people/race] no longer [having] the same intrinsic value as it had before, because it has no longer the same blood in its veins, continual adulterations having gradually affected the quality of that blood."[12] Such racist ideas were popular in the antebellum South, and provided a delusional justification for slavery. Rev. George H. Clark of Savannah, Georgia, stated this position clearly in one of his sermons. Black people were, he said, "the most degraded race in every way, phyiscally [sic], socially, intellectually, and morally."[13] These faults could not be allowed to infect superior white stock, and thus social equality of blacks and whites was to be avoided at all costs.[14]

Theorists noted Black people, in particular, were uniquely well suited to slavery, since they perceived African peoples as childlike in their intellect and unable to properly take care of

themselves. To enslavers, including the almost universally well-respected, at the time, Robert E. Lee, slaves were "immeasurably better off in America rather than Africa," since they were now under the "supervision" of more highly evolved beings.[15] This detrimental notion found root among Southerners, egged on by the pseudoscientific theories of the time. While modern evolutionary theory champions the relative intensities of various environmental factors as the prime driver of evolutionary change, evolutionary scientists of the nineteenth century simply assumed that the inherent qualities of certain races were more basal, and less highly evolved. Franz Gall and Johann Spurzheim created the field of phrenology, now proven completely pseudoscientific, which argued that the innate qualities of an individual could be inferred from the size of various parts of the cranium.[16] Since the skulls of people of African descent are shaped differently to those of Europeans, "scientific" minds of the time claimed that the very slopes of their faces "[denote] an utter deficiency of understanding."[17]A telling pamphlet, created by an anonymous pro-southern writer during the Civil War, revealed that poor white Southerners feared mixing the races. The tract was purported to genuinely support amalgamation and comes across as bombastic and fanatical: perfect to convince fearful southern whites, ravaged by years of war, that the Union's main goal in the conflict was to allow and enforce intermarriage.[18] In another example of this fear, a captured rebel private complained, "You Yanks want us to marry our daughters to the niggers."[19] Clearly, miscegenation with "inferior" races was a prime fear of Southerners.[20]

Additionally, purity of blood was greatly emphasized by Southerners in other ways, as they favorably compared themselves to the cavaliers of England from which their ancestors supposedly hailed. Immediately after the Civil War, Edward Pollard published his landmark book, *The Lost Cause; A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates*, in which he argued that the blood of refined, gentile, and freedom-loving Englishmen flowed in the veins of the Southerners.[21] The North, by contrast, was populated by the misbegotten offspring of "coarse and materialistic" Englishmen.[22] Great pride was taken in this perceived tradition, with many other writers, including Daniel Hundley, speaking of the "pedigree and stock" of their brave cavalier ancestors, while demonizing the "underbred" Northerners.[23] Here again we see conceptions of race,

lineage, and breeding at the forefront of the southern view of the world, more specifically about the indispensability of southern slavery.

Another reason why poor white Southerners saw the end of southern slavery as such a calamity was their crippling fear of "servile insurrection." This fear, cultivated over nearly half a century by events such as the Haitian revolution, the Denmark Vesey plot, the revolt of Nat Turner, and the Baptist War, paralyzed Southerners. They simply could not conceive of a multi-racial society without race warfare. Each of these events were violent attempts by enslaved or free Blacks to rebel against the systems which tormented them. The rhetoric of servile insurrection permeated all levels of southern society. The Declarations of Secession from Georgia, Texas, Mississippi, and South Carolina all mention the instigation of servile insurrection by Northerners as a primary reason for their attempted exit from the Union.[24] The Charleston *Mercury*, a radical southern periodical, warned that if Lincoln were elected and the slaves freed, there would follow "circumstances of suffering and horror, unsurpassed in the history of nations."[25] The moment they ceased to be masters, they would become slaves. Historian Ulrich B. Phillips hammered the issue home:

> Slavery was instituted not merely to provide control of labor but also as a system of racial adjustment and social order. And when in the course of time slavery was attacked, it was defended not only as a vested interest, but with vigor and vehemence as a guarantee of white supremacy and civilization. Otherwise, it would be impossible to account for the fervid secessionism of many non-slaveholders… the eager service of thousands in the Confederate army.[26]

Fear of slave uprisings even prevented pragmatic actions on the part of southern voters. They were so terrified by the idea of servile insurrection that even near the end of the war, with Union forces closing in, the vote to create black regiments in the South only passed on the 13th of March, 1865 and succeeded by three votes in the Confederate House of Representatives, and one in the Confederate Senate.[27] Southern voters were so frightened of Black people rising up that they would have rather keep millions of potential fighting men in chains, than equip a single black man with a rifle. As Reverend

Richard Furman wrote in a letter to the governor of South Carolina, "in some parts of our Union there are Citizens, who favour the idea of general emancipation; yet, were they to see slaves in our Country, in arms, wading through blood and carnage to effect their purpose, they would… unite under the government with their fellow-citizens at large to suppress the rebellion."[28] Here again we see that peaceful emancipation of the slaves was not even considered by white Southerners. The bloody result was a forgone conclusion.

Another side to this fear was sexual in nature. Many Southerners, especially the poor and lowly, considered a slave insurrection likely to incur the rape of white women. They would sooner kill their own wives and daughters than allow them to be "given up to the embrace of their present 'dusky male servitors.'"[29] In their songs and music repeated promises to protect and defend the women of the South come to the surface, feelings clearly etched on the minds of the songwriters. An unknown rebel soldier, G.M.T. Pattillo reportedly wrote, "[A] lovely woman is a treasure, what is man without her aid? To protect her is a pleasure, hears the boys that's not afraid."[30] While not the most sophisticated of lyrics, the song gets across the point: the women of the South were seemingly threatened by a slave uprising and southern men considered themselves honor-bound to defend their women.

There is, however, a deeper side to the southern terror of insurrection. Southerners suspected that newly freed slaves would slaughter, rape, and pillage for three main reasons: this had happened in other slave revolts; they considered Black people to be naturally brutal (both which have been previously addressed) and, finally, they seemed to understand on some level that their beloved "peculiar institution" was wrong and feared repercussions for their sins. Evidence of this idea comes through in the language the South used to refer to the Union and the war itself. Countless private soldiers of the Confederacy referred to the war as "a war of subjugation," and to their own fate under Union authority to be, literally, "slavery."[31] As James M. McPherson highlights, "*Subjugated* was the favorite word for the fate worse than death that would face Southern whites if the Confederacy lost the war. *Enslaved* was another frequent choice to describe that fate." McPherson postulates that rebels used these words as the American Revolutionaries had done in 1776, to mean their oppression under British authority, yet it is telling that such

language so readily evoked their own "peculiar institution" and all its accompanying horrors. Indeed, slavery was to them a fate worse than death precisely because they observed slavery every day and knew the truth of their rhetoric in that respect. In one case, a squad of Southerners dismembered and removed the eyeballs of a slave child after he gave information against them. [32] Such evils preyed on the minds of Southerners, and whether consciously or not, manifested themselves in the southern conception of life. From this perspective, the words of poor white southern soldiers like Pvt. William McKee take on a chilling new context: "We wil [sic] enjoy our liberty, and nothing is worth anything without that… I love home and al that surrounds it as wel as anybody, but if I have to [be] the equal with a niger, I had rather never come home, better me fall in the struggle for it." Their understanding of Black freedom was not that it would uplift the Black South, but rather that it would lower the White South.

Another side of poor white southern support for secession and slavery was grounded in religious justification. The antebellum South was an intensely pious society, and as war loomed, questions of God's favor asserted themselves in church life. Southerners held a great preoccupation with understanding God's will, which they believed they could interpret clearly. In the worlds of Mark Noll, southern Christians presumed, "that moral or spiritual perception could be crystal clear and that the means of moral action lay entirely within the grasp of well-meaning individuals."[33] This notion was not confined to the American South but permeated national society. Often poor southern soldiers referred to "the holy cause of southern freedom," to mean their quest to secede from the Union.[34] With this mentality, that anything one does with conviction is righteous before God, how could poor white Southerners question their beliefs? To question them would be to question the Lord of Heaven himself. Over time, this blind loyalty to "the cause" became worship in itself.

After the war, the Baptist preacher J. William Jones summarized the completion of this transformation: "Oh God! ... God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God of Israel, God of the centuries, God of our fathers … God of Jefferson Davis, Robert Edward Lee, and Stonewall Jackson, lord of hosts and king of kings."[35] Jones set the patron saints of the Confederacy on the same level as the biblical patriarchs of old. Of course, this transition was

completed after the war and in response to the rebel loss, but in a very literal sense, Southerners began to worship their own ideology, rather than the God who they professed to serve. God existed to give justification to their beliefs. With this understanding of southern theological validation, one can fully observe the effectiveness of such rhetoric.

The pertinent rhetoric that southern religion highlighted was the necessity and benefit of slavery. As far back as medieval times, western sources associated black skin with the so-called "curse of Ham." Ham makes a mockery of his drunk and naked father, Noah, and for this crime suffers his father's wrath. The argument that this curse justifies slavery hinges on Genesis 9:27, in which an enraged Noah curses his son, proclaiming, "God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant."[36] Slaveowners took this passage to its extreme, and equating Ham to the Black population, determined that all those of dark skin should be enslaved.[37] Nowhere does this passage refer to dark skin, but this association dating from the medieval era legitimized slavery in southern white minds.

African slavery, as practiced in the American South, was a wholly different beast than slavery in the ancient world. Slavery in the contexts of the ancient world had nothing to do with skin color; indeed, the American race-based chattel slavery system was almost totally unique in history.[38] The dissimilarity of biblical and antebellum slavery, was all too often, conveniently forgotten by scholars of the time. The southern conception of slavery was governed primarily by the customs they saw practiced every day. They could not imagine non-race-based slavery as the social norm of which the Bible speaks. Northerner Francis Wayland's critique of this argument went largely unheralded by slavers, and the fact remains it was simply more comfortable for many Southerners to imagine they had the tacit blessing of the scriptures, rather than look into their evil too deeply.[39] The centrality of the golden rule in modern Christian thought was no less significant to poor white Southerners. They simply did not extend the precept of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" to Black people, whom they considered non-human beings.

Other religious defenses of slavery also ignore historical inconsistencies between slavery in the United States and biblical

slavery. Englishman Thomas Thompson's religious defense of slavery in the 1770s provides the first example of the attempted religious justification for the practice of slavery. He reasoned that if God, in scripture itself, clearly permitted the practice of slavery in the books of Philemon and Paul, Christians could not justly oppose it.[40] This staunch proslavery partisanship eventually led to a split in the American Baptist church between northern and southern Baptists. Political moderate Richard Fuller expressed a southern defense of slavery that Christians in the South could rally behind: if neither Christ, the apostles, nor the Holy Spirit commanded masters to emancipate their slaves, then slavery itself could not be sinful.[41] There may be evils that attended upon it, for example Roman cruelty toward slaves, but even in the face of this Christ emphasized seeking a personal relationship with him in whatever station one found oneself.[42] To Fuller, since slavery was not expressly condemned in scripture, it must be moral. Moses Stuart, the most preeminent biblical scholar in the nation, agreed.[43] Questions about the similarity of ancient slavery to the "peculiar institution" of the South were lost in semantics.

The final major religious justification for slavery stemmed once again from the claimed inferiority of blacks. Many Southerners believed that slavery was of moral and material benefit to the slaves, because in their native Africa they could never have hoped to experience "civilization and conversion."[44] This odious pronouncement reeks of justification ex post facto, for no one could or did argue that the slave trade was begun for either of those goals. Instead, it was begun simply to facilitate wealth on the part of the traders. Rev. Richard Furman's writing is perhaps the most articulate example of this ideology. He writes that "If, also, by their own confession, which has been made in manifold instances, their condition… has been greatly bettered by the change; if it is, ordinarily, really better, as many assert, than that of thousands of the poorer classes in countries reputed civilized and free."[45] To Furman, it was better to be a slave in the South than a northern mill worker or a German factory hand. More alarming still, those Southerners who did find religious fault with the slave trade rarely perceived the moral evil in keeping slaves. Rev. Richard Furman's letter concedes that "the slave trade, in present circumstances, is justly censurable."[46] By this admission, he opens the door to the only possible

alternative—that without a trade in slaves, the enslaved must be forcibly bred. The vile practice, indeed, thrived in the South after the abolition of the slave trade and was also championed by the theatrical pronouncements of southern preachers. Henry Burgwyn, a young soldier of the 26th North Carolina Regiment, gave this disturbing advice to his father in 1863: "I would buy boys & girls from 15 to 20 years old & take care to have a majority girls."[47] By this skillful economic move, he could increase the amount of his "property" by breeding enslaved girls to produce more. Such loathsome evil was commonplace and defended implicitly by all levels of southern society, not least by religious figures.

The next reason for the support of slavery among poor white Southerners was their perception that the institution was threatened. This is indeed a half truth, for there was undoubtedly a sizeable majority in the North who sought to prevent the further spread of slavery into the new Union states. For example, the Missouri Compromise, the Wilmont Proviso, and the annexation of Texas, were all arranged in such a way as to prevent slave states from outnumbering free states.[48] Compared to the meteoric explosion of slavery in America after the invention of the cotton gin, the frustratingly small gains of slavery in the latter decades before the Civil War left Southerners feeling confined putting them on the defensive.[49] The limits placed upon slavery's growth were not severe; indeed, legislation like the Fugitive Slave Law confirmed that proslavery forces in government were still fully able to support slavery legally until at least 1850.[50] Southern refusal of the Corwin Amendment of early 1861, which would have guaranteed slavery in states where it already existed but not beyond, indicates that it was not merely the goal of Southerners to maintain slavery where it was, but to expand it. To the South, lack of expansion was the same as suffocation. This fear was, however, hidden under the surface of southern bombast. Speaking before the United States Senate on March 4, 1858, James Hammond proclaimed, "What would happen if no cotton was furnished for three years?... England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her, save the South. No, you dare not make war on cotton. No power on earth dares to make war upon it. Cotton is king."[51] Such grand words covered the insecurity Southerners felt about their precious institution. Southerners were proud of slavery and were personally

affronted when it was threatened. As one Mississippi soldier, Thomas Pollok wrote to his mother, "This country without slave labor would be completely worthless."[52]

The imminent inauguration of Abraham Lincoln stoked the fears of many Southerners, proving to be the final straw for secession. Howell Cobb, a wealthy Georgian politician, articulated the conspiratorial fears of many poor white Southerners, writing in 1860, "On the fourth of march next the chair of Washington is to be filled by a man who hates the institution of slavery as much as any other abolitionist, and who has not only declared but used all powers of his intellect to prove that our slaves our equals and that all [our] laws… [are] at war with the law of God."[53] Historians disagree as to Abraham Lincoln's intentions; the quotes Cobb upholds as evidence of Lincoln's belief in abolition are equally offset by Lincoln's vehement denial on several occasions of those same beliefs. Since politicians are obliged to espouse insincere and contrary opinions almost constantly, it is difficult to believe that Cobb's fears were totally realistic. It may be unhelpful to consider Lincoln's words during the war as a view to what his plans might have been before; nevertheless, they shed light on the mindset of the man himself:

> My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union… I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty; and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free.[54]

Historians will never know what Lincoln's policies would have been had the southern states chosen to remain and protest his appointment to the presidency in other ways, but one thing is clear: Southerners felt that Lincoln's appointment, the restriction of slavery in new territories, and the less than exponential growth of slavery threatened the life of their valued institution, and they were prepared to do anything to keep it secure.

The final fear which poor white Southerners articulated was the loss of their principal economic advantage over the North. Slavery was viewed as an essential method for economic advancement in the South. James D. B. De Bow, born to a poor Charleston family, argued that poor whites were assured greater remuneration for their labor, since there were fewer poor white laborers in the South than in the North.[55] While positions may have been proportionately scarcer, and therefore more well-paying, he neglected to mention the substantial lack of unskilled farm labor positions in the South (an unfortunate consequence of maintaining a slave underclass to perform this work). De Bow further contended that poor white non-slaveholders were not reduced by their condition "to find employment in crowded cites and come into competition in close and sickly workshops and factories, with remorseless and untiring machinery."[56] To De Bow at least, poor whites preferred poverty to work in northern mills—whether he was correct in this assumption or not is harder to determine. Crucially, De Bow concluded that the slave system provided upward mobility for non-slaveholders via the easy acquisition of slaves as capital, and that the majority of the southern upper class had only recently come into their money as a result of slavery's expansion.[57] The argument about upward mobility is demonstrably false. Bertram Wyatt-Brown's in-depth study of antebellum southern culture revealed through court records that there existed an almost "dynastic" system of land ownership in the South which greatly hindered mobility of status. The same few families maintained vast plantations for decades, rendering social hegemony in the South remarkably static.[58] The point to bear in mind, is not the veracity of De Bow's assertions, but their existence. Wealthy upper-class Southerners articulated the present feelings in their society to a greater degree than the private soldiers whose writings have been covered above. Factual accuracy aside, De Bow communicated the beliefs and fears of most Southerners; if they lost their slaves, they lost the last hope of economic advancement.

De Bow also argued that "The non-slaveholder of the South preserves the status of the white man, and is not regarded as an inferior or a dependant."[59] In the words of the popular song of the day, "although he may be poor, he would never be a slave," (though even in the context of the song these words espoused the opposite sentiment.)[60] Jabez Curry, a congressman from Alabama, argued that

of all peoples in the South, the poor whites were "more interested in the institution than any other portion of the community," because they were spared from unfairly constituting the lowest rung of society.[61] He lambasts the class systems of Europe and the North, complaining of the artificial inequalities they create between white people.[62] Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens agreed, saying in his famous Cornerstone speech that "all of the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eye of the law."[63] Recall again Rev. Richard Furman's pronouncement on the condition of slaves in the South as "really better, as many assert, than that of thousands of the poorer classes in countries reputed civilized and free."[64] To these Southerners, differing social classes among whites in both Europe and the North were as disgusting and unnatural as slavery is to modern readers today. Understanding that grants the modern reader a grasp of the passion with which Southerners championed their most "peculiar institution."

There may be some counterarguments to these claims. Some take issue with slavery as a vested interest for non-slaveholding Southerners. They rather claim that "states' rights" formed the central disagreement which led to war in 1861. They are, in a sense, correct. Southern rhetoric of the time highlighted the defense of the domestic South and unique cultural practices as primary. Both causes for war, however, are thinly veiled euphemisms for slavery. The South felt defined by slavery and proudly so, but in the wake of the Civil War, Southerners changed the rhetoric surrounding the cause of the conflict. The quote which opened this essay, that of Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens, stands in sharp contrast to his own, and other Southerners later explanations of the war. Rebel soldier Sam Watkins, whose grounded reminiscences of the Civil War form a large part of popular conception, wrote in 1882 that "We believe the doctrine of State rights, they in the doctrine of centralization…. We only fought for our State rights, they for the Union and power."[65] Historians cannot allow themselves to be swayed by ex post facto explanations, however, and the truth remains that southern writings after the Civil War sought to alter the original narrative and replace it with Lost Cause ideology. The words of John Stuart Mill, in 1862, come to mind once again. The Civil War was indeed a contest over the rights of the states—one right in particular, slavery.

The reasons for poor white support of slavery in the South were supremely interrelated: intrinsic to southern culture and extrinsically imposed, at once deeply religious and superficially scientific. Most critically of all, the justifications serve to encompass the unfathomable complexity of the human soul's propensity to sin. The poor white Southerner's support of slavery manifested in fear, suspicion, and complacency. They feared miscegenation due to pseudoscientific ideas. They feared slave revolts both from recent examples of violence, and from the racist views about the inherent violence of black people. In a telling display of guilt, they worried they could receive in recompence the same moral evils they perpetrated upon their slaves. They justified their beliefs and fear with religion, mistakenly appealing to Christianity in an attempt to defend their heinous acts. And lastly, they feared losing the economic and social core of their civilization. From this perspective, with a new and broader view of poor southern whites, one comes to genuinely understand, but never to condone, their actions.

Appendix

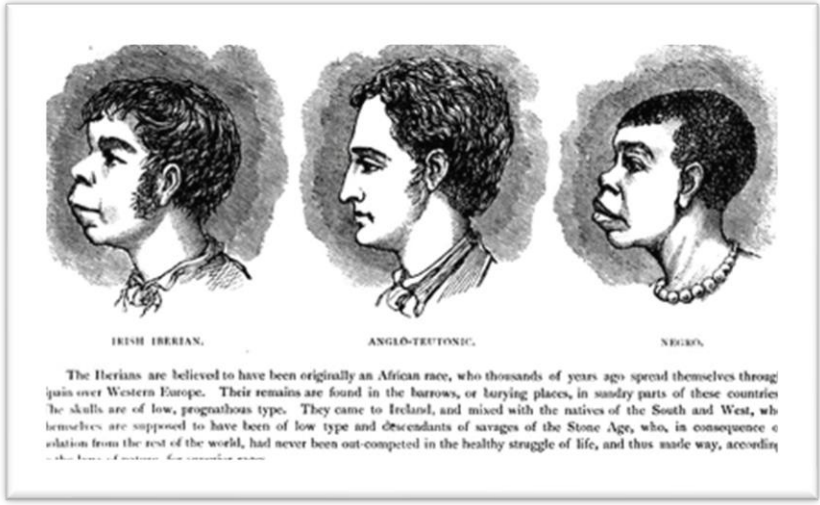

Figure 1: Phrenological diagram, c.19th century, depicting Irish, African, and Anglo-Teutonic skulls shape.[66]

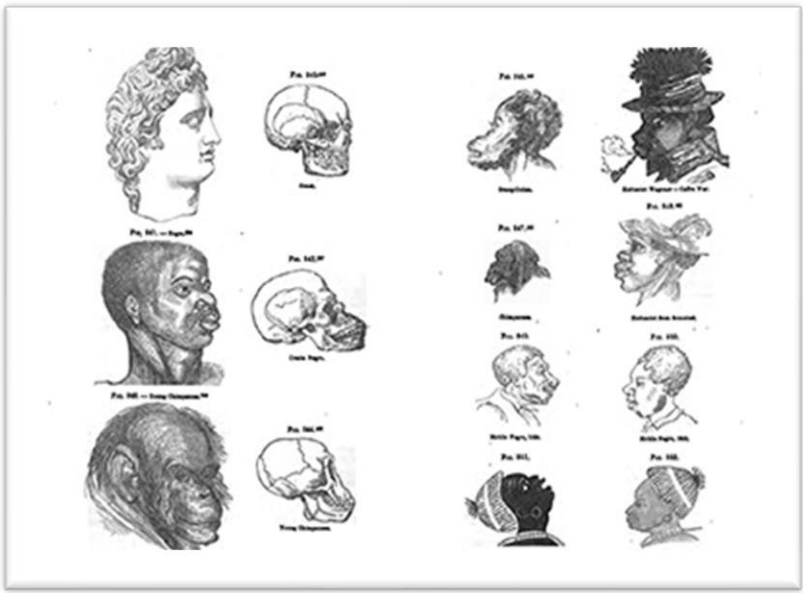

Figure 2: Phrenological diagram c.19th century, depicting Hellenic, African, and Ape skulls.[67]

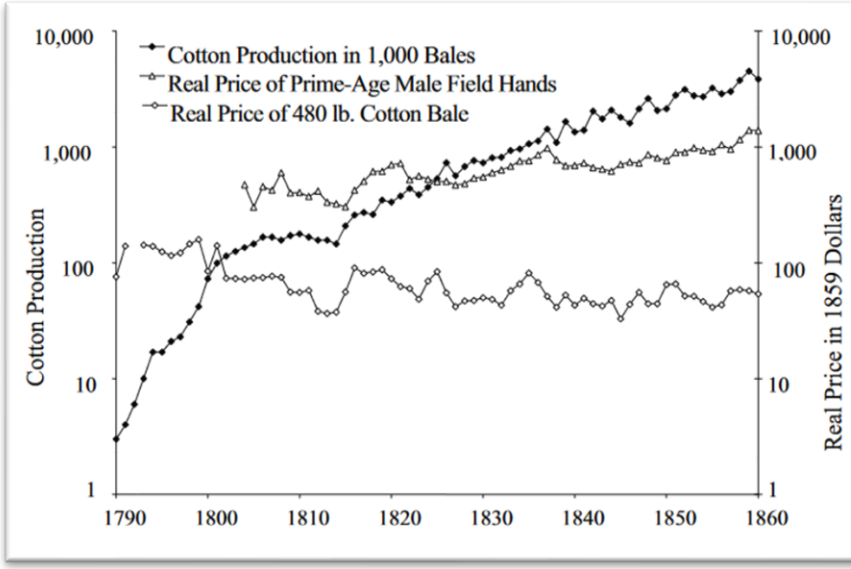

Figure 3: Graph showing Cotton production, Price of Farm hands, and Cotton value per bale from 1790 to 1860.[68]

Notes

[1] Stephens, "Cornerstone Speech."
[2] McPherson, *What They Fought For*, 48.
[3] Deetz, "400 Years Ago."
[4] Tindall and Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 73
[5] Tindall and Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 73
[6] Olmstead and Rhode, "Biological Innovation." See Figure 3 in Appendix.
[7] *The Constitution of the United States.*
[8] "The Declaration of Causes of Seceding States."
[9] Ibid.
[10] Mill, *The Contest in America*, 12.
[11] Gobineau*, Inequality of the Human Races*, 24.
[12] Ibid., 25.
[13] Jon L. Wakelyn, *Southern Pamphlets on Secession,* 55.
[14] See Figure 1 in Appendix.
[15] Robert E Lee to Mary Randolph Custis Lee, "Letter."
[16] Lavater, *The Pocket Lavater*, Preface.
[17] Ibid., 24.
[18] Anon., *Miscegenation*, 14.
[19] McPherson, *What They Fought For*, 53.
[20] See Figure 2 in Appendix.
[21] Stampp, *The Causes of the Civil War*, 180.
[22] Ibid., 180
[23] Ibid., 181.
[24] "The Declaration of Causes of Seceding States."
[25] Stampp, *The Causes of the Civil War*, 132.
[26] Ibid., 174-175.
[27] McPherson, *What They Fought For*, 55.
[28] Richard Furman to John Lyde Wilson, "A Religious Defense of Slavery."
[29] McPherson, *What They Fought For*, 53.
[30] McKee, *The McKee Letters*, 56.
[31] McPherson, *What They Fought For*, 12.
[32] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 403.
[33] Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 12.
[34] McPherson, *What They Fought For*, 11.
[35] Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, 133.
[36] *The Bible: King James Version*, Genesis 9:27.
[37] Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*, 43-44.

[38] Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 46.
[39] Ibid., 46
[40] Ibid., 33.
[41] Ibid., 37.
[42] Ibid., 37.
[43] Ibid., 38.
[44] Richard Furman to John Lyde Wilson, "A Religious Defense of Slavery."
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] McPherson, *What They Fought For*, 108.
[48] Tindall and Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, Chapter 13.
[49] Olmstead and Rhode, "Biological Innovation," 1129.
[50] United States. *The Constitution of the United States.*
[51] Hammond, *Selections from the Letters and Speeches,* 311-322.
[52] McPherson, *What They Fought For*, 48.
[53] Wakelyn, *Southern Pamphlets on Secession*, 95.
[54] Abraham Lincoln to Horace Greeley, "The Greeley Letter."
[55] Wakelyn, *Southern Pamphlets on Secession*, 82.
[56] Ibid., 83.
[57] Ibid., 84-85.
[58] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 262.
[59] Wakelyn, *Southern Pamphlets on Secession*, 84.
[60] Root, "Battle Cry of Freedom."
[61] Wakelyn, *Southern Pamphlets on Secession*, 45.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Stephens, "Cornerstone Speech."
[64] Richard Furman to John Lyde Wilson, "A Religious Defense of Slavery."
[65] Watkins, *"Co. Aytch": A Side Show of the Big Show.*
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