

Foundations of Oppression: The Antebellum South Appalachian Class Dynamic

By Andrew Heggie

Introduction

The American Republic was largely founded by a wealthy, speculative, land-owning class. This class wielded a great deal of power over the governmental structure and economic development of the Republic. In the Republic's region of Antebellum Southern Appalachia this economic and governmental power over the region can be partly traced back to this class through the early land exchange.

Origins of the Planter Economy: The Early Land Exchange

The early exchange of Southern Appalachian lands was heavily dominated by wealthy Eastern speculators. One of the bigger reasons for this domination was the high prices of former Native American Appalachian land, and as a result "when land was marketed, it was often too expensive for average Appalachians."^[1] This resulted in a vast disparity of land ownership in the region which heavily favored speculators and left many without land. But this landlessness was not only due to high prices. Past land laws such as the Virginia Land Law of 1770 created confusion over land titles. As a result speculators utilized armies of lawyers to challenge land titles given to Revolutionary War veterans.^[2]

Another tool utilized by speculators was the bribery of local officials, who controlled the sale of land in many cases, in order to get ownership of the region's best lands.^[3]

These lands would be used for the creation of profits for further enrichment. One means of going about this was through the creation of towns; this process of creation would begin with the granting of permission to build such a town by the region's local government (which may have been done through bribery). Once given permission, the speculator could then create towns that would serve as a resting place for settlers traveling out west, or they could be centered around a specific geographical region which held some special resource, such as a falls or a river. These towns created vast amounts of wealth for speculators through the acquisition of rent, which would increase as the surrounding area became more developed, and through heavy taxes. One speculator "collected road tolls and stallage fees at weekly markets"^[4] on top of the profits he was gaining from rents. Ideally most of this wealth would be taxed, but most speculators did not pay many, if any, taxes. In one case the "Kanawha County tax assessor...served absentee engrossers by arranging for their delinquent taxes to "disappear" from public records."^[5] These methods of profit gaining tended to be very fruitful for speculators, but this was not their only means of enrichment.

The Plantation System

A vast amount of speculator land was turned into plantations built by a multitude of free workers and slaves. These peoples were expected to perform multiple activities around

the land including, but not limited to, working in the fields, cutting lumber, fence-posting, and tending animals. These peoples will be further examined in a later section.

Once developed these plantations produced such large quantities of cash crops that:

“Appalachian plantations accounted for nearly one-quarter of the regional output of tobacco and cotton. In the Appalachian counties of Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Virginia, plantations accounted for one-half to three-fifths of the staple crop production. The most extreme case was western Maryland, where a small number of large slaveholders produced four-fifths of the tobacco, averaging 2,400 pounds each.”^[6]

These plantations not only produced a large amount of cash crops but also a relatively large amount of agricultural crops.^[7]

Such crops were produced on land which was owned by speculators or derives from the hands of speculators. It then should not come as a surprise that “nearly two-thirds of the agricultural acreage was monopolized by holders of more than 500 acres.”^[8] Much of the best land in the region was retained by the former speculators or sold to other wealthy elite, and it is these lands which the plantations were built on. The rest of the agricultural acreage, which did not have plantations developed upon them, were the lands of the small farmer.

The Small Farmer

The small farmer class originated from a number of places. Some may have been veterans or already existent land holders which were not attacked by speculators, others may have had the money to purchase the property in the early land exchange but were not extremely wealthy, others may have been able to buy the land once Appalachian land prices began to fall due to the opening of the west, etc. The farms which were built on the lands acquired by these small farmers would be numerous and smaller than their plantation counterparts.

These smaller farms were more numerous than the plantations, so much so that a vast majority of the farms in the region were that of small farmers.^[9] These small farms were run by a moderately wealthy middle class which, contrary to popular belief, were not yeomen-like subsistence producers. Rather, these small farms were operated by families which depended on the market to a large extent. Morrison writes that “[n]early nine-tenths of the region's farm owners consumed less than one-fifth of their total food crop production or grew staple crops.”^[10] Subsistence production was very rare in the lowlands of Southern Appalachia and when it was existent it was secluded to small, specific regions.

These smaller, non subsistence small farms produced a number of crops. Some produced agricultural crops, others produced animals, and some produced cash crops

such as cotton and tobacco. In order to produce such crops these small farms utilized a number of labor mechanisms. Some used family labor, others used wage-labor, and some used slave labor. It may come as a surprise to some that slave labor was not overwhelmingly used by these farms and varied depending on what was being produced. Slave labor was utilized more on farms which produced staple cash crops rather than those which did not.^[11] Those small farms which did utilize slave labor typically did not have more than nine slaves. Although few in number when slavery was used it played a vital role in the production of crops on the small farm. It is these slaves and workers which built the region as a whole, and as such, an understanding of the material conditions of these peoples is necessary for an understanding of the region as a whole. We will first consider the free worker class.

The Free Worker

The free worker class was a collection of people which depended on the various landowners for their continued reproduction; these people did not own land of their own, and did not retain the wealth necessary to move west. The free worker class was the majority class of free men in Southern Appalachia and it was this class, along with the enslaved class, which developed the plantations and farmlands in the early years of the republic. One section of the free worker class which was hired to develop the land was that of the tenants. Tenants were landless peoples who owned their own animals and cultivation tools. This section would rent lands from speculators in exchange for the ability to live and farm on such lands. These rented lands could range anywhere from

twenty to two hundred acres. On this land tenants were stipulated by contract to perform various activities other than farming for their own personal needs. Such activities included things as: fence posting, lumber cutting, working in the landlord's fields, and other various activities outlined in the contract.^[12] Tenants were also expected to give a portion of their crop or its earnings to the landlord. Some tenants had no issue with this exchange as they may have produced crop surpluses whilst others may have had a harder time surviving under these terms. Another section similar to tenants was that of the share-croppers.

Share-croppers differ from tenants in that share-croppers do not own any animals or cultivation tools, rather everything they used was advanced to them by the landlord. Due to this the "landlord's legal control over the cropper's labor and possessions was complete."^[13] Everything used and created by the sharecropper was legally owned by the landlord who could do what he pleased with it when he willed it. The sharecropper was expected to perform numerous activities for the general upkeep of the land. Some were also expected to do other labor activities such as mining, and lumber cutting on top of farming and general land upkeep. In exchange the sharecropper was given a plot of land to grow his own crops or was given foodstuffs by the landlord, tools to cultivate his plot with, and a house for him and his family to live under. Due to this dynamic many share-cropper households struggled to produce or acquire enough foodstuffs for their own reproduction due to the landlord's production quotas. In many cases "a poor household...was allocating its labor time toward the production of cash crops, even

though it was not producing enough foodstuffs for its members to survive."^[14] As a result of this "more than three-quarters of the Appalachian cropper households were food-deficient; that is, they failed to produce enough food crops to supply their household consumption needs."^[15] Many sharecroppers did not stay in one place for a long period of time and moved from farm to farm regularly. The lives of these peoples were full of hardships and poverty, but for many there was seemingly nowhere else they could turn. This was their only means of reproduction no matter how brutal it may be. One section which lived a somewhat nicer life than tenants and sharecroppers was that of the farm managers.

Farm managers were overseers of land owned by far-flung landowners. This section would be contracted by the landowner to oversee the development and production of commodities from the land. These managers would work on the land, and in some cases on larger farms, hire, and oversee the labor of those below him, in exchange for a wage, foodstuffs for their own sustenance, and a house to rent out.^[16] Most of the sections of the free worker class that we have looked at lived and worked on the farmland, but that does not mean investment in non-agricultural production did not take place.

Many of "Southern Appalachia's large farm owners leased flour mills, sawmills, blacksmith shops, and gristmills"^[17] where they employed many wage-laborers. Those who worked at these centers of production may have also been employed in labor

activities such as mining and log cutting. In exchange for these activities wage-laborers could be paid with a portion of the product produced, money wages, or wages in kind. Some of these wage-laborers rented out land owned by those who employed them. These rented out lands typically contained a small house and garden plot. Those which lived on land rented out by their employer were known as cottage tenants. These cottage tenants were useful for cheap labor as wages did not have to cover all sustenance needs as many were provided with a garden plot. Another section which allowed for cheap labor was the nomadic proletariat.

The nomadic proletariat were a section of the free worker class which performed agricultural and non-agricultural work but most did not always live in quarters rented out by their employer. This section of “wage laborers accounted for more than one out of every two....Appalachian families”^[18]. Some may have lived in the same building as their employer as contracted wage-laborers but many did not as most lived in adjacent towns. Most contracts were centered around agricultural work and were not long term, as most were day or week contracts and the rate of employment depended on the season; due to this most “Southern Appalachians day laborers...remained unemployed five to six months of the year”.^[19] These circumstances can be best described through a nineteenth century account which states that:

“Laborers wages [in western North Carolina] were from 50 cents to one dollar a day or eight dollars a month . . . ain't general for people to hire here only for harvest time; fact is, a man couldn't earn his board, let alone his wages, for six months in the year.

But what do these men who hire out during harvest time do during the rest of the year; do they have to earn enough in those two to three months to live on for the other eight or nine?

Well they gets jobs sometimes, and they goes from one place to another.

But in winter time, when you say there's not work enough to pay their board?

Well, they keeps a goin' round from one place to another, and gets their living somehow."^[20]

Many of these nomadic proletarians lived in extremely poor conditions and struggled to provide for themselves and their families. The tragedy of this section, and many of the other sections of the free worker class, is that these peoples were trapped in their circumstance. They did not have the money to purchase titles to land, nor did they have the wealth to move out west. They seemed to have been stuck in place, forced to live miserable lives at the hands of those seeking profits.

These labor-mechanisms existed purley for the maximization of profits at the expense of the lower classes. It is these classes which played a vital role in the development of the land and transformation of wealth which would be hoarded by the ruling classes. This development of land and transformation of wealth was not only done by the free worker class, but also by the enslaved class.

The Enslaved Class

The enslaved class was predominantly made up of African slaves who descended from peoples which came to the Americas through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. This class

of people had no property of their own and were fully dependent on their masters for sustenance. This sustenance came in the form of property such as animals, a small building for a house, and tools for cultivation. Masters were as well obligated by law to provide slaves with quality food adequate for their continued reproduction. "What kind or quality of food was sufficient [for reproduction] appears to have been left to custom. In one case animal food was held to be necessary and customary."^[21] This food provided by masters was not provided for the well-being of the slaves, but rather, just enough for the slave to continue working for the master.

Most slaves worked "for more than twelve hours a day during the busy season, and ten hours for the rest of the year."^[22] These hours were long and grueling for many as most had to work with physical and mental illnesses. These illnesses were magnified depending on the intensity of the work that was being done. Most slaves worked as field slaves, which were employed in the production of crops such as staple cash crops. Others were domestic slaves, which were employed in domestic household labor. The work of both sections had major influences on the development of the slaves and their descendents.

Most domestic slaves were better educated than field slaves. This is due to the domestic slave being around their masters more, and as such domestic slaves could pick up the mannerisms of their masters and could be taught by the children how to read the gospel and nothing else. Teaching slaves how to read and write was forbidden,

but the former was not as enforced as the latter. The deprivation of education was used as a tool of oppression. If a slave could not write then he could not communicate with those in the outside world. If the slave could not read outside of the gospel then he could not pick up notions of freedom, among other things. This is just one example of oppression that was used to control slaves. Other tools included things such as violent and brutal punishments for breaking rules, police slave patrols, malnourishment, psychological abuse, and lack of rights under the law.

This oppression did not only apply to slaves, but also to their free black counterparts. American slavery is unique in that “the slave among the ancients...belonged to the same race as his master, and he was often the superior of the two in education and instruction. Freedom was the only distinction between them; and when freedom was conferred, they were easily confounded together.”^[23] In American Slavery, race is fetishized with the class of slave to such an extent that the two become inseparable. This fetishism would haunt the descendants of former slaves for generations, and due to this most descendants of former slaves would never gain the same legal rights as Whites. Some who did wish to escape the horrors of the plantations and apartheid society turned to the same location many free workers did, the Highlands.

The Highlands

The Highlands are the regions of Appalachia dominated by turbulent mountainous landscapes. Unlike the Lowlands this region was not fully colonized by planters and its

ecological base was left generally intact during the antebellum period, although that is not to say the region was uninhabited.

After the natives were forced from their ancestral homelands the region became inhabited by various sections of European colonizers. In the early years many yeomen lived in the highlands and gained subsistence from hunting, small gardens, and animal raising. Further supplements to subsistence living may have also been found in small communities. Those which lived in these communities may have used land which they held no title to, for these lands were owned by “absentee landowners”^[24] who found no use for the land in the early years due to its unsuitable properties for large scale farming.

Such land may have not been suitable for those seeking profits but it did provide a vast ecological base which allowed some to derive sustenance from. These subsistence peoples were not totally isolated from the lowland markets, but rather wielded a great deal of autonomy not present in many lowland regions. This autonomy was seen as a haven for some, and as such it became a home for them.

These highlands created a sort of haven for peoples wishing to escape the lowland class dynamic created by profit seekers. This antebellum class dynamic has been given a general outline in this article but should be further researched by the interested

reader; for such a dynamic is immensely complex and has left many scars on the region which continue to be felt.

Recommended Further Reading

A History of Dispossession, By Andrew Kordik:

<https://isreview.org/issue/109/history-dispossession>

Extraction, Ecology, Exploitation, and Oppression: The Political Economy of Coal in Appalachia, By William R. Wishart:

https://trace.tennessee.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1249&context=utk_gradthes

Medical-social conditions of slaves in the South, By Harry Bloch, M.D

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2611674/?page=1>

Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia, By Steven Stoll

The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, By Wilma Dunaway

Citations

[1] Dunaway, Wilma. 1996. *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700-1860*, 67, University of North Carolina Press.

[2] Drake, Richard. 2001. *A History of Appalachia*, 61, The University of Kentucky Press.

[3] Dunaway, Wilma. 1996. *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700-1860*, 65, University of North Carolina Press.

[4] *Ibid.*, 60.

[5] *Ibid.*, 65.

[6] *Ibid.*, 136.

[7] *Ibid.*, 135.

[8] *Ibid.*, 130.

[9] *Ibid.*, 134.

[10] *Ibid.*, 133.

[11] *Ibid.*, 134.

[12] *Ibid.*, 97.

[13] *Ibid.*, 99.

[14] *Ibid.*, 100.

[15] *Ibid.*, 101.

[16] *Ibid.*, 102.

[17] *Ibid.*, 103.

[18] *Ibid.*, 106.

[19] *Ibid.*, 107.

[20] *Ibid.*, 106.

[21] B. J. R. 1893, *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 1, No. 4: *Features Of American Slavery*, 481, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

[22] *Ibid.*, 481.

[23] Ibid., 475

[24] Drake, Richard. 2001. A History of Appalachia, 60, The University of Kentucky Press.