Plain Folk Recovered: Class, Property And Agriculture In Lawrence County, Alabama, 1850-1860

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University of Mississippi

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PLAIN FOLK RECOVERED: CLASS, PROPERTY, AND AGRICULTURE
OF YEOMEN AND PLANTERS IN LAWRENCE COUNTY, ALABAMA, 1850–1860

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of History
The University of Mississippi

by

JOSEPH THOMAS RICHARDSON

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the population and economy of farmers in Lawrence County, a county in northern Alabama, in the decade between 1850 and 1860. It uses the manuscript schedules of the United States census and statistical analysis aided by a computer database to determine landownership and bring a focus to the class of landowning yeoman farmers on the border between two physiographic regions: the Tennessee Valley, where land and resources were largely dominated by large planters, and the hill country in the south of the county, where yeomen enjoyed access to open land and opportunity for economic advancement. It shows that landownership, as the defining characteristic of yeomen, made a substantial difference in the fortunes of yeoman farmers vis-à-vis tenants who had access to land but did not own it. It reconsiders the arguments of Frank Owsley, the pioneering southern historian who first brought attention to yeoman farmers in the 1940s, in the context of subsequent historiography. Contrary to Owsley’s thesis, it argues yeomen were neither prosperous nor upwardly mobile, but were stagnating economically. They were losing ground in the share of resources they held in the economy to the expansion of planters, as property in both land and slaves became increasingly concentrated among the wealthy elites. Yeomen in particular were becoming decreasingly involved in the institution of slavery as the nation neared the Civil War.
DEDICATION

To my parents, for giving everything they are, so that I could be everything I was meant to be.

And in memory of the yeoman farmers of Lawrence County, Alabama, whose lives and labors leave a proud legacy for their descendants; and especially of Edmond Dutton, the image and archetype of a southern yeoman, faithful to his family and country.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to many dear people who have seen me to the end of this road. First I would like to thank my thesis committee, Anne Twitty, Charles Reagan Wilson, and Deirdre Cooper Owens, whose ready direction and timely aid have made this thesis possible.

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Introduction

One of the most notorious historiographical exchanges of the past century occurred in the 1940s between southern historian Frank Owsley, who had recently argued for the existence and socioeconomic importance of a class of “plain folk” who undergirded antebellum southern society, and economist Fabian Linden, who sought to undercut the basis of Owsley’s quantitative analysis. In a time before quantitative methods were commonly applied to social history, Owsley’s pioneering use of statistical analysis on manuscript census schedules promised to open new doors for historians; but Linden’s criticism startled the profession and cast doubt upon the method’s efficacy as well as Owsley’s conclusions. When historians again picked up the study of middling, yeoman farmers some thirty years later, many of Owsley’s claims of a “comfortable” and “constantly improving” yeoman class, who lived harmoniously with neighboring planters in a “yeoman democracy,” were left to the dustbin as fanciful and unrealistic.¹

Since that time, a number of detailed studies on yeoman farmers in various geographic and economic situations have been published, notably Steven Hahn’s *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890*

(1983), Lacy Ford’s *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800–1860* (1988), and Stephanie McCurry’s *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (1995). The former two examined yeomen in upcountry regions of Georgia and South Carolina, where yeomen held most of the land, faced relatively little competition with large planters, and held political and social sway. The latter focused on yeomen in the South Carolina Low Country, where planters were predominant and yeomen lived on the margins of plantation society in close interaction with their planter neighbors. These works engaged with and built upon Owsley’s methods, combining with it extensive work on traditional historical sources that had been gathered since Owsley’s time, and brought to light many important aspects of yeoman life, from Hahn’s appraisal of “customs of mutuality,” the bonds of interdependence between yeomen that supported the autonomy and independence of all, to Ford’s emphasis on the involvement of yeomen in the market economy, to McCurry’s detail of the inner life of the yeoman household, and the means by which the yeoman farmer “produced independence.”

Several of Owsley’s most basic questions, however, perhaps seen as antiquated or elementary, warrant further examination. In particular, were yeoman farmers “constantly improving” throughout the antebellum period? Were they upwardly mobile, acquiring land and slaves to join the ranks of planters? Did yeomen face competition with larger farmers for land and resources? Are yeoman farmers even a distinct and interesting economic class in themselves?

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In this thesis, I reengage these claims of Owsley, through the lens of examining one county in the Tennessee Valley region of northern Alabama, a county which presents a hybrid of the locations examined by Hahn, Ford, and McCurry. Lawrence County stands with one foot in the fertile Tennessee Valley, where most land and resources were held by large planters, akin to McCurry’s Low Country; and the other foot in Alabama’s hill country, predominantly yeoman and more resembling the upcountry of Hahn and Ford. The close proximity of these two regions, marked by two separate census districts, demonstrates the vivid contrasts between the two diverse geographies and populations in their social and economic structures. It represents, too, a yeoman population that would have enjoyed easy access to staple markets afforded by the railroad and river improvements funded by the local elite, as well as experienced close contact and competition with planters, while at the same time living in a region whose character reflected the mutuality and self-sufficiency typical of yeomen. Finally, with the cotton boom of the 1850s, Lawrence County, even in its southern, yeoman district, was in the course of a slow transition from a yeomen-driven society to a planter-driven one. Between the 1850 and 1860 censuses, Lawrence County marked a significant redistribution of land and property and a shift in the relative position of the yeoman class. The population of the county contracted sharply by about 15 percent, while the average size of a farm increased from about 120 improved acres to nearly 190. I will show how land and slaves were becoming increasingly dominated by elite planters, and how, despite the economic advantage they possessed over other small farmers of owning clear title to their land, yeoman farmers were not prospering but losing ground in the larger economy.

In the first chapter, I examine Owsley’s claims, especially in light of Linden’s critique of them, and in the light of subsequent historiography, as important background to considering
these claims and the study of yeoman farmers today. I show that though Linden’s criticisms did call into question much of Owsley’s statistical analysis, they did little to approach Owsley’s overarching argument, that the majority of the “plain folk” of the South owned their own land and therein possessed the resources to lead a “comfortable” existence. Even beyond his claims, Owsley’s methodology using manuscript census schedules laid a groundwork which social historians of many different social groups have since built on, and I will proceed from this groundwork in my examination of Lawrence County.

The second chapter takes some initial steps into that examination, introducing Lawrence County and providing context for the case study that follows. I describe the diverse geography of North Alabama and the unique situation it presents us in a county straddling the border between plantation country and hill country, and present the demographics of the county through its formative years, up until the 1850 and 1860 censuses, which will be the means of our study. I then discuss the rise of the Tennessee Valley as a major cotton-producing region, and its eclipse by the fertile Black Belt counties of central Alabama, setting the stage for the developments of the cotton boom of the 1850s.

The third chapter, leading into analysis of the census, examines several important aspects of methodology crucial to the definition of a yeoman farmer. I present that his landholding is his key distinguishing quality, and then examine a method, first proposed by Owsley, for determining from the census alone whether or not a farmer owned his land, and I establish a set of criteria for defining yeomen suitable for a case study of Lawrence County. I consider how various forms of land tenure, from clear landownership to tenancy, and might appear through census records. Finally I examine the distribution of land and slaves in Lawrence County in 1850, before the great changes of the ensuing decade.
The final chapter completes the case study of Lawrence County in 1850 and 1860, showing the economic shifts that took place over the course of the decade and the redistribution of land and wealth that followed. I present that, in confirmation of our suppositions regarding yeoman farmers, the ownership of land did give a substantial advantage to a farmer’s ability to produce wealth, over that of a tenant farmer with access to land but not ownership. Slaveholding, even at the entry level of a single slave, also appears to have given a significant edge. Despite this, slaveholding became decreasingly common for yeomen in Lawrence County, as slaves became more and more concentrated on large plantations. Land, too, became increasingly concentrated among the largest farms. The yeoman class, rather than prospering and growing as Owsley proposed, was stagnating economically and gradually being pushed out of Lawrence County.
Chapter 1: Plain Folk Recovered

In February 1940, historian Frank Lawrence Owsley first advanced a challenge to what he decried as an antiquated stereotype of the social structure of the antebellum South. Based largely on the reports of northern travelers and observers such as Frederick Law Olmstead, the view had come to predominate, Owsley claimed, that only three classes had existed in the South: the aristocratic planters, ruling over both society and economy; black slaves, supporting the plantation system with their labor; and the masses of “poor whites,” lazy, shiftless, and marginalized. In fact, Owsley argued, a vast body of small slaveholders and nonslaveholders who were neither wealthy nor poor made up the great majority of southern society. These “plain folk,” as he called them, or yeoman farmers, largely owned the land they worked and lived self-sufficiently alongside the great plantations. This proposal, which became known as the “Owsley Thesis,” brought the southern agricultural middle class to the attention of historians for the first time.

Owsley published three articles in the *Journal of Southern History* presenting this thesis between 1940 and 1945, and in 1949 his monograph, *Plain Folk of the Old South*. His research

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3 I have used the terms “yeoman farmers,” “yeomen,” and “plain folk” synonymously and interchangeably in this thesis. Owsley’s preferred term was plain folk.

4 Owsley received both a B.S. and an M.S. in history from Alabama Polytechnic Institute in Auburn, Alabama, later known as Auburn University. He studied at the University of Chicago under pioneering southern historian William Edward Dodd, and received his Ph.D. in 1924. Owsley spent some thirty years of his career as a professor of history at Vanderbilt University, leaving in 1949 to accept the chair of the history department at the University of Alabama.
featured a statistical analysis of the manuscript returns of the United States census for the years 1850 and 1860, calculating distribution of wealth, land, and slaves among the southern rural population. It was the first project to make extensive use of the manuscript census in this way, and pioneered a methodology that has become a mainstay of social history. A group of Owsley’s graduate students at Vanderbilt University, who aided Owsley in the research, went on to publish articles and monographs applying the Owsley Thesis and its methods on individual southern states. The initial publications of Owsley and his students, who became known as the “Owsley School,” were received to general acclaim for both their groundbreaking methodology and their illuminating conclusions.5

But in April 1946, Fabian Linden, who had been a graduate student in history at Harvard prior to World War II, published a scathing review article of the entire body of work of Owsley and his group, calling into serious question both Owsley’s methods of statistical analysis and his conclusions. Linden’s article came as a serious blow to Owsley’s claims. In the eyes of much of

the historical profession, Linden had conclusively discredited the Owsley School’s entire line of research, three years before Owsley even published his final work.⁶

Linden’s refutation had a chilling effect. The critique attached itself doggedly to Owsley’s research until, according to historian Lacy K. Ford, “[the] Owsley-Linden citation … emerged as the most familiar, and the most predictable, note in all southern historical writing.”⁷ Ford wrote that “the questions about method and interpretation raised by Fabian Linden … seemed to stifle rather than encourage further scholarly examination of southern yeomen.”⁸ Beyond Owsley’s immediate circle, historians abandoned the Owsley Thesis and any other research involving yeoman farmers. For more than forty years, there would not be another monograph-length study of yeomen.⁹

Though Linden’s criticism undercut Owsley’s evidence, the historical profession nonetheless found value in his statistical sampling of the manuscript census, and adapted his methods. The content of his thesis has not fared as well. Since the 1980s, historians such as

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Steven Hahn, Lacy Ford, and Stephanie McCurry have again taken up close examinations of yeoman farmers, but from different approaches than Owsley’s. Their works acknowledge the existence and numerical majority of the yeoman class, and generally give a token nod to Owsley for his foundational work (invariably paired with the Linden citation), but markedly neither approach Owsley’s discarded work nor build upon his ideas. Many of the issues Owsley considered deserve additional attention. This thesis aims to systematically reexamine the Owsley Thesis in light of both Linden’s critique and later criticism to assess whether Owsley’s ideas should be reconsidered.

*The Owsley Thesis*

A preliminary task, in order to consider what of Owsley’s “plain folk” thesis might be recovered, must be to enumerate what he actually proposed. Most immediately, Owsley argued that an erroneous myth had taken hold in historiography, particularly among northern and northern-educated historians, that there had existed only three socioeconomic classes in the antebellum South: planters, poor whites, and black slaves. He presented as a corrective that there had in fact been a large population of middling farmers who were neither planters nor poor whites, and who made up by far the bulk of the agricultural population. Contrary to the myth, these “plain folk” were a numerical majority and not marginal to southern society. They were “middle-class” people, a “vital element of the social and economic structure of the Old South.” The plain folk engaged with their planter neighbors in trade, in social activities, and in local political meetings.10

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These plain folk were as a rule economically secure and enjoyed a “comfortable” standard of living, owning farms large enough and fertile enough to provide for their families—not only were they secure, but “on the whole their position was … constantly improving.”

According to Owsley, the “basic means of production” was “well distributed” among all classes of the population. Apparently land, however, was the only “means of production” Owsley intended to argue was “well distributed.” In his 1940 presidential address to the Southern Historical Association, which offered a rough overview of his yeoman thesis, Owsley stated that, unlike in the industrial East, “the basic means of production . . . in the South as a whole was well distributed among all classes of the population. The overwhelming majority of southern families in 1860 owned their farms and livestock.”

To suggest that the “means of production”—a phrase with particular implications to Marxist historians—was “well distributed,” while apparently excluding from consideration the human capital of slave property, was an apparently naïve omission on Owsley’s part that immediately opened his thesis to criticism. Slaves were at least as significant a “means of production” as was land. Owsley’s emphasis here, however, was on the equal distribution and nearly universal ownership of land. Owsley only made this argument in his 1940 address, not in any other published article or his monograph, the final promulgation of his thesis. It is possible that he intended to retract it; but the statement nonetheless became a key focus for Owsley’s critics.

Owsley also argued that agriculture was comprised of two separate economies, complementary to each other rather than competitive: the farm economy, engaged in diversified, self-sufficient agriculture and producing primarily foodstuffs, and the plantation economy, 

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dependent upon slave labor and producing primarily staple crops. The farm economy, together
with livestock grazing, gave sustenance not only to the plain folk but provided even plantations
with a large portion of their food.  

Socially, according to Owsley, wealthy planters and plainolk commonly associated with each other “in all religious activities and in the schools,” and
even had “frequent ties of blood kinship” with one another. Generally, a sense of unity prevailed
between the two classes. Politically, the planter class did not dominate the plain folk coercively,
but instead the plain folk gave their support out of mutual respect for individual planters for their
qualities of character, concern, and community leadership. Owsley merely suggested these
claims in the course of his considerations of plain folk culture, and offered little evidence in
support of them.

Owsley argued that there was no significant class consciousness among yeomen, and no
class conflict between yeomen and planters. Instead, yeomen perceived a steady continuum of
prosperity from their state to that of the most successful planter, and an open avenue of
advancement with no obstacles to their success and prosperity. According to Owsley, yeomen
and planters were essentially on equal footing with equal opportunities economically.

Owsley rejected the argument that slavery as a system was detrimental or impedimental
to nonslaveholders. Even nonslaveholders could be economically secure. Few yeomen aspired to
be wealthy, however, with most content to own land and live in comfort and security.
Nonetheless, Owsley argued, yeomen prospered during the decade of the 1850s as a general rule,
growing in land holdings and wealth. At a large rate, nonslaveholders acquired slave property.
Many even rose to the status of planters.

13 Owsley, Plain Folk, 134–136.
14 Owsley, Plain Folk, 134–139.
As a class, the plain folk grew considerably in both number and prosperity between 1850 and 1860.\footnote{Owsley, “Economic Basis,” 30–35.} Yeomen farmers generally lived interspersed with large planters, on land equally as fertile and valuable, Owsley proposed. He rejected the generally accepted argument, advanced by Ulrich B. Phillips and Lewis C. Gray, that large planters expanding their land holdings pushed the yeomen off prime lands to poor and marginal property.\footnote{Owsley, “Economic Basis,” 44–45.}

At the same time, Owsley proposed a dramatic migration thesis, the subject of his third plain folk article. There were two waves of migration onto the southern frontiers, according to Owsley. First, there was a wave of herdsmen, the “typical southern pioneers,” whose primary livelihood was livestock grazing and the cultivation of small gardens and corn patches for subsistence. Since the best pasture lands were as a rule also the most fertile for farming, the second wave of migration, the farmers, pushed the herdsmen from these open ranges into less arable regions, the highlands and piney woods. Owsley suggested that it was these herdsmen, mountaineers, and backwoodsmen, living on the fringes of civilization and cultivating little land, whom travelers and observers such as Olmsted incorrectly identified as “poor whites,” giving rise to the stereotype. Even further, Owsley argued that migrating farmers tended to choose to settle on lands that were the most similar in climate, soil, and terrain to their points of origin, both for psychological reasons of familiarity and for practical reasons of the suitability of the agricultural skills and implements they already possessed. In many cases, therefore, farmers deliberately chose poorer lands, regardless of their fertility or value.\footnote{Owsley, “Migration,” 147–176.}
**Linden’s Critique**

At the time Fabian Linden wrote his review article, the Owsley School was at its apogee. Blanche Henry Clark had published her monograph, *The Tennessee Yeomen, 1840-1860*, in 1942, and Herbert Weaver had recently published *Mississippi Farmers, 1850-1860* in 1945. Two other Owsley students had published articles, Chase C. Mooney in September 1942, applying the thesis to Tennessee, and Harry L. Coles, Jr. in August 1943, applying it to Louisiana. Owsley himself had published all three of his plain folk articles, the last one, concerning the migration thesis, appearing in May 1945. Linden directed his critique against this entire body of work. It is unlikely, however, that Linden had seen Owsley’s third article at the time he penned his review, since he addressed none of the migration claims, some of which would have been relevant to his criticisms.18

Linden had initially submitted his article to *The Journal of Southern History*, but the journal was then published at Vanderbilt University, Owsley’s academic home, and its editor was William C. Binkley, his department chair. Linden’s harsh critique of a Vanderbilt professor and students disturbed Binkley. He was unsure whether to even send the article out for review since the only people qualified to review the claims, in Binkley’s view, were other students and close acquaintances of Owsley. He also felt that if the article were to be published, Owsley and his students should have the chance to respond in the same issue. Ultimately, Binkley rejected the article. Linden then submitted his review to *The Journal of Negro History*, which had a reputation for publishing articles that were critical of prevailing white interpretations of race and

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18 Owsley’s student Mooney would not publish his monograph, *Slavery in Tennessee*, until 1957. Linden, in critiquing Weaver’s contributions to the research, reviewed Weaver’s doctoral dissertation rather than his monograph, not yet published at the time of Linden’s article.
slavery at a time when leading historical journals reinforced traditional, often racist views. Carter G. Woodson, the journal’s editor, readily accepted the piece.\textsuperscript{19}

Linden’s lengthy article presented nearly fifty pages of aggressive criticism of Owsley’s statistical methods and conclusions. The tone throughout the piece appeared harsh, casting Owsley’s findings in starkly negative terms: what Owsley “neglected,” what he “failed to demonstrate,” where “fallacies” and “arithmetic confusion” pervaded the work, and where its methods were “questionable” and its assumptions “dubious.”

Of Owsley’s general thesis that the agricultural middle class had made up a large portion of the southern population and that “the old planter-poor-white stereotype of southern society” was false, Linden scoffed that this was already a “widely accepted fact … [whose] proof certainly does not require laborious processing of unorganized census manuscripts.” Rather, he wrote, “It is the debunking of the ‘two class’ fallacy that has now become the tedious cliché.”\textsuperscript{20}

Linden’s strident tone is especially evident in his footnotes, particularly when regarding lacks and limitations in Owsley’s data. In Owsley’s preliminary article, his calculations of land distribution in 1860 were limited to only a few Alabama counties, due to many of the agricultural schedules for that census having been “lost or destroyed,” according to Owsley’s footnote. Not taking Owsley at his word, Linden inquired to the Alabama Department of Archives and History, only to find the schedules present. He recounted this disparity in a footnote, with the tacit suggestion of Owsley being either deliberately misleading or grossly incompetent. “Dr. Owsley


\textsuperscript{20} Linden, “Economic Democracy,” especially 147–148, 182–187. I have taken some liberty with the use of pronouns and with the attribution of Linden’s charges. In some cases when Linden’s charges were directed at one of Owsley’s associates, I have made Owsley the target, since in nearly all cases Owsley’s positions were the same.
… [claimed] that the … schedules ‘[had] been ‘lost or destroyed.’ But these schedules seem to be available …” In fact, the schedules had only been misplaced at the time of Owsley’s visit, in the midst of construction of the Archives’ new building, and were later found stored in a nearby church.21

Nonetheless, Linden praised Owsley and his group for their contribution to historiography and methodology in their systematic utilization of the manuscript census. In the manuscript census returns, Linden recognized the “limitless source” it presented of economic data on the southern slave economy. There had never before been such a “vast deposit of specific and detailed evidence.” Linden sharply concluded, however, that in order to harness its full historical potential and draw valid conclusions from it, the historian must wield “sharpened historical tools … with scientifically objective postulates.” Just as Owsley’s research had presented a new methodology that excited the historical community with its potential, Linden’s critique was a new kind of mathematical, quantitative criticism that demonstrated the necessity of mature and scientific statistical analysis.22 Linden’s major criticisms were directed toward six aspects of Owsley’s work:

- Owsley had not provided the numbers of farmers in his samples, making it impossible to compare the group of farmers against the larger economy.
- Owsley had selected samples from hand-chosen counties to represent diverse regions of the states studied, to which Linden objected on the grounds that it did not properly represent the whole of the southern economy.

• Owsley did not examine the aggregate landholdings of the yeomanry, either by themselves or as a segment of the whole county or region, which generally reflected the landholdings of yeoman as vastly overshadowed by those of larger landholders.

• Owsley did not prove statistically his argument that small farmers lived interspersed with planters, and that they lived adjacent to each other on land of comparable quality.

• Owsley arguments that the yeoman class was prospering and expanding over the decade of the 1850s were poorly supported by his statistics.

• Owsley, in claiming that yeomen were economically “comfortable” and “secure,” did not present standards by which those qualities could be measured.

The first major point of Linden’s criticism was that Owsley had not provided precise numbers of the yeoman households he examined as a proportion of the overall population. One could not determine how significant a class was, Linden argued, without comparing it to other classes in proportion and holdings. In Owsley’s initial paper, he presented tables indicating the sizes of farms owned by nonslaveholders, but did not provide the overall number of nonslaveholders, that population’s proportion to the slaveholding population, or the aggregate totals of land involved. For example, one table stated that for Fayette County, Alabama, in the Piedmont region, 27.87 percent of nonslaveholding landowners owned farms of between 51 and 100 acres; but he did not indicate the overall number of nonslaveholding landowners, the aggregate total of land in consideration, or the proportion of these farmers and their landholdings against those of the population of slaveholders. In considering sizes of landholdings among slaveholders, he examined different counties than the ones for which he had studied the
nonslaveholders. He offered no direct comparison anywhere between populations of slaveholders and nonslaveholders and their landholdings.23

Because one could not determine what percentage of the overall population these nonslaveholders comprised, Linden argued, one could not assess their economic significance. One Owsley student, Harry Coles, had provided numbers of households in his sample, and from these numbers Linden interpolated, using the published aggregate census totals, that Coles had only studied about 60 percent of the overall rural population. Accounting for 15 percent that might be classified as urban Owsley completely excluded as much as a quarter of the overall population from his examination. Furthermore, Linden pressed, a proper study of “plain people” could not exclude the urban population, which included many middle class workers and laborers who, forced by the slave system to become wage laborers, had “fallen through the very bottom of the agricultural hierarchy.”24

In response to Linden’s point regarding the numbers of households studied and their proportion against the overall population, when Owsley published his monograph, Plain Folk, he modified his tables to provide data regarding the number of households in his samples, as well as direct comparisons between slaveholding and nonslaveholding populations. Linden’s suggestion that Owsley should have included the urban middle class, however, went beyond Owsley’s stated

23 Owsley labeled this region as the piedmont in the 1940 “Economic Basis” article. This is not to be confused with the physiographic section known as the Piedmont Upland, as defined by the Geological Survey of Alabama See C. D. Sapp and J. Emplaincourt, Physiographic Regions of Alabama, special map no. 168 (Tuscaloosa: Geological Survey of Alabama, 1975), online at Alabama Maps, Cartographic Research Laboratory, The University of Alabama, http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/historicalmaps/alabama/index2_1961-1980.htm (accessed 28 November 2013); or University of Alabama Department of Geography, General Physiography (Base Map 6), or Physiographic Regions, both at Alabama Maps, http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/contemporarymaps/alabama/physical/ (accessed 28 November 2013). For Owsley, the “piedmont” refers to the entire area of the uplands above the fall line. For table, see Owsley, “Economic Basis,” 38.

intentions. In Owsley’s agrarian ideal, the “plain folk” were the rural, landholding, middle-class agricultural population. Though Linden proposed that status as an urban laborer might suggest a failure at agriculture, Owsley maintained that this argument reached beyond the scope of his study.

To Linden, however, the primary measure of a class’s economic significance was not its numerical majority, but whether it owned a significant share of wealth and capital relative to the rest of society. Reliance only on numbers of plain folk to indicate significance, Linden warned, was “unreliable” and “deceptive.” In fact, Owsley had indeed suggested that wealth was “well distributed.” When Owsley stated that the “means of production … was well distributed,” however, it was clear from the context that he was referring to land, not slaves—at the very least a misuse of the term “means of production.” Linden proceeded to demonstrate the inequality of the distribution of slaves—certainly a major component of the means of production. Naturally, as he demonstrated, the vast majority were concentrated on large plantations. Linden concluded that “on the basis of the distribution of slaves … it would seem difficult to maintain that there was a significant economic middle class.” Though it is certain that the yeomanry, held against the larger picture and the economic dominance of planters, had little economic power by comparison, Owsley’s thesis focused more upon the class’s security and independence than on their role in the larger economy. He never intended to argue that the plain folk owned the majority of land or total wealth, relative to planters. Owsley had a different concept of “significance,” in which the plain folk’s landownership granted them economic freedom and security.25 Linden next challenged what he called a “questionable” procedure, the suggestion that the predominance of small farmers in one area cancelled out the dominance of large planters in the larger economy.

Owsley and each member of his group had selected sample counties from various regions of their states to demonstrate the varying levels of landownership. In some regions the plain folk were certainly the predominant class both in number and in ownership of land. Linden argued, however, that when considering “significance” of a class, regions must be weighted by “relative importance”—and by “importance,” he meant economic output. Regions of high cotton production, large plantations, and numerous slaves should “receive many times the ‘weight’” of upland regions with lower productivity. The point of Owsley’s regional comparisons, however, had been to demonstrate the importance of locality and regional diversity. Showing that yeomen were predominant numerically and owned the majority of land in a particular region was not to suggest that this translated to economic impact on a larger scale. Despite having little economic power in their larger state and sectional economies, yeomen nonetheless wielded significant power in their counties and regions. Power and influence in a local and regional economy translated to power and influence in local and regional politics, which in turn could command votes on a statewide and national level.26

Proceeding from his macroeconomic perspective, Linden labeled the Owsley group’s focus on regions a “fallacy.” Owsley had posited that selecting representative counties of a state’s diverse socioeconomic regions gave a picture that was “fairly typical of the state as a whole.” Linden rejected this notion, arguing that such an approach only summarized local conditions in the various regions, with no bearing on the overall state. In Linden’s view, Owsley’s samples from the diverse regions of each state did not constitute “adequate” samples of the state. Owsley had chosen his sample regions from each major geographic division of Alabama, which differed from each other both demographically and agriculturally; but Linden

contended that this diversity did not guarantee “representativeness in reflecting overall state
trends.”

Linden then demonstrated the inequality of landholding even within several sample
regions: in each, the wealthiest planters at the top of the economic ladder owned the largest
portion of the land, while smaller farmers owned comparatively little in aggregate. Owsley never
addressed aggregate landholdings within each sample county, not even in Plain Folk. Owsley
continued even in the monograph to present land data in terms of percentages of land owned
rather than aggregate area of land. Owsley’s tables gave the appearance that small landowners
commanded more land and wealth than they actually did. In the Alabama Black Belt, for
example, it might appear meaningful that nearly 60 percent of slaveholding farmers (about 1,400
landowners) and 90 percent of nonslaveholding farmers (about 800 landowners) owned farms of
under 400 acres in 1850; but the aggregate area of these farmers’ land might be dwarfed by that
of the wealthiest farmers who owned upward of 400 acres, some as high as the tens of
thousands.

Linden’s assertion, however, appears to have been true only in regions where there were
many large landholders. In regions where there are few large landholders, such as the upcountry
regions of states, Owsley’s claim of land being well distributed among the population appears
closer to fact, with yeomen holding the greater portion of land. In the hill country counties of the
Alabama uplands, Owsley’s argument would have presented a substantially different picture if
he had worked out the aggregate numbers. Only 8 percent of nonslaveholding landholders (only
4 households) owned farms larger than 400 acres, with the largest farm still under 1,000 acres,

giving an aggregate value of at the most 1,500 acres. The substantially larger portion of aggregate land was owned in farms of fewer than 400 acres by 92 percent of the remaining landholders. Less than 20 percent of households in Fayette County owned slaves.29

In a related criticism, Linden rejected Owsley’s claim that in the Alabama Black Belt, “the small planters and the slaveholding and nonslaveholding farmers owned the larger portion of the landed wealth—perhaps 75 per cent.” Linden suggested that farmers and small planters instead owned less than two-thirds of land. But the difference here is only one of definitions. Owsley defined a “well-to-do, not rich” planter as one who owned fewer than 30 slaves and fewer than 1,000 acres of land; therefore a “large planter” would be one with holdings above these limits. Linden defined a “large planter” merely by Owsley’s land criterion, ignoring the slave definition, so he significantly over-counted the class. This marks the beginning of a question of definitions that has followed the study of social and economic classes in the South throughout its historiography: the definition of a “planter,” or a “yeoman farmer,” or any number of grades in between. Recent historians have commonly followed Owsley in employing both land and slave ownership criteria in the definition of classes, though drawing different conclusions concerning the classes’ roles.30

Linden next challenged Owsley’s claim that “there was no marked difference in the quality of the land held by the slaveholder and the nonslaveholder.” Citing the historiographic tradition of U. B. Phillips and L. C. Gray, Linden argued firmly for the accepted model of land

29 Landownership data for Fayette County from “Economic Basis,” 39, and Plain Folk, 190–191. The 1850 census did not compute totals of slaveholding households; this value is for 1860.
competition. He charged that Owsley had assumed the adjacency of small farms and large plantations merely by the households’ proximity on the census schedules, and rejected Owsley’s claim that farmers and planters lived interspersed, primarily on the grounds that Owsley did not prove the claim statistically. Linden was correct that Owsley had not substantially proven his argument, but Owsley had other evidence not available to Linden in support of his claim. At the Alabama Department of Archives and History, he had discovered the detailed land maps of Greene County, Alabama, drawn in 1856 by tax assessor V. Gayle Snedecor, which showed the landholdings of every landowner in the county. Cross-referencing the names to the agricultural and slave schedules of the census, Owsley created maps based on Snedecor’s that demonstrated that nonslaveholders and slaveholders, small farmers and large planters frequently lived interspersed. Owsley presented these maps in *Plain Folk.*

On its face, Owsley’s claim regarding equal land value and fertility seems overly idealistic and simplistic; but in his criticism, Linden also oversimplified. As Linden pointed out, it should have been easy to observe, by simple arithmetic, that according to the stated cash value of farms and the reported size in improved acreage on the agricultural census schedules, large planters generally showed a higher value of land per acre—though this method is not always reliable, since buildings and other improvements to the land factored into the farm’s cash value. Owsley selected two or three counties to represent various “soil regions” of each southern state, in an effort to consider varying levels of fertility and land value. This does not take into account, however, the diversity of soil types even within a county. Both Owsley and Linden, in assuming that adjacent farms would contain land of the same value and fertility, did

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31 Owsley, “Economic Basis,” 44–45; Linden, 168–169; Owsley, *Plain Folk,* 78–89.
33 Owsley, *Plain Folk,* 10–17.
not take into account the irregularity and striation of soil regions, as well as the importance of topography and location in determining land value. A distance of only a few yards might make all the difference between the richest, most fertile soil and the poorest bog.

Linden rejected Owsley’s arguments that the class of yeomen was rapidly expanding over the course of the 1850s, a position Linden called “defensible” but ineffectively proven. In an effort to prove this hypothesis, Owsley cross-referenced the 1850 and 1860 censuses for a number of counties in order to trace the changing fortunes of farmers over the decade. However, as Linden indicated, this necessarily gave a biased sample. The farmers remaining in the same county over the course of the 1850s were generally the ones who were faring well economically. Such farmers would naturally show increase and expansion of holdings. Owsley’s method excluded the farmers who may have been driven from their land by economic pressures or left voluntarily to seek greener pastures elsewhere. Farmers were not “on the make,” Linden suggested, but “on the move.”

Owsley’s evidence did not adequately prove the hypothesis that yeomen were prospering and the yeoman class was expanding. Linden argued instead that small farmers were “particularly nomadic,” noting that as high as 85 percent of nonslaveholders in Jefferson County, Mississippi, seemed to have left the area between the 1850 and 1860 censuses. Linden should not have generalized this statistic to all regions and states, however. Jefferson County, low on the Mississippi River and high in land value and cotton production, may have had more reasons for a higher rate of migration than many Mississippi counties, especially due to competition for land and access to the river.

Finally, Linden rejected Owsley’s assertion that yeomen were economically “comfortable” and “secure.” More specifically, according to Owsley, they owned farms “large enough and fertile enough to produce basic necessities.” Even further, Owsley argued that since the majority of the white population owned “sufficient” land, livestock, and tools, this was a standard by which to exclude as high as 75 percent of white families from the label of “poor whites.” But Linden charged that Owsley failed to define standards by which to measure “comfort” and “security” and “sufficiency,” and so could not demonstrate his claim. Also, since Owsley effectively excluded “poor whites” from his examination entirely, his study failed to see any farmers that were not “comfortable.”

**Owsley’s Response**

While initial reviews of the Owsley group’s work were generally favorable, their tone changed markedly following Linden’s critique. Avery Craven, in reviewing Herbert Weaver’s *Mississippi Farmers*, addressed the work of the entire Owsley school, hailing their findings as “revolutionary” in recovering the place of yeomen in southern society. Craven, however, closed his review with the warning, no doubt in response to Linden’s review published two months earlier, that some historians would reject the claims of the Owsley school. Southern history, Craven wrote, was “a field where honest efforts at revision bring only distortion and condemnation.”

Owsley never offered a direct defense or rebuttal of Linden’s criticisms. He gave only a brief statement, in a July 1947 letter to the editor of the *American Historical Review (AHR)*, in

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defense of the work of Herbert Weaver, Owsley’s student and major collaborator in the plain folk project. Linden had reviewed *Mississippi Farmers*, Weaver’s monograph, in the January 1947 edition of the *AHR*, distilling the major methodological criticisms of his earlier review article into a curt appraisal. The same criticisms Linden directed at Weaver applied equally to the methodology of Owsley and his entire group. Owsley’s response here, therefore, is tantamount to a defense of his own work against Linden’s overall critique.

In the letter, Owsley argued firmly that Linden’s criticisms had avoided the major subject matter of Weaver’s work. “Mr. Linden’s piece was not a review of Weaver’s book,” he stated flatly, “for he fail[ed] to reveal the essence of the work to the reader.” The actual subject of the work, in Owsley’s terms, was “the analysis of land tenure” in the late antebellum South, during the period from 1850 to 1860. “Not once [did] [Linden] intimate” that this was the monograph’s “primary objective”—instead he termed the work, together with Blanche Henry Clark’s *Tennessee Yeomen*, as “studies of slavery.” Linden, Owsley charged, “[avoided] the reviewer’s fundamental obligation to discuss the contents and purpose of a book,” and instead focused his critique on the author’s methodology—in Owsley’s view, not valid grounds for dismissing the work. “Mr. Linden damns by the simple process of assertion,” Owsley declared, comparing Linden’s critical approach to “a familiar technique in propaganda today,” one “disheartening to see … employed in historical criticism.” Readers of Weaver’s book, Owsley maintained, would find no resemblance between it and “Mr. Linden’s ‘review’” of it.

With regard to Linden’s criticisms of the group’s methodology, Owsley maintained that they had done all statistical calculations scrupulously, methodically, and thoroughly—as if their care and scrupulosity by themselves overcame the fundamental errors of method and data that Linden had exposed. In their study of land tenure, the group had processed their data with punch
cards and an electric calculator—in fact Owsley was among the first historians to make use of these technologies in quantifying historical data. Any statistical errors—“and I am not at all sure that there are any,” Owsley interjected—would be very few and minor, and would not affect the group’s conclusions.

Linden’s assertions against the group’s sampling method, Owsley said, were also “of doubtful validity.” Rather than an inadequate sample as Linden had charged, the samples included an even larger percentage of the population than did “the usually successful polls of Gallup and others.” The group selected sample counties typical of a state’s various regions, by measures of soil, population, amount of improved land, cash value of farms, agricultural production, and number of slaves. Linden argued instead for a “judicious weighing” of each region by its “relative importance,” measured in economic production, Given Owsley’s objective was to study land tenure and not the plantation economy, however, his method no doubt served his intended purposes.38

Owsley maintained that an analysis of land tenure in the antebellum South was a valuable and much-needed study that approached a valid historical problem. Such a study had never been attempted on an extensive scale; in fact, it had never before been thought possible, since the United States census did not record statistics of land ownership until 1880. But, Owsley declared, land tenure between 1850 and 1860 could be determined by a “complicated operation” of studying and cross-referencing the manuscript schedules of the census. In short, if a farmer on the population declared possessing $4,000 in real property, and that same farmer appeared on the agricultural schedule as operator of a farm with a cash value of $4,000, Owsley deemed it conclusive evidence that the farmer owned his land. A comparison of the census schedules with

surviving tax lists in several counties attested to the accuracy of this method. The detailed account of the Owsley group’s methodology that he gave in this 1947 letter appeared again nearly verbatim in his 1949 *Plain Folk*.

The editors of the *AHR* had likely tapped Linden to review Weaver’s book on the merits of his lengthier review article in the *Journal of Negro History*. Ironically, Owsley’s response to Linden in the *AHR* may have drawn even more readers to Linden’s more thorough refutation of the plain folk work than would otherwise have read it. Appended to Owsley’s letter was the editorial note that “the attention of those interested” should be called to “the elaboration of Mr. Linden’s views” in the *Journal of Negro History*.39

For the final formulation of his thesis, his monograph *Plain Folk*, Owsley collected the arguments of his three plain folk articles, and expounded on his ideas. The end product consisted of four chapters, together with a lengthy appendix containing the tables of his statistical analysis. The first chapter, “Southern Society: A Reinterpretation,” stated his basic thesis. “To the Promised Land: The Migration and Settlement of the Plain Folk,” the second, elaborated upon Owsley’s thesis of yeoman migration and the pioneering class of southern herdsmen. The third chapter, “Southern Folkways,” presented an idyllic and romanticized portrait of homespun southern life, describing everything from the pastimes of children and adults, the faith of the country church, shaped-noted singing schools, to the origin of the southern drawl. Owsley’s final chapter, “The Role of the Plain Folk,” laid out a detailed description of the role of the plain folk in social, political, and economic relations with their neighbors and communities.40

40 Owsley, *Plain Folk*, inclusive pp. for chapters, 133–149.
Palpably absent from *Plain Folk*, however, was any sense that Owsley was writing defensively against the criticisms of Linden. His tone throughout remained instructive and pleasant, at times folksy, passionate, or proud. Nowhere did Owsley acknowledge Linden’s article or directly address any of his concerns. He did include a lengthy account of his methods of data collection, sampling, and analysis, drawn from his earlier letter and expanded. In his statistical summary, Owsley did appear to accept some of Linden’s criticisms regarding the absence of the size of his samples, as he included in each table the number of landowners that made up each group; but he still made no effort to include the aggregate areas of land held by each category of farmers, or the percentage of their overall holdings relative to groups of larger or smaller farmers, as Linden had demanded. It was as if to defiantly maintain, as he had in the 1947 letter, that his argument was the argument he intended to make, and his data were the data he intended to support it. His thesis was one about land tenure in the antebellum South, not about aggregate holdings of land or wealth, or about relative economic position, or about slavery.41

When Owsley published *Plain Folk* in 1949, its reception was mixed and markedly more guarded than that of his students’ work. Clement Eaton praised the “pioneering” work of Owsley and his group in their use of the manuscript census returns, but found some of Owsley’s generalizations “questionable.” Eaton noted that Owsley’s sampling method had been challenged, but seemed “adequate” to him. Rupert Vance lauded Owsley for his “bold use of the scientific imagination,” but found him “much too innocent of the use and resources of modern statistical

method.” 42 Owsley’s initial proposals had pushed against the frontier of social history, but the discipline had rapidly advanced to meet him.

Overall, Linden’s critique did far more to expose the inadequacies of Owsley’s evidence than to conclusively refute his claims. As a logical argument, disproving a premise does not necessarily disprove its conclusion. The heart of Linden’s criticism was focused on what was not present in Owsley’s statistical analysis—the lack of indication of the sizes of his samples; the absence of data about aggregate landholdings and the proportion of overall land held by each group of farmers; the inadequacy of his method of sampling the census. Linden demonstrated the problems in drawing the conclusions Owsley drew from the data he provided. Using only the limited data that Owsley and his students had provided in their publications, he interpolated the data that seemed to be missing and showed that Owsley’s data did not support the assertions he made about it; in fact it seemed to indicate otherwise. But uncovering the flaws in Owsley’s statistical analysis did not necessarily prove that every assertion was false. If Owsley’s census sample was flawed, the historian must undertake further analysis of more acceptable samples to draw any definite verdict. A fair number of Owsley’s propositions were not quantitative at all, and these Linden by and large did not address.

Many historians, however, saw Linden’s critique as having conclusively rejected Owsley’s thesis. Eugene D. Genovese stated, in perhaps the harshest opinion toward Owsley since Linden, that “Owsley’s statistical framework has been thoroughly discredited by Fabian

Linden’s brilliant critique.”43 Gavin Wright, writing in 1970, rejected Owsley’s arguments largely on the evidence of “Fabian Linden’s celebrated article.”44 In Edward Pessen’s noted essay, “How Different from Each Other Were the Antebellum North and South?,” Pessen dismissed Owsley’s thesis as a “too neat portrait,” undermined by Linden’s “devastating critique.” He noted that any opposing viewpoint was “rare … in this scholarly era.”45

Frank Owsley did not live to see the long-term reception of his work or the lasting fruits of his historical legacy. He died in 1956 in Winchester, England, at the age of 66, while serving on a Fulbright Scholarship. At the end of his life, he considered Plain Folk his greatest work, and his research into yeoman farmers his most rewarding labor.46

After Linden

For some fifteen years following Plain Folk, Owsley’s arguments went largely unnoticed. The next major rejection of Owsley came from Eugene D. Genovese, in his collection of essays

The Political Economy of Slavery (1965). Genovese propounded a radically different image of the South than the warm, tranquil world of Owsley’s yeomen. In Genovese’s stark, Marxian perspective, the planter class had total dominance of the economy, politics, and society, subjugating all other classes and stifling all economic growth and development in a premodern, preindustrial South. He presented a starving, impoverished South, choked by the oppressive system of slavery, struggling to even feed itself through inefficient slave labor and farming techniques, prematurely exhausted soil, and systemically inferior livestock. Nowhere to be found are Owsley's “comfortable” and self-sufficient farmers or harmonious planters and plain folk. In fact, Genovese gave little notice to yeomen at all; where he mentioned them, it was to reject Owsley’s thesis that “the southern yeomanry was strong and prosperous.” Genovese was summarily dismissive to Owsley’s arguments, citing Linden’s thorough refutation of the Owsleian statistical framework.47

The next historian after Linden to engage the Owsley group’s work in a thoroughgoing manner was Gavin Wright, another economic historian. In examining the question of whether large planters or small farmers dominated the antebellum Southern economy, Wright rejected the methodologies of both U. B. Phillips and L. C. Gray, who argued for planter dominance, as inadequate; but he found the methodology of Owsley, who argued for an “economic democracy,” even more lacking.48 Largely following the lines of Linden’s earlier criticisms, Wright first noted Owsley’s failure to demonstrate the proportions of overall land holdings between large landholders and small landholders. He questioned the relevance of farmers’ ownership of land as

48 Owsley in fact never used the term “economic democracy,” which has become one of the most common descriptions of his plain folk thesis. It was Linden first coined it with the title of his review article, “Economic Democracy in the Slave South.”
a measure of economic well-being, or of comparing nonslaveholders to slaveholders of “similar economic status.” Wright also challenged Owsley’s notion of the “intermingling” of small farms with large plantations, offering even an alternate interpretation of Owsley’s Snedecor maps.

In Wright’s 1970 article are evident the 25 years of maturation in the disciplines of economic history and statistical quantification that had passed since Linden’s critique. Wright brought his statistical analysis to great heights over the methods of either Owsley or Linden, to the level of Lorenz curves and Gini coefficients, statistical formulae for measuring inequalities of wealth and size in a population.49 In offering his own analysis, however, the first prerequisite for Wright was a valid statistical sample of the census. Wright took the inadequacy of Owsley’s samples for granted, per Linden’s argument; he did not engage the question of sampling directly. Instead he used samples already prepared: for the 1860 census a sample prepared by William N. Parker and Robert E. Gallman (known as the Parker-Gallman sample in later literature), and for 1850 a sample prepared by James D. Foust. Like Owsley, Wright’s samples included comparison of a wide panel of soil regions across the South, without any “weighting” as proposed by Linden. Also like Owsley, Wright did not state the total numbers of farms considered in his sample; his data and argument were, however, based around the relative proportions of holdings between large and small farmers. Through his detailed analysis, Wright demonstrated that holdings of land, cash value in farms, slave property, and agricultural wealth (a measure of personal and real

property) were heavily concentrated, in increasing orders of weight, in the wealthiest 5 percent of southern farmers.\(^{50}\)

Randolph B. Campbell, writing in 1974, again took up the question of the distribution of agricultural wealth and influence in antebellum southern society, engaging the “planter-dominance” thesis of Phillips and Gray and the “yeoman-democracy” thesis of Owsley and his group. Campbell accepted Linden’s review of Owsley as an “important critique,” but noted that even though Linden had called into question Owsley’s statistical methods and data, he had left unanswered many of Owsley’s more qualitative questions. In reviewing Wright, Campbell acknowledged the degrees of inequality which Wright had demonstrated in his study, but noted the limitations of that study, owing to the limitations of its census sample: in examining only farm operators in large cotton-growing counties, and not distinguishing between slaveholders and nonslaveholders, Wright’s study could not consider changes in landholding over time or the relative positions of slaveholding and nonslaveholding farmers—questions important to Owsley’s proposals. In the end, Campbell concluded, Linden and Wright had demonstrated the importance of concentration of wealth in envisioning antebellum southern society, but with regard to the less qualitative aspects of that society—how planters and plain folk related to each

\(^{50}\) Gavin Wright, “‘Economic Democracy,’” 63–99. Wright’s census samples, however, may have been to some degree biased toward his conclusions. A number of historians have criticized the Parker-Gallman sample for its purported errors of coding and inconsistent exclusion, and for it being unrepresentative of all southern agriculture. The sample, by design, included only southern counties that reported the production of over 1,000 bales of cotton in the year prior to 1860. Though extensive—it sampled, overall, 5,228 farms in 382 counties in eleven states—its selected counties likely tended more to concentration of wealth than counties in other regions of the South. See Frederick A. Bode and Donald E. Ginter, “A Critique of Landholding Variables in the 1860 Census and the Parker-Gallman Sample,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 15 (Autumn 1984): 277–295, http://www.jstor.org/stable/204884 (accessed 28 November 2013); and Mark D. Schmitz and Donald F. Schaefer, “Using Manuscript Census Samples to Interpret Antebellum Southern Agriculture,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17 (Autumn 1986): 399–414, http://www.jstor.org/stable/204772 (accessed 28 November 2013).
other socially, economically, and politically—the picture remained unclear. Owsley’s assertions remained untested.

Campbell’s solution was to apply both quantitative and traditional, qualitative historical methods to Owsley’s questions: to examine a society’s distribution of wealth and resources quantitatively, but to approach the question of how that society actually functioned through documentary sources such as newspapers and legislative rolls. Such an approach could only be effectively applied in microcosm, in a population sufficiently small to study in detail through all available sources. For this microhistorical study, Campbell chose Harrison County, Texas, a county in northeastern Texas on the Louisiana border, which had been the most populous county in the state in 1850 as well as the largest cotton producer.\(^{51}\)

Applying modern statistical methods to data on farm size and cash value obtained from the 1850 and 1860 censuses, Campbell found that although the percentage of farmers owning land increased significantly between 1850 and 1860, as Owsley asserted, yeoman landholders owned a relatively small portion of the improved acreage in the county, and this portion showed a marked decrease in the same period. Land was becoming more concentrated among the wealthiest farmers, and slaveholders tended to be larger landholders than nonslaveholders. Ownership of slaves too became concentrated among the wealthiest farmers, with 3.4 percent of all farmers owning 21.6 percent of the county’s slaves by 1860. The decade also showed a dramatic increase in large cotton-producing farms, with the farms growing more than 100 bales of cotton in 1860 making up only 6.7 percent of the population, but producing 42.1 percent of the...
total cotton crop. By every measure, wealth was becoming more concentrated. Campbell found little evidence of Owsley’s “economic democracy.”

Turning then to traditional methods of history, Campbell sought to answer whether the most elite planters who dominated in property similarly dominated in politics. Examining newspapers for accounts of public political meetings, the published record of the county’s elected representatives to the state legislature and to the organization meetings of the Democratic and Whig parties, and lists of elected county officers, Campbell constructed a roster of “politically active and influential persons.” Comparing this roster to the economic data revealed by the census, Campbell found that nearly all politically active men were slaveholders, and that the largest, planter class slaveholders, averaging about 26.9 slaves to each, monopolized political leadership among the politically active farming population. Campbell concluded that his economic and political findings in Harrison County supported the planter-dominance thesis rather than Owsley’s yeoman-democracy view. Yeoman farmers simply did not participate in the market or in the public square on equal footing with elite planters.52

The passing of a decade can bring changes in the historical profession as well, and in the individual historian, and this was true in the case of Eugene Genovese. Genovese’s 1975 article, “Yeoman Farmers in a Slaveholders’ Democracy,” presented a dramatic shift in his views toward Frank Owsley and his work, from dismissive of Owsley’s arguments and of the place of yeomen in a plantation society, to appreciative of the labors of the Owsley group and emphasizing the importance of understanding the mind and life of the ordinary farmer. Genovese’s article, which originated as an address to the Agricultural History Society, posed the question of why the

nonslaveholding masses fought in the Civil War, seemingly against the interests of their own class. Genovese encouraged historians to challenge prevailing notions, which placed the answer squarely in a common racism and commitment to white supremacy, and to consider nonslaveholders as more than “political and moral marshmallows.” “Their easy acquiescence in an enforced consensus,” Genovese stated, “itself requires an explanation that takes full account of their toughness, pride, and strong sense of being men with equal rights to those of the richest planter.”

Genovese argued that it is “essential to distinguish sharply between the yeomen of the plantation belt and those of the upcountry.” Genovese acknowledged that the geographic isolation of many yeomen in upcountry communities offered them a more advanced social position than that of yeomen in planter-dominated areas, which allowed them to shape local politics and regional culture. He also noted that a self-sufficient, upcountry locality often became a staple-producing locality in the span of only the decade between census years. No historian had yet examined yeomen in a county in the midst of such a transformation.

With regard to Owsley and his group, Genovese lamented that little comprehensive work on the yeomanry had been undertaken since their “pioneering” work. “In retrospect,” Genovese concluded, “the work of Frank Owsley, Blanche Clark, Herbert Weaver, and others of their school appears all the more impressive despite sins against statistical method and a tendency toward romantic reconstruction.” Just as recent historians had brought vitality to the understanding of the lives of slaves, Genovese offered warm praise to Owsley for lighting the path for the same treatment of yeomen. “The yeomanry, both of the upcountry and of the plantation belt, have yet to receive the careful attention they deserve,” admonished Genovese.

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53 Perhaps by coincidental timing, Genovese had married Elizabeth Fox in 1969.
“We shall never understand fully the triumph and eventual demise of the slave system of the South … until we study the daily lives, the religion, the family and courtship patterns, and the dreams of the ordinary farmers of the slave South.” Genovese thus became the prophet of the ensuing revival that would soon come about in the study of yeoman farmers.54

Steven Hahn marked the beginning of this revival in 1983 with the publication of *The Roots of Southern Populism*, the first monograph-length study of southern yeomen since Owsley’s *Plain Folk*. Taking Genovese’s suggestion, Hahn focused his extensive study on yeoman farmers in the Georgia upcountry. Following this population of farmers from 1850 all the way to 1890, Hahn argued that the economic upheavals of the Civil War and the postbellum years transformed these farmers’ way of life and threatened their economic self-sufficiency and well being, eventually leading them in the 1890s to embrace the Populist movement. Hahn devoted the sizable first half of his book to yeoman farmers in the antebellum period. He gave the yeoman farmer a precise definition for the first time: a farmer who owned 200 acres of land or less and no more than five slaves.55

Hahn’s was the first of a number of monograph-length studies that took a microcosmic approach to the yeoman class, following the lead of Campbell. To deal with the problem of the paucity of sources, he examined the region of the Georgia upcountry in detail, and sought to re-integrate traditional, local sources to create a more complete picture—a method markedly simpler when dealing with a limited area. Hahn merged statistical analysis from the census with the use of other manuscript sources such as account books, letters, and journals that have

surfaced since Owsley’s time, as well as local court and land records.\textsuperscript{56} While Hahn agreed with Wright’s interpretation of the distribution of land and wealth in the black belt—that planters heavily dominated the region—Hahn’s study of the upcountry agreed much more with Owsley’s model, presenting two upland counties in which large plantations were few and yeomen were the predominant element of society. Supporting Owsley’s contention that yeomen lived interspersed with large planters even in the black belt regions, Hahn argued that the upcountry presented a different picture entirely. He demonstrated that in the two upland counties on which he focused his statistical analysis, yeoman farmers accounted for about 90 percent of all households, owned at least 60 percent of the total improved acreage, and produced at least 70 percent of all foodstuffs. Planters and plantations may have led in the black belt society, but in the upcountry, farmers and farms prevailed. The two regions were “very different worlds.”\textsuperscript{57} In fact, Hahn discovered an economy fitting Owsley’s model of a “dual economy,” with the economy of yeomen marked by an emphasis on self-sufficiency—“safety first”—but engaging in cotton agriculture with their remaining resources to supplement their incomes. He found a society characterized by “customs of mutuality,” bonds of interconnection and interdependence that supported a commitment to local autonomy.\textsuperscript{58} Hahn’s examination of the politics of the yeomanry revealed an uneasy alliance between the yeoman and planter classes, which planters forged across class lines behind a common ideology of economic independence. He found, however, that a growing class conflict boiled beneath the surface. Yeoman joined planters in supporting slavery because they perceived northern threats to slavery as threats to their own

\textsuperscript{56} Hahn, \textit{Roots}, 311–320.
\textsuperscript{57} Hahn, \textit{Roots}, 27.
\textsuperscript{58} Hahn, \textit{Roots}, 50–85.
independence and property. Prompted by the renewed interest in the yeoman class, in 1987 Donald L. Winters of Vanderbilt University re-examined Owsley’s statistics from his and his students’ original work sheets, still in the special collections of the Vanderbilt Library. He entered Owsley’s numbers for Tennessee into the computer, and with the power of that new technology, applied deeper and more sophisticated analyses than Owsley had been able to carry out in his time. Winters’ study supported some aspects of Owsley’s thesis, but supported Owsley’s critics, notably Wright, with regard to other aspects. Winters showed that the highest concentrations of both land and slaves were on plantations. He found no evidence that the yeomen class was growing in prosperity relative to the planters, but neither did he find evidence that they were diminishing. The yeoman class was, however, growing in wealth in absolute terms, confirming a component of Owsley’s argument. Winters concluded that in general, Tennessee did not fit the model of Owsley’s thesis, and that his analysis of the numbers supported the planter-dominance theory of social structure rather than Owsley’s economic democracy.

Following upon the work of Hahn, Lacy K. Ford, in his 1988 book Origins of Southern Radicalism, focused his microcosmic study on the Upcountry of South Carolina. Like Hahn, he examined a state’s upcountry for the roots of a political sentiment; but Ford sought to answer a more immediate question, again taking a lead from Genovese: why did yeoman farmers cooperate with planters in secession and the Civil War? To answer this question, Ford studied the Upcountry’s society and political culture. Compared to other southern upcountry regions, the South Carolina Upcountry presented something of a demographic anomaly. It had a majority

59 Hahn, Roots, 86–133.
white population, while South Carolina as a whole was 60 percent black. Despite having only 36 percent of the black population, the Upcountry produced 56 percent of the state’s cotton. Unlike upcountry Georgia and Alabama, roughly half of farmers in the South Carolina Upcountry owned slaves.\textsuperscript{61} Ford defined social classes based on slave ownership. Yeomen owned up to five slaves; middling slaveholders owned between six and nineteen slaves; and planters owned twenty or more slaves.

Ford discounted the idea of “dual economy” as proposed by Owsley, with market-oriented planters emphasizing cotton and subsistence-oriented farmers emphasizing foodstuffs. Instead, at least in the Upcountry, farmers increasingly produced cotton and were oriented towards the same market as planters.\textsuperscript{62} Planters did not hold complete dominance in society. Ford perceived an undercurrent of class conflict between planters and yeomen throughout the antebellum period. The reason South Carolina did not secede in the Crisis of 1850, Ford argued, is because yeomen refused to support it. But as in Hahn’s Georgia, the planters and yeomen of the South Carolina Upcountry found a common ground in the “country-republican” ideal of personal independence. When they perceived that their ideal was threatened, the yeomen rose to defend it.\textsuperscript{63}

Most historians writing yeoman microhistories, such as Hahn and Ford, have focused on upcountry regions where yeomen were dominant demographically, if not also socially and politically. By contrast, Stephanie McCurry’s 1995 study \textit{Masters of Small Worlds} completed the


\textsuperscript{62} Ford, \textit{Origins}, 57–95.

picture, focusing on the yeomanry of a coastal plain region where planters were dominant. Her book examined the yeoman farmers of the South Carolina Low Country, who though a slight majority of the white population, were a sizable minority to black slaves. Yeomen land holdings were vastly dwarfed by neighboring plantations. McCurry defined yeomen first by the character of their labor, as “self-working farmers,” farmers who worked their land themselves with the help of their families and at the most a few slaves, contrasting this to planters, who owned enough slaves to supervise their labor while “[leaving] [their] own hands unsoiled.” In quantitative terms, McCurry defined yeoman farmers in terms of both landholding and slaveholding, as farmers who owned no more than 149 acres of improved land and nine slaves; Hahn’s and Ford’s yeomen, on the other hand, owned at the most five slaves.

McCurry sought to explain the dynamics of power in the Low Country society, not just between yeomen and planters, but more significantly, within the yeoman household itself. She connected the interior world of the yeoman household with the external political world. Thus, through examining the household, McCurry introduced another crucial element into her study of white class: gender. Dismissing the traditional models of planter dominance and yeoman democracy, McCurry created a gendered political model. Though they could never be masters of planter society, yeoman farmers were masters of their households, and women, slaves, and children were their dependents. They perceived the antislavery forces of the North as a threat to their own domestic patriarchy, questioning their dominance of their own households, and in the

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64 Not coincidentally, McCurry is Hahn’s wife.
65 Stephanie McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), vii-ix. In St. Peter’s Parish, Beaufort District, where McCurry focused her statistical analysis, yeoman farmer households made up a slight numerical majority over planter households (about 53 percent) in 1850. By 1860, they had fallen to slightly under 50 percent (54–55).
66 McCurry, Masters, 48–55.
end they supported secession and the Civil War in order to perpetuate their dominion as “masters of their own small worlds.” McCurry argued that planters actually lost control of the secession movement to the fears and passions of the yeomen. The Civil War, in her view, was a “popular revolution.” In reintegrating women and gender into the historical discourse of politics and ideology, McCurry’s ultimate goal was to “redraw the complex web of gender, class, and race relations within which Low Country farmers were enmeshed and to locate in it the meaning of their political sensibilities and fateful political decisions.”

Most recently, Samuel C. Hyde, Jr. of Southeastern Louisiana University has engaged Owsley’s concept of plain folk. In 1996, he organized and hosted the Plain Folk of the South Symposium, with the goal of “enriching the concept of “plain folk” in terms of race, gender, and culture. Hyde edited and published the symposium papers in Plain Folk of the South Revisited. Hyde’s 2005 article in The Journal of Southern History, “Plain Folk Reconsidered: Historiographical Ambiguity in Search of Definition,” traced the highlights of plain folk historiography from Owsley to the present, asking the fundamental question: who were the plain folk? Through their major works, Hyde examined each author’s definitions, and then attempted to arrive at a more precise one. Most involved criteria of both combination of slaveholding and landholding, but Hyde further honed these parameters with the concept of “working slaves.” He excluded young children and elderly slaves, counting only slaves whose work output would have reduced a farmer’s work load. With that in mind, Hyde defined four classes. He identified poor whites as landless farmers; plain folk as nonslaveholding farmers who owned land, and farmers

67 McCurry, Masters, 50–55, 208–304.
68 McCurry, Masters, viii.
who owned up to 100 acres of improved land and from one to five working slaves; middling or larger farmers who owned more than 100 improved acres and from six to nine working slaves; and small planters up to elite large planters as farmers who owned more than 150 improved acres and ten or more working slaves. Finally, Hyde’s study affirmed Owsley’s basic thesis that the plain folk, or yeoman farmers, were the majority of the population across a range of survey regions, and that the plain folk’s level of wealth across these regions was fairly consistent.70

The Legacy of Owsley and Linden

Fabian Linden, after publishing his famous critique of Owsley, never completed his graduate degree in history, and proceeded to change professions. Linden maintained that the he suffered no negative fallout from his review, and that the exchange had no bearing on his decision to leave the historical profession. Following a decade spent in Europe as economic attaché with the Allied Control Commission in Vienna with the United States Foreign Service and the United States delegation to NATO, Linden returned to New York to begin a long career as a Wall Street economist. As director of the Conference Board, a worldwide business research organization, Linden created the Consumer Confidence Index so commonly used in the economic world today. He died in 1995 at the age of 79.71

Linden’s article, however, had a deep and longstanding impact on historiography. In undermining Owsley’s methodology of drawing historically quantifiable data from the manuscript census returns, he may have raised doubts about its utility and delayed its wider implementation. But even Linden’s own methodology pushed the bounds of historical scholarship. Just as Owsley’s methods were nascent and pioneering, Linden’s analysis in rejecting Owsley’s arguments applied the statistical methods and principles of economics to history, years before such methods were commonly utilized in approaching historical problems. Linden’s greatest influence was in directing the path that statistical analysis in history should take in the future, in demonstrating the considerations it should take into account, and in warning of the pitfalls that it should avoid.

One fundamental question Linden raised is the issue of sampling: how best a sample should be selected from the census to capture an accurate picture of the South as a whole—if indeed the economic and demographic trends in question were uniform across the South, and a picture of the “whole South” is a valid expectation. Certainly it is informative to collect data from a range of various economic and geologic regions, even as part of a larger sample, as Owsley originated and Wright further developed; but should these regions be “judiciously weighted” by “relative importance” as Linden suggested, and if so, by what measure of “importance”? Or should the regions be weighed only against each other, for any differences among them, as contrary to wider trends as they might be? How large, and how wide, must a sample of the census be to be valid, and by what criteria should it be selected? Is a microcosmic approach, as utilized by Campbell, Hahn, Ford, and McCurry, examining a small area in detail,

an effective or productive tool for considering the period in the wider context of the South or the nation? Perhaps with the advances in computer processing power, census data from many counties, from whole states and regions, can be studied without the use of sampling at all. The limit is only the effort in data entry required to translate the census information into the computer.

Another complication that historians including Campbell and Hahn have discussed is the difficulty in determining land ownership from the census. Owsley’s method for determining land tenure—comparing the farmers claiming real property on the population schedule to the farm operators stating an equal cash value for their farms on the agricultural schedule—was not always certain, and may have either underestimated or overestimated the number of farmers who owned land, versus those who were only tenants. Farm operators on land might be only managing the farm, or owners of land might be living elsewhere. Individuals who declared other occupations on the census—doctors or lawyers or ministers—might also own land and farm, as many in the South did. Both Campbell and Hahn followed methods similar to Owsley’s; it may be the only reasonable indicator from the limited data the census provides. The most definite method of determining who owns land is by tax lists; but adequate tax lists from the antebellum period do not survive in many southern counties.72

A final concern is the teleological error that Owsley fell into in studying the fortunes of farmers across the census years of 1850 and 1860. He concluded that small farmers generally were growing in landholdings and other property over the decade; but in following only the farmers who could be identified in the same county in both censuses, Owsley biased his data toward the farmers who were prosperous enough to remain in the same location, to not be pushed

72 For Campbell’s discussion of this issue, see Campbell, “Planters and Plain Folk,” 373–374, n. 12. For Hahn’s, see Hahn, Roots, 22–23. n. 19 and 20.
off their land by economic pressures, and very naturally, having been so successful, to expand their landholdings.\footnote{I have at times fallen victim to a similar fallacy in conducting historical research in counties from which my family descended, assuming that because all of his families remained in the county, most families must have stayed put in that county. But clearly I would only be descended from the families that stayed put, whose children were able to meet each other and marry!}

Most of Owsley’s less quantitative, social and political claims remain unaddressed. Many of these are clearly idealistic and untenable, such as that the plain folk felt no class consciousness or class conflict with planters, or that small farmers did not have aspirations to greater fortune. Others, such as that plain folk and planters engaged socially with each other through church, school, and community, or frequently had blood ties with one another, are propositions that future historians should be able to pursue. In Alabama, for example, a number of antebellum church records survive, at Samford University for Baptist churches and at Huntingdon College for Methodist churches, many of which contain church membership lists. Comparison of these lists with census records should give a picture of a church’s class makeup. Examinations of marriage records, wills, and estate records can demonstrate the intermarriage and family relationships, or lack thereof, among various economic classes. Antebellum newspapers can present a picture of social interactions in a community, especially among the people deemed publicly notable, which in itself can reveal the community’s social values and the social standing of citizens of various economic classes. Though it is unlikely that yeomen supported their “betters” politically purely out of respect for their superior qualities and service to the community, as Owsley suggested, historians might examine the question of what political involvement and power they did have through study of state voting patterns and the historical makeup of the state legislature.
Even the claims for which Linden undermined Owsley’s evidence may still be worthy of reexamination—not necessarily to prove Owsley correct or incorrect, but because the questions are still unanswered. Were yeoman farmers gaining or losing in the economy of the 1850s, and were these trends universal throughout all regions of the South? How did these trends compare to the progress of agriculture in the North and other regions of the country? Was there any significant class mobility from the yeomanry to the upper classes, or downward to poverty? Were yeomen, as a rule, purchasing land and slaves? A comparison of farmers over time between the decennial censuses, as Owsley undertook, is now possible on an even wider scale today with the aid of computers. Analysis of tax records should allow both a study of changing fortunes and a reconstruction of the geographic distribution of farms. Court records, especially those that preserve market transactions, can shed light on who was doing business with whom, and who was prospering. An examination of deed records can show who owned land and who was buying and selling it. These records are available in counties across the South, though the historical record for some counties is fragmentary due to negligence, poor record-keeping, or courthouse fires—all factors aggravated by the Civil War.

Were yeomen economically “comfortable” or “secure”? It should be possible for an historian to measure this through quantifiable standards. For example, Steven Hahn employed a “self-sufficiency index” calculated as the total of food crops grown from the agricultural census divided by the number of members of the household. He found that most yeoman farmers in his region, the Georgia upcountry, did indeed grow enough food to feed themselves and be self-sufficient, supporting at least in part Owsley’s contentions. Future historians can fruitfully apply
this methodology to yeomen in other regions. As today’s historians receive these issues, the ultimate question still stands: Were antebellum yeoman farmers a significant part of southern society? This question depends largely on how one defines significance. If significance is only economic power and wealth, then Linden and Wright have proved the plain folk’s insignificance in the larger southern society. But the historian may also consider significance in terms of political power or social influence. All of these capacities—economic, political, and social—may have local and regional significance, the role and influence one has in one’s local economy and society.

As a class, the yeomanry was numerically a substantial component of southern society. How yeomen interacted with planters, with slaves, and with the urban middle class, is an important historical question in considering how these classes functioned together as a whole in southern society. The plain folk certainly had more class consciousness than Owsley supposed, and may have operated in resistance to other sections of society in ways historians have not yet identified. As others have noted, understanding the relationships between yeomen and planters is crucial, with the coming of the Civil War, to answering the question of why yeoman farmers, who made up the rank and file of both the southern and northern armies, chose to fight.

It is not difficult to imagine what Frank Owsley was thinking when he made his thesis: the southern, agrarian pride that pervaded his life and work, and the drive to maintain that pride in the face of a historiographic pendulum that was swinging toward negative interpretations of antebellum southern society and especially slavery. Creating an idyllic, utopian society in which upright plain folk lived harmoniously alongside plutocratic planters, not subjugated or oppressed

74 Hahn, Roots, 32–33.
by the institution of slavery or the unforgiving plantation economy, may have been Owsley’s final attempt, his lost cause, to redeem the South from its dreadful burden.

Though Owsley’s ideal South may not have existed, the Owsley Thesis leaves an important legacy in the questions it asked that are still unanswered; in the methodology it fostered, now such a crucial component of social history; and in having brought southern yeoman farmers to the consciousness of historians as a population worthy of serious consideration.
Chapter 2: Introduction to Lawrence County

Eugene Genovese’s 1975 address to the Agricultural History Society brought a renewed focus to the place of yeoman farmers in antebellum society and issued a call to bring future research to bear on examining their lives and social situation. In particular, Genovese noted that it was “essential to distinguish sharply between the yeomen of the plantation belt and those of the upcountry.” In the years that followed, historians took on his charge. Stephen Hahn, in his 1983 *The Roots of Southern Populism*, examined the yeomen of two counties in the Georgia upcountry, detached from the lands of large planters by both terrain and limits of transportation. In the upcountry, Hahn discovered a “very different world” than the planter-dominated black belt that had been most familiar to historians of the past half-century. There farmers practiced a “safety first” economy focused on self-sufficiency but engaging in cotton culture with their remaining resources. Through an interdependent society characterized by “customs of mutuality” with their neighbors, these yeomen upheld their communities’ local autonomy.75 Lacy Ford, in his 1988 book *The Origins of Southern Radicalism*, similarly focused on the yeomanry of the South Carolina upcountry, but found there quite a different society than that of the Georgia upcountry. Despite having only 36 percent of the state’s slave population, yeomen of the South Carolina upcountry produced 56 percent of the state’s cotton, and as many as half of white farmers were slaveholders. Rather than farmers geared primarily toward self-sufficiency, Ford found yeomen

75 Hahn, *Roots*, 27, 50–85.
actively engaged in the staple cotton trade, and experiencing a mounting class conflict with their planter competitors.

By contrast, Stephanie McCurry, in her 1995 *Masters of Small Worlds*, examined the yeomen of the planter-dominated South Carolina Low Country, whose society and economy were shaped by close interaction with the largest landowners and slaveholders. Focusing on a single Low Country parish, a subdivision of a county, she found yeoman farmers living on the margins on the planter society witnessed by contemporary travel writers and hinted by planter memoirs, making up as much as two-thirds of the white population even in planter districts. McCurry was the first to define yeomen by the character of their labor, as “self-working farmers” who worked their land alongside their families or slaves. She found direct connections between size of families (and number of laborers) and the size of farms, and similar trends in agriculture to those found by Hahn—practicing a “safety first” attitude toward the cultivation of food and staple crops. McCurry alsovaluably observed the connection between geography and class, noting that yeomen in her district clustered in settlements on swampy, marginal lands.76

In the northern part of Alabama, lying on the banks of the Tennessee River, one county in particular comprises a hybrid of these approaches, a collision in a relatively small geographic area between rich, fertile lands dominated by planters and the rolling upcountry populated heavily by yeomen. In this middle ground, the interaction between these two classes reveals and highlights the contours of their relationship in vivid contrast, in ways not visible in either a purely upland region where yeomen had relatively little contact with planters far above their economic status, or in a black-belt or lowcountry region where yeomen were vastly dwarfed in the midst of numerous planters. On the borderland between these two regions, yeomen of an

76 McCurry, Masters, 591.
upland area, accustomed to a fair degree of social and economic autonomy and self-sufficiency, apart from close proximity with domineering planters, would have interacted with more deferent yeomen of a planter-dominated area, and with planters of the same area who were accustomed to being the top of their local society. In the next chapter, using the census and other available records as a lens, a case study of Lawrence County, Alabama, will demonstrate the “best of both worlds,” the ways in which land and slaves were distributed in 1850, when yeoman farmers held most of the land in the southern district and enjoyed considerable independence and economic opportunity, while yeomen in the northern district, marginalized by neighboring planters, struggled to keep up and maintain on to their landholding and position. The final chapter will show the redistribution of property that took place in Lawrence County over the decade of the 1850s as a result of the booming cotton economy and the rapid expansion of planter fortunes, while the majority of yeomen made little economic progress and in many cases lost ground. This chapter will briefly introduce Lawrence County in its physical and geographic features, its demographic development, and its rise and fall as a major cotton producer in the state of Alabama.
Lawrence County, Alabama, is unique in that it is situated neatly on the verge between two major physiographic regions, with substantial parts of the county in both regions. The northern part of the county lies in Alabama’s Highland Rim, made up of a low, east-to-west ridge separating two valleys. The southern part of the county forms the rough edge of the state’s Cumberland Plateau. In focus, the topography of the county actually comprises four separate

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77 Note that the western border of the county extended all the way to the river in 1850 and 1860. The northwestern corner of the county, that bounded by Town Creek, was ceded to Colbert County in 1895.
landforms. The Tennessee Valley, the valley of the Tennessee River which forms the county’s northern border, contains the county’s richest farmland, extending between seven and ten miles south from the river. Continuing southward the land rises sharply to Little Mountain, the east-to-west ridge that defines the Highland Rim, an area of land made up of rolling hills and occasional plateaus, for about seven miles wide across the county. The land dips back down into Moulton Valley toward the south, characterized by gently undulating hills, and crossing the county at a width of four to nine miles. At the southernmost of the county, Sand Mountain rises abruptly, elevated from Moulton Valley by as much as 400 feet, with a width of three to nine miles across the county, and containing rough and broken lands with deep stream valleys and jutting mountains.

From the Tennessee River to the county’s southern border is between 26 miles in length at the shortest and 34 miles at the longest, and the county is 24 miles in width. All combined, by 1860, the county encompassed about 777 square miles (497,264 acres) of land.79
Demographics

Lawrence County was formed in 1818 by an act of the territorial assembly of the newly-organized Alabama Territory. The Alabama Territory, which had been part of the Mississippi Territory since 1798, had been separated from Mississippi in 1817, pending Mississippi’s admission to the union as the twentieth state later that year. Both the Cherokee and Chickasaw Nations of Indians had claimed the territory that Lawrence County encompassed, but both had ceded their claims on the land to the United States the previous year. The earliest white settlers in Lawrence County migrated from Virginia, the Carolinas, and Tennessee.

The county was rapidly settled after the land was opened in 1816. By 1820, the population of Lawrence County was over 7,000 people, according to a census conducted by the...
State of Alabama: nearly 5,000 whites, 2,400 slaves, and 18 free colored persons. On account of the untimely death of the United States marshal responsible for conducting the 1820 federal census of Alabama, a second census of several counties, including Lawrence, had to be taken in 1822. This unfortunate circumstance does however give history a glimpse at the county’s development in its first years. According to the 1822 federal returns, the population of the county had reached over 8,500: 5,600 whites, 3,000 slaves, and 40 free people of color. In a period of only two years, almost 1,500 people settled in Lawrence County, an overall rate of population increase of about 20 percent. By 1830, the overall population had reached about 15,000: over 8,000 free people and 6,500 slaves. The rate of population increase in the eight years between 1822 and 1830 was about 50 percent for whites, and higher than 120 percent for slaves—


84 David J. Files was appointed in May 1820 as the first U.S. marshal of the State of Alabama, but served only about 90 days before his sudden death of a heart attack on the steps of the Clarke County (Alabama) Courthouse on 10 October 1820. Taliaferro Livingston was appointed as his replacement in November 1820. In the ensuing disorder, the returns of the census of Alabama failed to be completed by the established deadline, oaths and certificates of assistant marshals in a number of counties were misplaced or lost, and the enumerations of several counties, including Lawrence, had to be retaken. On account of its growing population, Alabama was on the verge of receiving a third congressional representative, and her congressional delegation sought, as an amendment to the apportionment bill, allowance for a reassessment of Alabama’s apportionment when the final census returns were received. On 20 December 1822, Congress passed a bill granting Alabama her third representative. The 1822 returns of Lawrence County were published in the official report of the 1820 census. U.S. Census Bureau, *Census for 1820 (Fourth Census of the United States)* (Washington, D.C.: Gales & Seaton, 1821), at U.S. Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html, 7–8, 10, 121; U.S. Congress, *Senate Executive Journal, 16th Cong., 2nd sess.*, 1821, 236; *Senate Journal, 17th Cong., 1st sess.*, 1822, 136–137; *House Journal, 17th Cong. 1st sess.*, 1822, 302; *Senate Journal, 17th Cong., 2nd sess.*, 1823, 89; *An act concerning the apportionment of Representatives in the state of Alabama*, H.R. 202, 17th Cong., 2nd sess. (20 December 1822), *Bills and Resolutions*—all online at *A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation*, American Memory, The Library of Congress, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/ (accessed May 2013); *1820 State Census of Lawrence County, Alabama*, 35.
suggesting an increasing presence of large plantations in Lawrence County, and a growing involvement in cotton production (see Table 1).  

Table 1. Population growth in Lawrence County, Alabama, 1820–1860.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Whites 1820 (Ala.)</th>
<th>Whites 1822 (U.S.)</th>
<th>Whites 1830</th>
<th>Whites 1840</th>
<th>Whites 1850</th>
<th>Whites 1860</th>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>% change</th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>% change</th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>% change</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>4,782</td>
<td>5,671</td>
<td>8,428</td>
<td>7,143</td>
<td>8,342</td>
<td>7,173</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>+18.6%</td>
<td>+48.6%</td>
<td>-15.2%</td>
<td>+16.8%</td>
<td>-14.0%</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slaves</td>
<td>2,423</td>
<td>2,941</td>
<td>6,556</td>
<td>6,145</td>
<td>6,852</td>
<td>6,788</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>+21.4%</td>
<td>+122.9%</td>
<td>-6.3%</td>
<td>+11.5%</td>
<td>-0.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Blacks</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>+122.2%</td>
<td>+67.5%</td>
<td>-62.7%</td>
<td>+156.0%</td>
<td>-78.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL:</td>
<td>7,223</td>
<td>8,652</td>
<td>14,984</td>
<td>13,313</td>
<td>15,258</td>
<td>13,975</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>+19.8%</td>
<td>+73.2%</td>
<td>-11.2%</td>
<td>+14.6%</td>
<td>-8.4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The censuses of 1840, 1850, and 1860 reveal a fluctuating pattern of population growth in Lawrence County. Between 1840 and 1850, the white population dropped sharply, by about 15 percent. This was accompanied, however, by a smaller drop in the slave population, by only about 6 percent. The decrease in white population might be due in part to the economic crisis that began in 1839, with many overextended farmers selling their property and leaving the area. Only the other hand, for those farmers who remained, land and slave property were probably becoming more and more concentrated in the hands of a few property holders. By 1850, the white population had rebounded to nearly its 1830 level, with the slave population growing by a smaller percentage. This most likely reflects an influx of new farmers as the cotton economy improved, some slaveholding planters but many more nonslaveholding yeoman farmers. Over

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the decade of the 1850s, however, the white population again fell sharply by 14 percent, nearly again to the 1840 number, while the slave population decreased only marginally, by 1 percent (see Figure 2). As will become apparent as we examine the 1850 and 1860 censuses more closely, this drop in population evinces a great concentration in land and slaves among the wealthiest few, and many poorer farmers leaving the area. The changes over this crucial decade will be the subject of the next chapter.

![Figure 2: Population fluctuations in Lawrence County, 1820–1860.](image)

In 1850, Lawrence County had two incorporated towns: Moulton, the county seat, in the center of the county and the southern district, and Courtland, in the northern district.86 Since the

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enumerators of the census did not clearly demarcate the beginnings and endings of towns, it is not possible to give definite numbers for the towns’ populations, but judging by the occupations of those recorded on the census, a loose estimate is that Courtland had a population of roughly 250 whites and 35 slaves, and Moulton of roughly 180 whites and 20 slaves. Courtland was the more populous town, and judging by the census alone, the more affluent. In comparing the aggregate real wealth of the residents of each town, Courtland stands far ahead at nearly $62,000 to Moulton’s roughly $27,000. Courtland supported more merchants and storekeepers than Moulton, and manufacturers of a wider variety of goods, including coach makers and gin makers; while Moulton, being the center of law, hosted six attorneys and a probate judge, in addition to various other professionals and artisans (see Table 2).
Table 2. Occupations in Moulton and Courtland in 1850.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manufacturing</th>
<th>Moulton</th>
<th>Courtland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blacksmiths</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenters</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brick Mason</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet Makers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach or Wagon Makers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gin Makers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinists</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millwrights</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saddlers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoemakers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailors</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butchers</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicians</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dentists</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clergy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attorneys</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Clerks and Students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judges</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merchants and Storekeepers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerks</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druggists</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grocers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inn Keepers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheriff</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constable</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmaster</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Agriculture

The rich Tennessee Valley quickly became one of Alabama’s leading cotton-producing regions.\(^88\) By 1826, North Alabama grew as much as 40 percent of the state’s cotton.\(^89\) But the

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\(^{88}\) The 1840 census, the first to record statistics of agriculture, remarkably records that the Tennessee Valley counties in northern Alabama were outgrowing even several of the fertile Black Belt counties in cotton. Madison County in the Tennessee Valley, one of the most densely populated and heavily farmed, produced nearly 26,000 bales of cotton, as compared to Dallas County, one of the leading cotton producing counties in 1850 and 1860, which produced only about 5,600 bales in 1840. Lawrence County...
North’s early prominence waned as large planters and their vast numbers of slaves settled in Alabama’s Black Belt counties and rapidly increased its cotton production. Dallas County in the Black Belt had a comparable white population to Lawrence County, but twice and eventually three times the number of slaves. 90 By 1850, the Tennessee Valley grew only 15 percent of the state’s cotton. Lawrence County grew about a fifth of that number, producing about 13,500 bales. Meanwhile, the Black Belt surged. Over the decade of the 1850s, cotton production in the Black Belt more than doubled, from over 300,000 bales in 1850 to over 650,000 bales in 1860, while cotton production in the Tennessee Valley rose only slightly by comparison, from about 85,000 bales in 1850 to 95,000 bales in 1860. Even as the population of Lawrence County contracted, it nonetheless increased its cotton production by 15 percent in 1860 (see Table 3).

Despite the drop in population, it is clear that the farmers who remained, in whose hands property was increasingly becoming concentrated, were concentrating more and more on cotton. 91

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produced about 15,500 bales in 1840, as compared to Greene County, another leader in cotton in the next decades, which produced only about 8,000 bales. This seeming anomaly may perhaps be explained in part by the Panic of 1837, which threw many large planters across the South into bankruptcy and left their fields unplanted. The recession may also have contributed to the population decrease in Lawrence County.

89 Hezekiah Niles, “Alabama,” in Niles’ Weekly Register 30:241, 3 June 1826: “South Alabama is thought to have produced 75,000 bales of cotton, and North Alabama 50,000, in the last season. The first is chiefly exported from Mobile, the latter from New Orleans.”

90 Dallas County’s white population in 1840 was 7,922, with 17,208 slaves, as compared to Lawrence’s 7,143 whites and 6,145 slaves. By 1860, Dallas County had 7,785 whites and 25,760 slaves, to Lawrence’s 7,173 whites and 6,788 slaves.

91 For the purpose of these calculations, I considered Autauga, Barbour, Butler, Choctaw, Dallas, Greene, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Montgomery, Perry, Pickens, Pike, Russell, Sumter, and Wilcox counties to be the Black Belt region, and De Kalb, Franklin, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Limestone, Madison, Marshall, and Morgan counties to be the Tennessee Valley region.
Table 3. Cotton production in Alabama’s Tennessee Valley and Black Belt regions, 1840–1860.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>1840</th>
<th>% of State</th>
<th>1850</th>
<th>% of State</th>
<th>1860</th>
<th>% of State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee Valley Region</td>
<td>96,004</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>84,160</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>94,778</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawrence County</td>
<td>15,470</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>13,427</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>15,434</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Belt Region</td>
<td>117,417</td>
<td>40.1%</td>
<td>313,024</td>
<td>55.5%</td>
<td>652,981</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas County</td>
<td>5,558</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>35,275</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>63,410</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATE TOTAL</td>
<td>292,847</td>
<td></td>
<td>564,429</td>
<td></td>
<td>989,955</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Tennessee River which runs along the northern border of the county would provide the perfect transport of cotton to market in New Orleans—if not for the impassable barrier to river navigation posed by the Muscle Shoals, a succession of reefs and shoals in which the river fell some 130 feet, in the northwestern part of the county. All cargo would have to be unloaded and carried to other vessels on the other side of the Shoals for its traffic to continue. A grant from the United States Congress and years of state legislation toward the construction of a canal to bypass the Shoals had not opened the river by the 1830s, so in 1830 a group of leading area planters and citizens chartered the Tuscumbia, Courtland, and Decatur Railroad, in order to facilitate the transport of Tennessee Valley cotton to waiting riverboats beyond the Shoals.92

David Hubbard, lawyer, state senator, and investor, and Colonel Benjamin Sherrod, a prosperous planter, both resided in Courtland, and the greatest length of the railroad passed through Lawrence County. It was the first railroad in Alabama and only the second in the South. The T.

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92 The Shoals proved to be a perennial problem for river navigation. A workable canal was not completed until 1890 at a cost of over $3 million dollars. It was not until the completion of Wilson Dam in 1924 and Wheeler Dam in 1936 that the Shoals themselves were passable. Owen, “Muscle Shoals,” in *History of Alabama*, vol. 2, 1063–1064.
C. & D. Railroad opened in 1834. It was plagued with problems from the start, and fell to bankruptcy in the Panic of 1837, but in the hands of new investors, it would be revived as the Tennessee Valley Railroad, and would service the needs of planters for the remainder of the period, ensuring cotton agriculture in the Tennessee Valley would remain a profitable investment.\(^{93}\)

By 1850, when this study begins, North Alabama had become a very different place than either the Georgia upcountry where Hahn’s study focused, the South Carolina upcountry, the site of Ford’s, or McCurry’s South Carolina Low Country. Rather than the hilly terrain common to the southern upcountry, the Tennessee Valley was rich, productive, and relatively flat farmland, well suited for cotton culture. Unlike the situation in the Georgia upcountry, where few railroads existed and roads to major cotton markets were poor,\(^{94}\) the railroad and the river made transport of cotton to market more expedient. The Tennessee Valley had been an early leader in cotton production, though its share of the staple market had shrunk.

**Northern and Southern Districts**

In a historical boon that especially facilitates this analysis, Lawrence County was divided into two districts in both the 1850 and 1860 censuses, corresponding to the northern and southern halves of the county. The northern district encompasses the whole of the fertile Tennessee Valley region contained in the county, while the southern district contains most of the less prominent Moulton Valley and the rising Sand Mountain hill country (see Figure 3).\(^{95}\)


\(^{94}\) Hahn, *Roots*, 34.

\(^{95}\) The exact dimensions of the 1850 districts are known from the *Descriptions of Census Enumeration Districts* (National Archives and Records Administration, Microfilm Publication T1224, Record Group 4).
Since the northern district contained all the most valuable farmland, the greater part of this land was held by planters and other large farmers. Those yeomen who did live in this district appear to have inhabited marginal land between the large plantations, though the richest lands bordering the river seem to have been solid plantation. Many farmers in this district, claiming no value or acreage for their farms on the census, were probably tenants. Despite the predominance of planters, the concentration of land value in 1850 was nowhere to the degree seen in McCurry’s upcountry St. Peter’s Parish (see Table 4).96

The southern district, on the other hand, more closely resembled the counties of Hahn’s Georgia upcountry in 1850, especially the more established Jackson County, Georgia. Hilly and little suited for large plantation farming, the southern district was predominantly settled by yeoman farmers. These farmers, to whatever degree they participated in the staple economy, would have benefited from the same advantages of transportation as those of the northern district. If ever any region at all resembled Owsley’s “yeoman democracy,” where yeomen had both land and opportunity, it would be the Alabama hill country.

This was the situation in Lawrence County in 1850, as we examine more closely the distribution of land and slaves, and more fundamentally, the definition of the yeoman class and the nature of yeoman landholding. The tranquil and equitable situation apparent at this point, however, would not remain.

29, Roll 2). While the exact dimensions of the 1860 districts are uncertain, they appear to roughly coincide with those from 1850, with the border moving at most a mile or two to the south between the two censuses.

96 McCurry, Masters, 54.
Figure 3: Lawrence County’s census and tax districts
Lawrence County in its dimensions in 1850 and 1860, with the northern and southern census districts and tax districts labeled. (Source: Google Earth)
Table 4. Distribution of real wealth among real property holders in 1850

| Lawrence County, Alabama | | | |
|--------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Top                      | 7th District (Northern) | 8th District (Southern) | Whole County |
| $674,560                 | $221,283          | $1,050,664       | 64.14%       |
| 56.74%                   | 49.24%            |                 |
| Second                   | 235,032           | 79,676           | 258,703      | 15.79%       |
| 19.77%                   | 17.73%            |                 |
| Third                    | 118,618           | 44,965           | 116,331      | 7.10%        |
| 9.98%                    | 10.01%            |                 |
| Fourth                   | 65,974            | 29,247           | 70,560       | 4.31%        |
| 5.55%                    | 6.51%             |                 |
| Fifth                    | 35,555            | 22,100           | 46,882       | 2.86%        |
| 2.99%                    | 4.92%             |                 |
| Sixth                    | 24,095            | 16,535           | 33,045       | 2.02%        |
| 2.03%                    | 3.68%             |                 |
| Seventh                  | 16,410            | 14,042           | 24,620       | 1.50%        |
| 1.38%                    | 3.12%             |                 |
| Eighth                   | 9,635             | 10,540           | 18,057       | 1.10%        |
| 0.81%                    | 2.35%             |                 |
| Ninth                    | 6,125             | 7,353            | 13,268       | 0.81%        |
| 0.52%                    | 1.64%             |                 |
| Tenth                    | 2,825             | 3,620            | 6,060        | 0.37%        |
| 0.24%                    | 0.81%             |                 |

| Hahn, Roots of Southern Populism | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| $131,270                         | $213,700          | $1,336,000       | 71.43%       |
| 41.39%                           | 53.21%            |                 |
| Second                           | 62,410            | 59,400           | 239,000      | 12.78%       |
| 19.68%                           | 14.79%            |                 |
| Third                            | 35,600            | 38,400           | 119,150      | 6.37%        |
| 11.22%                           | 9.56%             |                 |
| Fourth                           | 23,600            | 26,500           | 68,300       | 3.65%        |
| 7.44%                            | 6.60%             |                 |
| Fifth                            | 20,480            | 20,100           | 41,500       | 2.22%        |
| 6.46%                            | 5.00%             |                 |
| Sixth                            | 14,440            | 14,450           | 26,300       | 1.41%        |
| 4.55%                            | 3.60%             |                 |
| Seventh                          | 11,440            | 12,600           | 16,850       | 0.90%        |
| 3.61%                            | 3.14%             |                 |
| Eighth                           | 8,850             | 8,500            | 11,105       | 0.59%        |
| 2.79%                            | 2.12%             |                 |
| Ninth                            | 6,085             | 5,600            | 7,740        | 0.41%        |
| 1.92%                            | 1.39%             |                 |
| Tenth                            | 3,005             | 2,360            | 4,305        | 0.23%        |
| 0.95%                            | 0.59%             |                 |

| McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------|-----------------| |
| St. Peter's Parish, Beaufort District, S.C. | | | |
| Top                              | $317,180          | $401,610         | $1,870,250  |
| 41.39%                           | 53.21%            |                 |
| Second                           | 62,410            | 59,400           | 239,000      | 12.78%       |
| 19.68%                           | 14.79%            |                 |
| Third                            | 35,600            | 38,400           | 119,150      | 6.37%        |
| 11.22%                           | 9.56%             |                 |
| Fourth                           | 23,600            | 26,500           | 68,300       | 3.65%        |
| 7.44%                            | 6.60%             |                 |
| Fifth                            | 20,480            | 20,100           | 41,500       | 2.22%        |
| 6.46%                            | 5.00%             |                 |
| Sixth                            | 14,440            | 14,450           | 26,300       | 1.41%        |
| 4.55%                            | 3.60%             |                 |
| Seventh                          | 11,440            | 12,600           | 16,850       | 0.90%        |
| 3.61%                            | 3.14%             |                 |
| Eighth                           | 8,850             | 8,500            | 11,105       | 0.59%        |
| 2.79%                            | 2.12%             |                 |
| Ninth                            | 6,085             | 5,600            | 7,740        | 0.41%        |
| 1.92%                            | 1.39%             |                 |
| Tenth                            | 3,005             | 2,360            | 4,305        | 0.23%        |
| 0.95%                            | 0.59%             |                 |

(Cf. to Hahn, Roots of Southern Populism, Table 1.2, p. 24; McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds, Table 2.5, p. 54)
Chapter 3: Defining Yeomen

At the beginning of our exploration, we are first faced with a question of terminology. What is a yeoman farmer? What is a planter? Historians have used these terms to refer to two distinct classes in antebellum southern society, the poor to middling farmer at one extreme and the upper-class cotton magnate at the other. But where were the boundaries between these classes? And were they really that distinct at all? The assumption, since Owsley, has been that yeoman farmers made up by far the majority of society, and that planters were the elite. If this is true, was there a clear delineation between these groups, or was there, as Owsley suggested, a gentle curve marking “well distributed” property among all levels of society?

Defining Classes

To some extent, the historical categories of “planter” and “yeoman” antebellum farmers are artificial and contrived. Since on the surface, no qualitative difference between classes of farmers is evident, the definitions of these categories have generally involved somewhat arbitrary limits of the numbers of slaves a farmer held or of improved acres farmed. This is especially the case when the primary means of discerning between the classes is by such quantitative means as the census. Ulrich Bonnell Philips, in his pioneering studies of the planter class in the early
twentieth century, proposed a rough minimum of twenty slaves for plantation agriculture.\textsuperscript{97} This “twenty-slave” threshold for planters has become a common historical rule of thumb.

For Phillips, the “plain people” were nonslaveholders and small slaveholders, those who owned between zero and four slaves. In Frank Owsley’s works, the distinctions between classes were not as clearly defined but the essential characteristic of his “plain folk” was landownership.\textsuperscript{98} Steven Hahn gave his “yeoman farmer” a precise definition: one who owned 200 acres or less of improved land and no more than five slaves.\textsuperscript{99} Lacy Ford’s classes were defined only by slaveholding, with “yeomen” owning as many as five slaves, “middling slaveholders” owning between six and nineteen, and “planters” fixed at the traditional twenty.\textsuperscript{100} Stephanie McCurry defined yeoman farmers in terms of both landownership and slaveholding, as farmers who owned no more than 149 acres of improved land and no more than nine slaves.

Such purely quantitative definitions of class can be problematic. They reveal little about the actual nature of the class, of its lifestyle, or of its mode of agriculture. Farmers might narrowly slip the yeoman category either by the slaveholding requirement or the landownership requirement, but still have more in common with the class’s members than they did with larger farmers. Certainly farmers during the period would not have observed such arbitrary distinctions. Any contemporary view of class would have been built on more observable, qualitative differences. Approaching such a definition, McCurry added a further distinction to her category: She defined yeomen as “self-working farmers,” farmers who worked their own land with their

\textsuperscript{97} Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, \textit{Life and Labor in the Old South} (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1957), 339.
\textsuperscript{98} Owsley’s critics noted lack of precision. Also quote from Linden about him “reasoning the poor whites out of existence”
own hands, with the help of their families and at the most a few slaves—as contrasted to planters, who owned enough slaves to supervise their labor while “[leaving] his own hands unsoiled.”

With her concept of the “self-working farmer,” McCurry comes the closest of recent historians to an objective, qualitative definition of yeomen, and approaches the distinction between classes that might have been perceived during the antebellum period. In fact, in the 1860 work of social observer Daniel Robinson Hundley, Social Relations in Our Southern States, this is the chief characteristic Hundley saw as defining the “common people” or “yeomen”: “the ability and the will to earn an honest livelihood . . . by the toilsome sweat of their own brows.” Hundley, an Alabama-born lawyer living in Chicago, appropriated the language of the nascent social sciences to define and examine eight highly subjective social classes living in the South, including “The Southern Gentleman,” “Cotton Snobs,” “Poor White Trash,” and “The Southern Yeoman.” Though acknowledging their poverty, Hundley plainly distinguished southern yeomen from the “poor whites,” the “mudsill” lower class into which other observers such as Hinton Rowan Helper often lumped them. Hundley also rejected the claims of Helper and others that southern slavery degraded the free labor of whites. In Hundley’s reckoning, yeomen generally owned no slaves, and “rarely possessed more than ten to fifteen.” Though this range is well beyond the categories employed by recent historians, the difference is somewhat mitigated by Hundley’s category of “middle-class” farmers, who typically owned from five to fifty slaves—implying that a farmer who owned fewer than five slaves was below “middle class.” As distinguished from “Southern Gentlemen,” “honest Southern Yeomen . . . always [worked] side by side with their own human chattels in the fields, in the forests, and everywhere else.” Though

subjective, Hundley’s observations do demonstrate some contemporary consciousness of class distinctions between aristocratic planters and yeoman farmers.\footnote{Hinton Rowan Helper, \textit{The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It} (New York: Burdick Brothers, 1857), Documenting the American South, University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, \url{http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/helper/} (accessed 28 November 2013); Daniel Robinson Hundley, \textit{Social Relations in Our Southern States} (New York: Henry B. Price, 1860), iii, 77–128; 191–222, \url{http://books.google.com/books?id=ifVLAAAMAAJ} (accessed 28 November 2013). Hundley raised the same idyllic praise of the yeomanry’s society and industry that Owsley would later echo.}

Of no small importance are the perceptions of those closest to the problem: the farmers themselves. How farmers self-identified their occupations on the census—whether as “farmer” or “planter”—indicates the broad subjectivity with which those terms were used, but also reveals some definite parameters between classes. On the 1850 census, 1,100 people in Lawrence County self-identified as farmers and only thirty-one as planters. By the 1860 census\footnote{The 1860 census marked a decrease in the white population of the county by 1,224 (15 percent of the 1850 population). Note this above in introduction to Lawrence County, and put something here to remind the reader.}, the number of “farmers” had decreased to 882, and the number of “planters” had increased to thirty-eight. 75 percent of the “farmers” in 1850 were heads of household, compared to 88 percent of the “farmers” in 1860. By contrast, 77 percent of the “planters” in 1850, and 92 percent in 1860, were heads of their households. Those three non-heads in 1860 were the eldest son of a wealthy “planter” and two elderly men living in the homes of relatives. Likewise in 1850, six of the seven “planters” who were not heads of households were the sons of established “planters,” some as young as sixteen: three of them were in one household, and two in another. The last non-head “planter” was the seventeen-year-old son of a widow and the “man of the house”; per the instructions to enumerators of the 1850 census, women could not hold occupations.\footnote{Carroll D. Wright, \textit{The History and Growth of the United States Census}, United States Senate Document no. 194, 56th Congress, 1st Session, United States Serial Set 3856 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), 39–52, 147–154, online at U.S. Census Bureau,}
cases in 1850, but not in 1860, the head of a household identified himself as a “planter,” and his 
adult sons identified themselves as “farmers.” If some planters identified their young sons as 
“planters,” while others identified their adult sons as “farmers,” the terms “planter” and “farmer” 
were broadly subjective. But was the label “planter” only one of prestige, or did it describe a 
difference in one’s activities or occupation?

Significantly, all self-identified “planters” in both the 1850 and 1860 censuses resided in 
the northern census district, the “planter” district. The largest farms, the “plantations,” were 
predominantly in northern district, where they occupied the rich, alluvial lands nearest the river. 
These great farms were in close proximity to each other, and dwarfed the small farms of the 
district by as much as ten times the acreage. By contrast, the largest farms in the southern district 
were still large, especially in comparison to other farms nearby, but they were nonetheless 
significantly smaller than the “plantations” of the northern district. Perhaps the community in 
which these farms were situated—with other large farmers or “planters” in the northern district, 
and with small, middling farmers in the south— influenced how a farmer identified himself.

All “planter” households appear to have owned their land.105 In 1850, the farms of 
“planters” encompassed an average of about 600 acres in improved land, with a median of 500 
acres. By 1860, the sizes of these “plantations” had increased dramatically: the average (mean) 
size of a “planter’s” holdings was about 1,500 acres in improved land, with a median of 1,000 
acres. Likewise, the average real property of landowners self-identifying as planters increased 
nearly fivefold between 1850 and 1860: “Planters” in 1850 owned an average of over $10,000 in 
real property, with a median of $8,000, and by 1860, held an average of $56,000, with a median 

http://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/overview/1850.html or 
105 I will discuss the methodology by which landownership is determined below.
of $40,000. By contrast, the average size and value of the holdings of all other landowning agriculturists—self-identified “farmers” and “farm laborers”—did not markedly change between the 1850 and 1860 censuses. When “planters” are excluded, the average size in improved acres of a farm in 1850 was only 119 acres, with a median of 40 acres. By 1860, the average had increased to 123 acres, with a median of 80 acres. The average real property of “farmers” in 1850 was about $2,000, with a median of $150, and by 1860 had increased only to $2,400, with a median of $800 (see Table 5).

Table 5. Distribution of land between self-identified “planters” and “farmers” in 1850 and 1860.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Improved acres</th>
<th>Real property</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1850 Average</td>
<td>1860 Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Median</td>
<td>Median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Planters”</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>1,572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>500</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Farmers”</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The increase in these median values suggests that the fortunes of a majority of farmers were improving slightly over the decade of the 1850s, but nowhere near as fast as the fortunes of the wealthiest farmers. The disparity between these figures, too, indicates that the “planter” label might to some degree correctly identify those farmers at the upper crust of the agricultural economy. On the 1850 census especially, a few farmers at the lowest end of the “planter” group seem to have had an inflated sense of their own prosperity: their holdings were in fact far below the definitions of the planter class put forward by historians. In 1850, two farmers calling themselves “planters” held only 50 and 75 acres in improved land respectively. One of the two owned no slaves at all, and the other owned only four. Six other farmers in 1850s owned fewer than twenty slaves, and would not meet an arbitrary limit set at that level. On the 1860 census, self-identifications were more consistent with historical definitions. The smallest self-identified
“planter” held only 300 improved acres, but had twenty-eight slaves. Seven “planters,” nonetheless, held fewer than twenty slaves, but still more ten.

On the other hand, the wealthiest agriculturists identifying themselves as “farmers” would easily fit into any historical definition of “planters.” Three self-identifying “farmers” in 1850 each held in excess of 2,000 acres of improved land, four held more than 100 slaves each, and nine held real property worth over $20,000—each group representing less than 1 percent of all “farmers.” Again, by 1860, self-identifications of “planter” and “farmer” had to some degree normalized along the lines of the common “twenty-slave” definition. Though twenty-eight self-identified “farmers” in 1860 owned more than twenty slaves (about 3 percent of all “farmers”), only six owned more than forty, and the highest number of slaves owned by a “farmer” was 67. Nine “farmers” still held real property worth over $20,000, the wealthiest holding $86,000, but only ten held improved acreage greater than 1,000 acres and only one as much as 2,000 acres. Certainly these agriculturists of the top 1 percent of the “farmer” group were exercising a tremendous degree of modesty in their self-identifications. All of this demonstrates the need for a definition of class set by more than arbitrary limits, and one that looks beyond self-identifications for some qualitative description.

The primary qualitative characteristic of the “yeoman farmer,” upon which all historians have agreed, is landownership. This definition distinguishes yeoman farmers from the so-called “poor whites” or “poor white trash”: the landless poor, tenant farmers or sharecroppers. To begin making a distinction between these classes, a reliable method first is needed by which to determine if a farmer owned his land, or was a tenant farmer or sharecropper.
Toward a Method of Determining Landownership

Frank Owsley, in his initial work on the “plain folk” in the 1940s, proposed a method of determining the status of a farmer’s land tenure, whether he owned his land or was a renter or tenant, based on only census records.106 Subsequent historians have generally accepted the basic premise of Owsley’s method: that a farmer who claimed real property on the population schedule of the census and stated a matching cash value for his farm on the agricultural schedule owned the land. Beginning in 1850, each individual who owned real property stated its value in dollars. Similarly, each individual who was the primary owner or operator of a farm stated his farm’s cash value on the agricultural census schedule, as well as the acreage of his farm in improved and unimproved acres. By a simple comparison of these two figures, Owsley determined that a farmer owned his land if the value of his real property on the population schedule matched or exceeded the cash value of the farm he operated on the agricultural schedule.

By this basic method, applied to Lawrence County in 1850, 678 households appear to have owned the land that they farmed, of a total of 1,074 households in the county in which at least one member operated a farm enumerated on the agricultural schedule: about 63 percent of farming households. Broken down by district, 232 households in the northern district owned land, about 55 percent of a total 426 farming households, while in the southern district, 446 households owned land, about 68 percent of the 648 farming households there. These figures are consistent with the rates of landownership among the farming population reported by Hahn for the Georgia Upcountry, where he found about 70 percent of farmers owned real property, but considerably lower than the findings of Ford in the South Carolina Upcountry and of McCurry in

the South Carolina Low Country, both places where as high as 80 percent of farmers owned land.\footnote{Hahn, \textit{Roots}, 22–23; Ford, \textit{Origins}, 48; McCurry. \textit{Masters}, 52. None of these historians strictly employed Owsley’s method, though all benefited from Owsley’s findings in some respects, such as in recognizing tenant farmers. Hahn, Ford, and McCurry each concluded that a householder was a landowner if he declared real property on the population schedule. Whether this assumption is valid or not will be weighed below.}

Owsley concluded that a farmer who claimed no real property on the population schedule but operated a farm on the agricultural schedule was likely a tenant, and subsequent historians have generally agreed,\footnote{Campbell, “Plain Folk,” 373–374 n. 10; Hahn, \textit{Roots}, 41–42; Ford, \textit{Origins}, 84–85.} but exceptions abound in the census, gray areas between the stark contrasts of those farmers who clearly owned their land and those who clearly did not.\footnote{In an unusual set of cases at the opposite extreme, several farmers, clearly large landowners, stated a high real property value on the population schedule, but stated a much lower cash value for their farms on the agricultural schedule, usually exactly a tenth of their real property value. For example, Paul J. Watkins, who tax records confirm was one of the largest landowners in the county, claimed real property worth $30,000 on the population schedule of the census, but claimed a value for his farm of only $2,500—despite the fact that the farm encompassed some 6,000 acres, 1,800 of it improved, and that it grew 250 bales of cotton and 15,000 bushels of cotton in the preceding year. One is tempted to dismiss this figure as an error, but similar situations occurred with about a dozen farmers. I thought initially that a plausible explanation might be that the individual occupied and farmed only a small part of his land and rented out the rest to tenants, but this seems inconsistent with Watkins’ statement of the size of his farm and its harvests. Watkins and the other farmers in this category plainly owned their land, and this may be the only conclusion we can draw with certainty from only the census.} In such cases, individuals on the census claimed to own real property, but either they operated no farms on the agricultural schedule or the value of their farms was inconsistent with the value of their real property. These exceptions highlight some of the limitations of Owsley’s method, which can only be applied to farm operators who are listed on both the population schedule and the agricultural schedule. Those not involved directly in agriculture, such as the denizens of towns, are completely absent from analysis by this method, whether they owned land or not. Landowners who did not operate farms on their land, or who employed agents to operate farms for them, likewise might not be counted among landholding farmers based on Owsley’s
The simplest method of gauging landownership among the entire population is to count an individual as a landowner if he claimed any real property. Hahn, Ford, and McCurry each made this assumption, and it is reflected in their landownership figures. Whether or not it is a valid one will be examined below. Is real property by definition land? Is there any difference between a figure based on careful comparison of real and farm values and one based on a simple deduction of real property? The householders that owned real property according to the census, but fail Owsley’s other criteria for landownership, are precisely the ones at stake in this question: Should an owner of any real property be classified as a landowner?

These households that claimed to own real property on the 1850 population schedule, but fall outside the bounds of Owsley’s method, fall into three general categories (see Table 6). The largest group, 73 households, claimed real property, but was not listed on the agricultural schedule at all as operating farms. Of these, 23 were enumerated within the bounds of the towns, Moulton and Courtland, as outlined above, and their heads identified themselves with town occupations (see Table 2 above). The real property these townspeople owned was certainly their town lots, homes, and places of business. Of the remaining 55 households enumerated outside the towns, only 18 had heads of household who identified themselves with farm occupations; most of the rest were skilled manufacturers such as blacksmiths, or professionals such as doctors or lawyers. These households likewise probably owned their homes and the small tracts of land

110 Some agents on the census identified that themselves as such and also stated their employers.
111 Three households within the towns had members other than the head who identified themselves as farmers.
on which they were situated. The individuals in this group who identified themselves as farmers may have worked the land of others as laborers or farm hands. In both the towns and outside them, the households in this class claimed an average of $500 in real property. Though these people were landowners in the strict sense, and should be counted as landowners be in any broad consideration of land tenure, a distinction should be made between these owners of home lots and owners of more than a few acres of agricultural land, on which they could work for their livelihood and self-sufficiency independent of others.112

The second class of households that claimed real property in 1850 but did not meet Owsley’s criteria for landownership is the 27 households that appeared on the agricultural schedule, but with farms that listed neither any acreage nor cash value. Fifteen of these were enumerated within the bounds of the towns and had heads who held town occupations. Only six heads of household identified themselves as farmers. These households, similar to the previous group, claimed an average of $500 of real property, so it is likely again that the property in question was their homes and businesses. Although it is apparent that these people did not own substantial agricultural property, the situation of the farms of which they claimed to be the operators is less clear. The products of the farms are too great for them to have been household gardens. All but three farms grew corn, and grew on average 300 bushels in the year. Only six grew cotton, on average two bales, if two farms are excluded: the farms of Asa Vaughn and A.M. Keller, which grew 21 and 42 bales of cotton in the year respectively, which are out of character with the other farms in the group. Vaughn identified himself as a farmer and Keller as a physician. Vaughn—or more likely his eight slaves—probably worked the land of his brother

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112 Although it is possible that some of the households in this group planted small vegetable gardens for their own food, these were unlikely to have grown enough produce to achieve self-sufficiency, without being large enough to consider farms.
and neighbor Baskerville Vaughn, a wealthy landowner and planter by any measure. Keller, a resident of Courtland, likewise may have farmed someone else’s land with his seven slaves. Of the 27 households in this group, sixteen owned slaves, on average six and at the most twelve. All but four households were located in the northern “planter” district. Though it is clear that these people did not own their agricultural land, it is also apparent that many of them, like Asa Vaughn and A.M. Keller, were people of some financial and social means, and should not be classed with tenant farmers whose situation was born of poverty. It is most likely that these people were renters rather than tenants or sharecroppers.

\[113\] It is also possible that these exceptions reflect an incorrect or inconsistent use of the agricultural census form, and that the assistant marshal was expected to enter the acreage and cash value of every farm, whether the operator owned the land or not—since 42 bales of cotton cannot very well have been grown on zero acres. The official instructions to assistant marshals for the agricultural schedule stated only that he should “insert the number of acres of improved land . . . connecting with or belonging to the farm which the assistant marshal is reporting” (U.S. Census Bureau, “Agricultural Schedules: 1850 to 1900,” in Census Reports, Volume V: Agriculture, Part I: Farms, Live Stock, and Animal Products [Twelfth Census, 1900] [Washington: U.S. Census Office, 1902], http://books.google.com/books?id=XS0UAQAAMAAJ [accessed 28 November 2013], 744). 144 of the 1,097 farms on the 1850 agricultural schedule for Lawrence County reported no acreage and no cash value. All but six of these were in the northern district, a third of the 434 total households there. The enumerators of the agricultural census in a number of other counties I reviewed followed the same habit as the assistant marshal of the northern district of Lawrence County of listing farms without acreage or cash value, but the assistant marshal of the southern district did this in only a few cases. Stephen Hahn notes a similar discrepancy between the two counties he examined: In Carroll County, the enumerator listed many farmers with no real property (about 70 percent of all farmers) on the agricultural schedule with farms stating no acreage, while the enumerator in Jackson County generally omitted farmers claiming no real property from the agricultural schedule. See Hahn, Roots of Southern Populism, 22 n. 19.

\[114\] This group fits the description of the “renters” Ford described in the South Carolina Upcountry, who “were actually quite wealthy and were renting an entire plantation or large farm.” Ford, Origins, 85 n. 99.
Table 6.  1850 households by landownership status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District 7 (N)</th>
<th>District 8 (S)</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total households</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>901</td>
<td>1485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In towns (% of total)</td>
<td>59 10.1%</td>
<td>35 3.9%</td>
<td>94 6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farming(^{115}) (% of total)</td>
<td>426 72.9%</td>
<td>648 71.9%</td>
<td>1074 72.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slaveholding (% of total)</td>
<td>256 43.8%</td>
<td>233 25.9%</td>
<td>489 32.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With real property (% of total)</td>
<td>282 48.5%</td>
<td>522 57.9%</td>
<td>804 54.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Landowning Farmers (\% of Farming) (per clear criteria by Owsley method)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District 7 (N)</th>
<th>District 8 (S)</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In towns (% of Landowning Farmers)</td>
<td>13 5.6%</td>
<td>5 1.1%</td>
<td>18 2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slaveholding (% of Landowning Farmers)</td>
<td>162 69.8%</td>
<td>174 39.0%</td>
<td>336 49.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Exception III (Mortgagors) included:</td>
<td>242 56.8%</td>
<td>463 71.5%</td>
<td>699 65.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exception I: Homeowners (% of Total)
Claim real property, but no farm listed (own home lots and businesses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District 7 (N)</th>
<th>District 8 (S)</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In towns (% of Exception I)</td>
<td>11 64.7%</td>
<td>12 21.4%</td>
<td>23 31.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slaveholding (% of Exception I)</td>
<td>9 52.9%</td>
<td>21 37.5%</td>
<td>30 41.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exception II: Renters (% of Total)
Claim real property, farm with no acreage or value (own home lots, but rent farms)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District 7 (N)</th>
<th>District 8 (S)</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In towns (% of Exception II)</td>
<td>12 52.2%</td>
<td>3 75.0%</td>
<td>15 55.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slaveholding (% of Exception II)</td>
<td>15 65.2%</td>
<td>1 25.0%</td>
<td>16 59.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exception III: Mortgagors (% of Total)
Claim real property, farm with acreage and value, but real value less than farm value (farm land under mortgage or lien)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District 7 (N)</th>
<th>District 8 (S)</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In towns (% of Exception III)</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slaveholding (% of Exception III)</td>
<td>4 40.0%</td>
<td>6 35.3%</td>
<td>10 37.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{115}\) A household is considered a farming household if at least one member was listed on the agricultural schedule of the census as operating a farm.
A third group of 27 households owned real property on the population schedule and appeared on the agricultural schedule with farms reporting acreage and cash value, but owned real property of lesser value than the cash value of the farms they operated. About two thirds of these, seventeen households, were located in the southern district, and none were in the towns. In eighteen cases, the farms owned sixty acres or fewer; the two largest farms held 700 and 800 acres. Many of these appear to have been functional subsistence farms: 85 percent of them grew corn, fourteen of them between 150 and 500 bushels in the year; the several large farms grew as many as 2000 and 2500 bushels. All of the farms raised livestock, with swine being the most prevalent animal, and all but one grew some other quantity of foodstuff, 75 percent of them growing sweet potatoes, on average 40 bushels in the year. Only 55 percent grew cotton. Nine of fifteen farms growing cotton grew between one and five bales; the larger farms in this category grew between ten and eighteen, and one grew as many as 171. Of slaveholding, only ten farmers in this group were slaveholders, six of them owning five slaves or fewer, and the largest slaveholder owning fifty.

The most notable attribute of the household farms in this group is the regularity of the correlation between real property value and farm cash value: in 22 of the 27 cases, the farmers owned in real property a regular fraction of the cash value of their farms. Sixteen owned a percentage divisible by five, between 10 percent and 60 percent, and six more owned exactly two thirds. For example, Sarah Hollowell, a thirty-two-year-old widow living in the east-central part of the county, near the town of Hillsboro, declared that she owned $200 of real property on

116 To allow for statistical noise, I included any farmer who owned in real property as much as 80 percent of the cash value of his farm in the “landowning” category from the first analysis, before even reaching this stage of examining exceptions. Strictly speaking, a further twenty farmers owned in real property between 80 and 99 percent of the cash value of their farms, four in the northern district and sixteen in the southern district.
the population schedule, but on the agricultural schedule, claimed that the cash value of her farm was $300. The Lawrence County tax list of 1848 confirms that Mrs. Hollowell did in fact own and pay taxes on forty acres of land. It would appear, then, that the farmers in this category owned at least part of their land, perhaps having taken out loans or being otherwise indebted for their land. It would seem appropriate in most cases to include these households with the landowning farmers, particularly if they owned at least two thirds of the cash value of their farms.

With regard to landownership, then, the essential question is whether the fact of owning real property at all, even a home lot, made a substantial distinction in itself between classes. Certainly individuals with professional or manufacturing occupations had other sources of income besides agriculture; the ability to own land in their cases was a product of their status and not a cause. For farmers, on the other hand, the product of their land was their primary livelihood, and the fact of owning one’s farm land rather than owing rent or a share in crops to a landlord may have made a critical difference in one’s ability to succeed, profit, and prosper. By definition, a farmer who didn’t own his own land could not be considered self-sufficient.

In that regard, Owsley’s measure of landownership from the population and agricultural censuses may be a more accurate indicator of class distinctions in antebellum society, especially among farmers. It notes the distinction, particularly in the cases of the homeowning townspeople and the agricultural renters, between individuals who could depend solely on their own property and labor for their well-being, as opposed to those who depended or relied on the patronage or property of others. The agricultural mortgagors, those who appear to have owned their own farm land but for a mortgage or lien, may be considered landowners in this regard, since by all other appearances they held title and control over their land.
By contrast, the measure of landownership based on the mere ownership of any real property overlooks this distinction, and at least with regard to farmers, would give an overestimate of economic independence among the agricultural population. For a query analogous to the one used above, examining those households in the county who had at least one member listed on the agricultural census and could be considered farming households, about 68 percent owned real property: 62 percent in the northern district and 72 percent in the southern district. The figures from the Owsley method above, if the group of apparent “mortgagors” is included, show that 65 percent of farming households in the county owned land: 57 percent in the northern district and 72 percent in the southern district. The difference seems almost at first glance. The disjunction between the two measures amounts only to 27 households insignificant—those classified as “renters” in the second exception above. But as mentioned above, a number of these households appear to have been unusual cases which may not be indicative of the situations their stated real property data suggest.

An altogether more reliable way to determine landownership is by deed and tax records. In many counties across the South, early tax records have not survived, significantly complicating the study of land tenure in those areas. Fortunately, a number of substantial and extensive tax lists exist for Lawrence County for the antebellum period, including especially voluminous and detailed ones for the years of 1848 and 1849. Through an analysis of the 1848

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117 By definition, this excludes the households who owned real property but did not appear on the agricultural schedule, i.e. the “homeowners” of the first exception. If all households are included, 54 percent of all households owned real property: 48 percent in the northern district and 58 percent in the southern district.
tax list and a comparison with the assessment of landholdings from the 1850 census, it will be possible to confirm the accuracy of those findings.\footnote{118}

The 1848 tax list in itself is a valuable source of information about both the economy and society of antebellum Lawrence County. Most applicable to the current project are the data nearest to the roll’s original purpose: the identification of property holders, and the value of each one’s holdings in land and slaves. For the tax assessment, each landowner stated both the extent of his land in acres and the location of that land within the county, as best as he was able. Though some landowners, especially poorer ones, did not know the exact legal description of their property, enough did to allow me to reconstruct a workable land map of Lawrence County just before 1850. This mapping will be discussed further below.

In addition to its utility in examining landownership, this tax list could also prove valuable to historians of slavery and to African American genealogists. Not only does the list give the numbers of slaves held by each slaveholder, but it categorizes slaves by age, and reports the given name of each slave. Even large slaveholders stated the names of each and every slave in their employ. The inclusion of slave names is an historical boon given by a meticulous tax assessor and not dictated by the Alabama tax code. Slaveholders also identified slaves who had special skills, such as seamstresses, cooks, or blacksmiths, or deficiencies, such as “diseased,” “wooden leg,” or “blind in one eye.”\footnote{119}

\footnote{118} The extent of the 1849 tax list was a late discovery. I had already spent a great deal of time in analyzing the 1848 list before I found it. Without a doubt, being a year closer to the census, more names on the 1849 list would be identifiable with names on the census, and the data on property holdings would more closely resemble the data from the census.

\footnote{119} Only slaves under 60 years of age were taxable and included on this list, however. Mr. William S. Cleere (1813–1872), the Lawrence County tax assessor, may be to thank for the inclusion of slave names. http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=53764166.
Also of considerable interest to social historians is the diverse collection of taxable items included in detail for each person on the list. Each declared ownership of any clocks and watches, whether gold or silver, revealing a developing time consciousness. What vehicles of conveyance each owned, including barouches, carriages, buggies, and saddle horses, can give an idea of each’s access to early road transportation, as well as his degree of luxury. Also indicative of one’s level of luxury was the value of any house furniture in excess of two hundred dollars. Additionally, owners of grist mills, tanneries, and other capital declared it and its value. While certainly similar items were taxed around the country, the preservation of such detailed records of what each individual owned is of inestimable value.\textsuperscript{120}

The tax assessment of 1848 divided Lawrence County into four districts by quadrant. The northeastern quadrant, District 1, encompassed many of the county’s largest plantations, as well as the town of Courtland and the village of Hillsborough. District 2, the northwestern quadrant, also included extensive tracts of rich farmland, as well as the village of Town Creek. The southwestern quadrant was District 3, and included the village of Mount Hope. District 4 made up the southeastern district, and included the town of Moulton, the county seat, and the village of Oakville. The northern Districts 1 and 2, and the southern districts 3 and 4, corresponded roughly to the northern and southern subdivisions as defined by the 1860 census. The dividing line between the northern and southern districts for the 1850 census is not certain, but it appears to have been several miles northward of the 1860 line, as a number of families that were shown in the southern census district in 1850 were shown both the northern tax districts in 1848 and the northern census district in 1860.

Toward the southern end of Division 1, just below the sharp rise in elevation that becomes Little Mountain, lived a farmer whose entry on the tax list we make take as an example, since it illustrates the various aspects of the tax assessment in ownership of land, slaves, capital, and personal property. Borum’s entry appears to be typical of a middling landholding farmer and small slaveholder:

William P. Borum,
120 acres land, N. end, E ½, Township 5, Range 6¹²¹ value $150
2 Negroes under 10 years: Isham, Washington $350
1 Negro, 21 years: Patience $550
1 Negro, 29 years: George (crippled) $450
1 tan yard $250
1 clock
1 poll

According to the census method of determining land tenure, Borum did appear to own land; comparison of Borum’s tax list entry with the census confirms that he was a landowner. In fact, in the two years between the 1848 tax assessment and the 1850 census, Borum acquired an additional forty acres of land and two more slaves. He stated on the population schedule that he owned $1,000 in real property, but only claimed a cash value of $500 for his farm on the agricultural schedule. Borum likely counted the value of his tannery separate from the value of his farm. He grew no cotton in 1850, and only enough food crops for him and his household to subsist on. The tannery was apparently Borum’s primary source of income. He stated his occupation as tanner, and appeared in an entry on the manufacturing schedule of the census, one of only a couple dozen men in the county to do so.

¹²¹ Mr. Borum’s tax list entry is also one of many that contains an incomplete land description, lacking here the section number. By comparing and cross-referencing the tax list with deeds and patents, I was able to locate Mr. Borum’s land.
Likewise for Edmond Dutton, a farmer living in District 4, in the extreme southeastern corner of the county, the 1848 tax list confirms the conclusion from the census that Dutton owned his land. Dutton paid taxes on 190 acres of land, 40 acres of which was exempt from taxation due to his service in the War of 1812. On the 1850 census, he claimed $875 of real property on the population schedule, and a farm valued at $875 on the agricultural schedule. The matching of these two values indicates that Dutton was the owner of the land, and a comparison with the tax list makes certain this assumption. Between 1848 and 1850, Dutton acquired an additional 100 acres of land. Of his 290 acres total, 175 acres were improved and 115 unimproved. Dutton was not a slaveholder, but with his large family of eight sons and three daughters—five sons over the age of twelve—he managed a harvest of fifteen bales of cotton in the year, as well as sufficient food crops.

In other cases, the tax list revealed inconsistencies in the census with regard to landholding—possible errors by the enumerator, or else flaws in the assumption of the correlation between real property value and farm cash value. For example, James Aldridge, a small planter living in District 4 a few miles from Moulton, claimed no real property on the population schedule of the census, but stated a $3,000 cash value for his 800-acre farm on the agricultural schedule. By the criteria of the Owsley method, it would appear that Aldridge did not own his land. However, the tax list reveals that in 1848 he paid taxes on 1,160 acres of land, valued at $2,500. This would appear to be the $3,000 farm he operated in 1850, with some land possibly given over to several sons or other relatives. Did the census enumerator erroneously omit a real property value for Aldridge? Or was there another situation in this case that defied easy categorization on the census?
The tax list did confirm several other assumptions made above regarding exceptions to the census criteria for landownership. Asa Vaughn and A.M. Keller and others in their category, supposed to be agricultural renters who perhaps owned their homes but not their farm land, appeared to own no land according to the tax list; though Keller did own a house and lot in Courtland. A number of other individuals who claimed real property on the census in 1850 paid no taxes on land in 1848, confirming the supposition that “real property” was not necessarily land.

As a whole, when compared against the 1848 tax list, the assessment of landownership by the 1850 census proved remarkably accurate. The census method correctly identified individuals as either landowners or non-landowners, as verified by the tax list, 87 percent of the time. A further 9 percent of cases presented ambiguous data, in which an individual’s landownership fluctuated between 1848 and 1850 by margins within reasonable expectations (see Table 7). For example, William C. Rains of District 3 paid taxes on no land in 1848, but by 1850 had acquired a forty-acre farm valued at $50. Conversely, Isaac P. Reed of District 2 paid taxes on forty acres of land worth $50 in 1848, but by 1850 appeared to own no real property. These men could very well have gained or lost forty acres of land in the span of two years. In only 4 percent of cases did comparison between the tax list and census reveal significant mismatches, such as in the case of James Aldridge above, or of Samuel D. Wasson of District 3, who paid taxes on no land in 1848 but in 1850 claimed to own 640 acres of land worth $700. Some such substantial changes in land may be owed to inheritance and the disbursement of estates.122

122 About 25 percent of the 1,250 names on the 1848 tax list could not be identified on the 1850 census. 42 entries on the tax list were estates, corporate entities, or out-of-county landowners who could not be expected to be found on the census. 270 others either removed from the county or did not provide enough
Table 7. Accuracy of method of determining landownership based on 1850 census, as compared to data from 1848 tax list.

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correct</td>
<td>817</td>
<td>87.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>938</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading the tax list back against the census, it is possible to correct our conclusions about individuals who appeared from the census not to own land, but in fact seem to have been landowners, such as James Aldridge above. With all data in hand, a final figure for landholding farm households—households that owned agricultural land, in which at least one member was listed on the agricultural schedule as operating a farm—arrives at 68 percent of all farming households for the county: 59 percent in the northern district and 74 percent in the southern district.

Who, then, were the tenant farmers? Once we have established what farmers owned their land, as well as what farmers appeared to be renting land, the remaining farmers would appear to be tenants, living on and working someone else’s land with a tenancy or sharecropping agreement. Judging from the census, these are the farmers who appeared on the agricultural schedule claiming farms with neither cash value nor acreage, or else operated farms but claimed no real property—excluding those cases such as James Aldridge who appear to have owned land but may have been mistakenly reported on the census as owning no real property. About 300 farmers, or 30 percent of all farmers, fell into this category in 1850. Only about 40 percent of these farmers grew cotton; the ones who did grew an average of three to four bales; and only information on either the tax list or the census to identify them. These entries were not included in the total of the cases considered in the test.
slightly more than ten percent were slaveholders, with the majority owning one or two slaves, or at the most four.

William Blackstone, a twenty-eight-year-old farmer residing in District 1, is typical of this group. He operated a farm for which he stated no cash value or acreage, but clear it was small: his only crops for the year were 50 bushels of corn and 100 bushels of sweet potatoes. He also kept swine and cattle and raised horses, perhaps grazing them on unenclosed pasture land. Blackstone did own $10 worth of farm implements, like other farmers in this group who likewise generally owned their own tools. He owned no slaves, and had only an infant son in 1850; he probably worked the farm with the help of his eighteen-year-old wife Mary.

One of Owsley’s more controversial claims was that land was “well distributed” among all levels of southern society. Though subsequent historians have plainly demonstrated otherwise—that property, both land and slaves, was heavily and disproportionately concentrated with the upper, planter class—the true gist of Owsley’s argument was that landownership was prevalent among both the upper and middling classes of farmers. In Lawrence County the majority of farmers did own their land, though at what appears to have been a slightly lower rate than Hahn found in the Georgia Upcountry. The southern district of Lawrence County, a land of small farms and middling farmers, seems to resemble Hahn’s Georgia counties more than the northern district, where the dominance of large farms left many smaller farmers landless. This begins to hint at the deeper question of landownership: how well land was in fact distributed—how heavily planters did dominate in the northern district, and whether yeomen had any degree of economic democracy in the southern district. Armed with as accurate a measure of landownership as possible, and having developed a firm set of landowning farmers through whom we may continue to ask questions, we are set to grapple with these questions.
**Distribution of Land and Slaves in 1850**

Journeying up Little Mountain may have been a slightly more serious undertaking in 1850 than it is today, when modern roads and automobiles make easy work of its slope. Though Little Mountain might appear a gently-rising hill compared to great mountains in other parts of the country, by Alabama standards it marks a significant spike in elevation, rising some 100 to 250 feet above the level of the rich Tennessee Valley. It was a prominent enough feature of geography that some large Tennessee Valley landowners noted in their land descriptions that they owned “some land in the mountain.”

Viewing a land map of Lawrence County in 1850, one also clearly sees the change in elevation. While the land plats in the valley are nearly completely occupied, only small and sparse tracts of land appear above the clear line demarking Little Mountain from the Tennessee Valley. The further north, and the closer to the Tennessee River, the land is, the larger the tracts of land become. Moving from south to north shows a general progression from small, scarce, 40-acre farms to vast plantations of thousands of acres situated end to end.

This picture seems immediately contrary to the findings of Frank Owsley. He claimed that large planters and small farmers generally lived interspersed with each other without regard to land value or location. Per Owsley’s observations from both census returns and tax lists, he claimed to find “little segregation of landholdings”; an “intermingling of all classes.” “The hundred-acre farm would be sandwiched between two thousand-acre plantations,” Owsley argued, and “there was no marked difference in the quality of land held by the slaveholder and nonslaveholder.” Owsley made these claims specifically with regard to the Black Belt region of

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Alabama, noting that piedmont and pine barren regions did not necessarily follow the same pattern. As a major support for Owsley’s arguments, Owsley presented the detailed land maps of Greene County, Alabama, drawn in 1856 by tax assessor V. Gayle Snedecor, which showed the landholdings of every landowner in the county. The Snedecor maps certainly show smaller farms interspersed among large plantations, but the significance of that interspersion is open to different interpretations.

Owsley seems to have taken for granted the wide diversity of soil types and qualities that can exist within a very small area—a surprising oversight for the son of a farmer and the heralding historian of the plain folk. The soil maps for most Alabama counties read like variegated patchwork quilts, with often several different soil types existing even within the same land section (one mile square). The soil map of Greene County, in fact, is even more variegated than most, resembling a work of Jackson Pollock in its seemingly random splashes of color, denoting differing soil types. With the exception of a few parts of the county with wider, unbroken regions of soil, a section chosen at random from the map of Greene County might contain as many as five or six soil types. A critic might surmise that what appeared to Owsley to be “well distributed” landholdings and an “intermingling of classes” was in fact the poorer farmers sandwiched on the inferior quality land between large plantations; but curiously,

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125 The Snedecor maps exist in several different forms in several different repositories. A color map of the whole county resides in the Library of Congress, a scan of which is available online: V. Gayle Snedecor, Snedecor’s Map of Greene County, Alabama (Mobile: Strickland and Co., 1856), The Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, http://www.loc.gov/item/2006626024 (accessed 28 November 2013). The original, hand-drawn maps of each district reside at the Alabama Department of Archives and History in Montgomery, scans of which are available online through the University of Alabama’s Alabama Maps project: V. Gayle Snedecor, Hand-drawn maps of the Precincts of Greene County, Alabama (s.l.: s.n., 1858), Alabama Department of Archives and History, on Alabama Maps, University of Alabama, http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/historicalmaps/counties/greene/greene.html (accessed 28 November 2013).
superimposing a modern soil map on the land map of one of Owsley’s Greene County districts reveals no clear correlation between soil type and class. Any given tract of land, of either small farmer or large planter, seems to have contained a diversity of soil types.126

Lawrence County’s soil map, by comparison, appears much more unbroken, with wide areas of the same soil types stretching across the width of the county in bands. And while Owsley applied his argument about “intermingling” of land to only the Black Belt region of Alabama, Lawrence County is neither in the Piedmont nor the Pine Barrens regions which Owsley named as exceptions. With its diversity of geography in mountains and valleys, constituting widely different soil types and qualities, Lawrence County appears an ideal location to test Owsley’s assertions.

From the detailed land descriptions given by landowners to the tax assessor in 1848, I constructed a land map showing the locations of each landowner’s property in relation to the geography of Lawrence County and to the holdings of other landowners. I overlaid upon this a series of geographic and topographic maps of the county, including the soil map. This whole process—which before would have taken weeks or months of painstaking cartography—was accomplished in only moments by computer automation. Using this assemblage of visual information, it is possible to examine some of these questions regarding the distribution and segregation of property.127

126 For this comparison, I used the Greene County District 12, the Knoxville district, in the northeastern part of present-day Greene County, on the border between Hale County in the east and Tuscaloosa County in the north. Hale County was created in 1867 from what had been the eastern half of Greene County.

127 I constructed a full map of only District 1 from the 1848 tax list, since it had the most complete land descriptions of the four districts, and since it presents the area best suited to compare the land of planters and yeomen. Also of great benefit in reconstructing this map was Margaret Matthews Cowart, Old Land
By the Lawrence County land map, it appears at once that land was not “well distributed.” There was a gross distinction in size and area between the land of the wealthiest, most expansive landowners, who owned thousands of acres, whole sections of land, and the property of small and middling farmers, who owned land in parcels of tens or hundreds of acres. There existed a clear segregation between large plantations and small farms. The largest plantations were to a great extent concentrated in the north of the Tennessee Valley, along the banks of the Tennessee River. Scattered among them in that area, there were only several smaller farm plots scattered among—and even these farms were owned by the sons of neighboring planters, or else by transitory farmers who did not remain long. James M. Gray, age 32, owned 180 acres of land in the midst of the wealthiest planters, not far from the land of his father Jonathan Gray, who owned 1000 acres. Bartley Cox and James Turrentine, who owned adjacent 40-acre plots on the bank of the river in 1848, were both gone by 1850.

On the other hand, smaller farmers generally tended to cluster together further to the south, away from the river. Here small farms were indeed in close proximity to larger farms—but it might be more appropriate to say that the large farms were scattered among the smaller ones. There continued to be large farms of a thousand acres or more all throughout the area of the Tennessee Valley. Farms appeared in high density, leaving no open land, from the river all the way to Little Mountain, even occupying the mountain’s lower slopes, where a particular soil type was highly desired. Higher on the mountain, farms became increasingly small and sparse.

There does appear a definite correlation between the location of farms and soil type. Though some of the same, rich soil types were spread throughout the Tennessee Valley, they

existed in wider areas closer to the river, where the wealthy planters staked their plantations. Farmers seem to have consciously bought up land to pursue areas of a particularly favored soil type. Several of the large farmers even held land on the islands in the middle of the river, frequently flooded and deposited with fertile silt.  

Though today it is considered valuable and important, larger farmers appear to have showed little interest in the soil on the heights of the Little Mountain plateau, probably on account of the difficulty of cultivating crops on the mountain. In 1850, the most valued farmland was held by the large landowners and plantations closest to the river.

Consequently, there also appears a correlation between the number of acres a landowner held and the value of his land per acre. Obtaining a figure of land value per acre from the census, however, proved unreliable. Real property as reported on the population schedule, as discussed above, included homes and other structures, and farm cash value as reported on the agricultural schedule also included the value of barns, irrigation, and any other land improvements. Relying on only a calculation of overall value per total acres results in unreasonable figures such as land worth $500 per acre (a farmer reporting a farm of two acres worth $1,000), or a plantation of 6,000 acres worth only 40 cents per acre. Self-reported land values on the tax assessments suffer from some of the same irregularities, but in general are more consistent. Based on these values, it is clear that land in the northern quadrants of the county, Districts 1 and 2, was significantly more valuable than land in the southern quadrants, Districts 3 and 4 (see Table 8).

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128 These islands are now inundated by the reservoir of Wheeler Dam.
129 See Footnote 109, page 72.
Table 8. Average value of land per acre by 1848 tax district.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tax District (1848)</th>
<th>Average Value per Acre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District 1 (NE)</td>
<td>$5.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 2 (NW)</td>
<td>$4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 3 (SW)</td>
<td>$3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 4 (SE)</td>
<td>$2.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, there is a correlation between the total number of acres a landowner held and the value of his land per acre: Those landowners who owned the most land also owned the most valuable land on average. A further stratification by number begins to appear: The fewest number of landowners owned the most amount of land. Only 55 landowners owned more 1000 or more acres, and on average their land was worth about $4.50. By comparison, 412 landowners owned 200 or fewer acres, and their land on average was worth just less than three dollars.

Figures from the census are far more comprehensive in examining landownership as a whole, since many farmers, for whatever reason, did not appear on the tax list. Immediately a great disparity between the largest and smallest landowners is evident: Farmers who owned 200 acres of fewer accounted for 85 percent of the farms in the county, but this majority of farmers owned only about a quarter of the county’s improved land. Farmers who owned 1,000 acres or more made up only 2 percent of farms, but they held nearly a third of the improved acreage (see Table 9).
Table 9. Value of land by number of acres owned, per 1848 tax assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acres of Land</th>
<th>Average Value per Acre</th>
<th>Number of Landowners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1000+</td>
<td>$4.51</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500–999</td>
<td>$4.18</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300–499</td>
<td>$3.70</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200–299</td>
<td>$3.20</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100–199</td>
<td>$2.92</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–99</td>
<td>$2.86</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These numbers become even more disparate in the northern district, and more even in the southern district. In the northern district, the largest farmers, those owning 1,000 acres of more, made up about 7 percent of total farms, but owned nearly half of all improved acreage; while farmers owning 200 acres or fewer made up about 70 percent of the population, but owned only 12 percent of improved land. The northern district, then, was dominated by large farms and plantations, as per our initial hypothesis. On the other hand, the southern district represented nearly the opposite of the north. In the southern district, those farmers owning 200 acres or fewer of improved land made up 93 percent of the total number of farms, and owned nearly 60 percent of the improved acreage in the district. Only 2 percent of farms held 500 acres or more, about 17 percent of improved acreage. The southern district in 1850 did indeed appear to be more egalitarian in terms of the distribution of land: more small farmers had access to more land (see Table 10).

130 This figure includes overall land owned, both improved and unimproved acres, whether used as farmland or otherwise.
131 For this calculation, I eliminated several farmers from the list whose land value per acre presented anomalous figures.
Table 10. Distribution of farms and improved acreage among landowning farmers in 1850.\textsuperscript{132}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Whole County</th>
<th></th>
<th>District 7 (North)</th>
<th>District 8 (South)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% Farms</td>
<td>% Acres</td>
<td>% Farms</td>
<td>% Acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000+</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>30.24%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>46.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500–999</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>18.09%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>19.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300–499</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>14.85%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>13.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200–299</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>8.29%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>7.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100–199</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>5.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–99</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>10.45%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>4.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–49</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>5.03%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>1.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–24</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>1.29%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>0.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total farms</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>474</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Distribution of farms and improved acreage among landowning farmers in 1850.*

But in terms of actual distribution, what portion of the population actually owned most of the land, even the “egalitarian” southern district appears to have been quite unequal: land was highly concentrated in the hands of the wealthiest few. Dividing farms into deciles by their holdings in improved acreage, the top ten percent of farms in the southern district owned over forty percent of all improved acreage, while the poorest fifty percent owned less than twenty percent. In the northern district, by comparison, the top ten percent owned more than half of all improved acreage, while the bottom half of farms owned only seven percent (see Table 11).

\textsuperscript{132} Cf. Table 1.5 in Hahn, *Roots* (p. 44).
Table 11. Distribution of improved acres by decile among landowning farmers in 1850.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decile</th>
<th>Whole County(^{133})</th>
<th>District 7 (North)</th>
<th>District 8 (South)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improved acres</td>
<td>% Share</td>
<td>Improved acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>61,880</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
<td>36,295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>18,529</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>12,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>10,333</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>7,631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6,616</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>5,061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4,902</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>3,309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3,854</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>1,892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>3,034</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>1,308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2,385</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>1,022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1,798</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>656</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1,007</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This unequal distribution of land may be plotted graphically via a Lorenz curve, showing the degree to which each decile of farms was depressed below what would be an equal distribution of land (see Figure 4 and Table 12). The decile of population at the far right of the graph holds a disproportionately large share of improved acreage. The ratio between the area below the Lorenz curve to the area below the equality line is known as the Gini coefficient, a common measure of inequality in the social sciences.\(^{134}\)

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\(^{133}\) These figures are based on a total 716 heads of household in the county: 242 in the northern district and 474 in the southern district.

Figure 4
Lorenz curve of distribution of improved acreage, whole county, 1850

Table 12. Distribution of cash value of farms per decile among landowning farmers in 1850.\textsuperscript{135}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decile</th>
<th>Whole County</th>
<th>District 7 (North)</th>
<th>District 8 (South)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cash value</td>
<td>% Share</td>
<td>Cash value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$912,094</td>
<td>63.8%</td>
<td>$578,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$225,053</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>$196,492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$103,516</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>$110,758</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>$60,687</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>$63,754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>$41,079</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>$36,455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>$30,613</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>$20,845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>$22,505</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>$14,679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>$17,120</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>$9,838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>$12,055</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>$5,885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>$5,655</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>$2,663</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{135} Cf. Table 1.2 in Hahn, \textit{Roots} (p. 24); Table 2.5 in McCurry, \textit{Masters} (p. 54)
If, as we have presumed, the “yeoman” class was constituted of those small and middling farmers who made up the numerical majority of southern society, and this class was visibly distinct in terms of the property it held, it would seem that we have found roughly the limit in landholding at which this class may be distinguished. Graphing the number of farms against the improved acreage that they held, a clear concentration is visible (see Figure 5). The spike or lump in the graph, indicating the number of improved acres held by the majority of farms, reaches a peak at around 40 acres: around 160 farms held more than 20 acres and less than 40. The curve descending from this apogee begins to level at around 200 acres, as this concentration, the yeoman majority, gives way to the elites, of whom there were decreasing numbers as the acreage held by each farm increased. Based on these data, it is reasonable to conclude that the majority of yeoman farmers owned no more than 200 acres. This figure is consistent with the definitions of the yeoman class set by Hahn, Ford, and McCurry. This apparently arbitrary criterion, then, is a fair descriptor of reality: perhaps this definition is not so arbitrary after all.
By a similar method, we can examine slaveholding: If we presume that the yeoman farmer is the “plain folk,” the representation of the majority or of typicality, then the limits of what “most people” had should coincide with the limits of the yeoman class. We see in a similar histogram of all slaveholders in Lawrence County in 1850 that a great number of slaveholders—
about 20 percent—held only one slave (see Figure 6). About half of all slaveholders held between one and five. In the yeoman definitions of Hahn and Ford, yeomen held at the most five slaves; McCurry allowed at the most nine. Although the curve in the figure is much more gradual than that of landownership, the slope levels somewhere between five and ten slaves; so McCurry’s figure of nine is not unreasonable. Setting the limit for yeomen at five slaves, however, seems to best capture the majority. Again, the apparently arbitrary definitions of yeomen used by historians correspond to fact. The final definition we will use, then, is that of a landowning farmer with fewer than 200 improved acres of land and no more than five slaves.

![Figure 6](image_url)

**Figure 6**
Number of slaveholders by number of slaves, 1850.
We come to this understanding just in time to see many yeomen leave. Between 1850 and 1860, the population of Lawrence County decreased sharply (see Table 1), the percentage of landowners increased by roughly the same rate, about 15 percent, and land values nearly doubled. As the cotton economy boomed, wealthy planters became rapidly wealthier, expanded their landholdings, and many poor or landless farmers were forced to leave the area. Even in the southern district, where in 1850 farms of fewer than 200 acres occupied 60 percent of the land, this statistic had reversed by 1860, with small farms holding only 40 percent of land in 1860. The tide was turning in the Cotton South, most of all for yeoman farmers.
Chapter 4: Redistribution

The decade of the 1850s brought great changes to the United States. Opening with the Compromise of 1850 in Congress, the controversy over slavery boiled constantly in the background, frequently spilling over into public affairs, pushing the nation precipitously toward war. An outbreak of violence in the new territory of Kansas, stirred by the Kansas-Nebraska Act, inflamed the national consciousness. The Dred Scott decision by the United States Supreme Court in 1857 fused law and politics, striking a seeming victory for southern slaveholders but provoking the mounting ire of northerners. The cotton economy reached to new heights, with the price of cotton constantly on the rise throughout the decade.136 In the combined South the size of the cotton crop nearly doubled. Senator John Henry Hammond of South Carolina declared confidently in 1858, “Cotton is King.”

On the ground in Lawrence County, Alabama, the 1850s proved tumultuous as well. The 1860 census assessment reveals some considerable shifts in the population and resources. Most strikingly, while the large planters of the upper class saw exponential growth in wealth, even the most prosperous yeoman farmers saw far more modest gains. Property holdings in both land and especially in slaves were becoming increasingly concentrated among the wealthiest planters.

Even as slavery was expanding deeper into the South, slaveholding in Lawrence County was declining, particularly among yeomen. Despite this, those farmers who did own their land, however little, possessed a marked economic advantage over neighbors who only rented or sharecropped their land.

In judging whether a farmer was “doing well” or succeeding in the agricultural economy, acquisitions in assets over the decade are the most evident measure of a farmer’s success—or a loss of assets show his failure. Rather than considering each type of property separately for each of more than a thousand farmers, I have developed an index of net wealth as a combined measure. Since a consideration of real estate or slave property only shows a farmer’s monetary worth in one aspect, and fails to take into account different modes of agriculture or economic situations—for example, a farmer with improved land involved primarily in agriculture of cotton and foodstuffs, vis-à-vis a farmer heavily invested in livestock utilizing mostly unimproved land or the free range—this net wealth index also helps to address diversity. The index consists of the value of the farmer’s real property as stated on the census, tabulated with the estimated value of his slaves, an estimated market value for each of his crops grown in the past year, and the value of his livestock. The resulting values for both the 1850 and 1860 censuses should not be understood as an accurate assessment of a farmer’s actual wealth or the value of his assets in absolute terms, but rather as a relative value, a measure of farmers’ prosperity over the intervening decade of the 1850s, as compared to other farmers in Lawrence County. For this reason, it is not essential that the prices I have attached to the various goods be absolutely accurate—since such a determination would be difficult, considering the wide diversity of market prices by region and locale, and the unavailability of primary records for markets in Lawrence County—but only that they be reasonable, and that all farmers be judged by the same
measure. Naturally, cotton, the preeminent market crop as well as the most valuable, makes up a large part of this figure. It was in cotton that wealth was to be made, and it can be reasonably assumed that any farmer growing cotton grew it for sale at market.

In addition to relative wealth, another important measure of a farmer’s success is the mere fact of whether or not he remained in the county for ten years. Although few conclusions can be drawn about the farmers who left the county and their reasons for leaving, generally it can be assumed that the farmers who remained after ten years did not lose everything they had, and maintained enough attachment and investment in the community to remain and seek fortunes elsewhere.

By a meticulous comparison of the two censuses, I cross-referenced the whole free population of Lawrence County in 1850 to that in 1860. This allowed me to establish definitively who remained in the county over those ten years, who left, either by death or by migration, and who arrived by 1860. By doing this, I was able to track individuals and households between the two censuses and gauge their long-term economic outcomes. Especially when harnessed to a computer database, these linked and aggregated data enabled the calculation of a large yield of valuable analyses and statistics.

The possibilities of these analyses are endless, once the data are in the database. For example, I tracked each child who left his parents’ household between the censuses and started his own household, and can study trends in what resources they started with in terms of land, real value, and slaves. With a query I wrote in the matter of half an hour, I examined the children of 1850 households who married over the decade and whom they married, and compared the real property values of their parents. Of the 52 marriages I identified, almost equal numbers of grooms married brides from a poorer family as brides married grooms from a poorer family. In
general, children of wealthy families married children of other wealthy families, but on average, brides were more likely to marry grooms of considerably poorer families, by as high as ratio of 7 to 1, than vice versa. These findings are not scientific—there were many more marriages conducted over the decade than 52, and I made no effort to systematically study them—but this is an example of the simplicity with which even complex operations can be performed using computer databases.¹³⁷

Pairing the two censuses was altogether like putting together a great puzzle. Some cases were straightforward, for families with unique enough names not to be easily mistaken for one another. For others, such as the Terry and Hampton families, names which are numerous and prominent in Lawrence County to this day, sons of households often shared names with cousins of similar age, and correctly matching them often required dipping into marriage records and genealogical sources. I presumed as a general rule that individuals older than 75 years in 1850 who disappeared from the census in 1860 most likely had died, but in many other cases, obituaries from the Moulton Advertiser and compiled records of Lawrence County cemeteries were very helpful in correctly those individuals who died between the censuses. The Lawrence County Archives in Moulton, its archivist Myra Borden and many volunteers, and the extensive

¹³⁷ I had planned originally to locate households who left Lawrence County between 1850 and 1860 in whatever places they ended up, and to find enough of them to draw meaningful conclusions about their change in fortunes over the decade, but this proved unreasonable due to time constraints. Another difficulty with this approach would have been an inherent bias. Any partial sampling would have been biased in favor of those families who had unique enough names that I thought there might be a reasonable chance of finding them in the census indices—and then further biased by which ones I then was able to find. A bias is also likely to be in favor of more prosperous farmers, whose wealth and standing would have made them difficult for census enumerators to miss. It is likely that over ten years, many poor farmers died, changed their names, migrated to the deep frontier or even beyond the United States, became itinerant, or simply faded to complete obscurity.
Between 1850 and 1860, the population of Lawrence County contracted sharply. From the 8,416 free residents enumerated in 1850, the number dropped to 7,185 in 1860, a decrease of about 15 percent. At least 500 individuals are known to have died between 1850 and 1860. Roughly 4,900 individuals in about 1,300 households from the 1850 census moreover could not be conclusively identified in the 1860 census, and either left the county, died, or were missed by the 1860 enumerator. Of those remaining, I identified about 3,000 individuals in 759 households as having remained in the county. About 4,200 individuals in 1,093 households appear to be new to Lawrence County in 1860. All in all, there was approximately a 60 percent turnover of the overall free population of Lawrence County; about 40 percent of the population in 1860 remained from 1850.

In general, the more property a householder held in 1850, the more likely he was to have remained in the county. Of households that owned no property in either land or slaves in 1850, only 38 percent remained in 1860. Considering yeoman farmers who fit the formal definition of landowners with fewer than 200 improved acres and five or fewer slaves, about 48 percent of households remained. On the other hand, of planter households, those who held more than 200

acres of improved land and twenty or more slaves, a full 60 percent remained. Those with investments in the county, especially in land, and with ties to the community through family and neighbors, were the most likely to have remained after ten years.

**Landownership**

The defining characteristic that separates yeoman farmers from other small farmers was landownership. But it begs the question to suppose that landownership in itself made a substantial difference in a farmer’s economic situation. Frank Owsley, whose early studies on the “plain folk” in the 1940s originated this method of research through the census, asserted that yeoman farmers were financially “comfortable” and succeeding in the agrarian economy, which implies something about the economic stability and prosperity of the yeomanry. Certainly by comparison to wealthy planters, whether yeomen were “doing well” must be considered relatively, but in comparison to the landless poor, southern society’s “poor whites,” were yeoman farmers, who owned their own small parcels of land, really in a better economic position?

As we have seen, landowners in general had a greater likelihood of remaining in Lawrence County over the decade of the 1850s than nonlandowners, and landowners also had a greater likelihood of gaining in their measure of net wealth—of succeeding in the economy. Even more strikingly, landowners on average showed markedly higher average growth in net wealth than nonlandowners. To a certain extent, this is only logical, since by definition the measure of net wealth includes the value of land as well as the market value of goods produced. Naturally those who owned land both included its value in their total net wealth, and having access to land, had the ready means to produce agricultural goods. But even on a very small scale, 

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139 These numbers are significantly higher if the households of those who are known to have died are excluded from the figure. As many as 41 percent of the propertyless, 55 percent of yeomen, and 75 percent of planter households remained after ten years if the known dead are excluded.
yeomen were both more likely to gain in wealth over the long term and had a higher average gain in net wealth than tenant farmers working the same amount of land.

If all farming households are considered as a whole, those households that owned land showed a slight but consistent advantage over nonlandowners in their likelihood of gaining in net wealth over the course of the decade. In the whole county, 73 percent of landowners gained in net wealth, compared to 69 percent of nonlandowners. Judging only by the probability of gaining in net wealth, all farmers in the southern, mountainous district, both landowners and nonlandowners, had a considerably higher chance of success than those in the northern, plantation district. In the northern district 70 percent of landowners and 61 percent of nonlandowners gained in net wealth, while in the southern district, about 75 percent of landowners and 74 percent of nonlandowners gained in net wealth (see Table 13). In the southern district, where land was widely available, any access to land provided the possibility of making a livelihood. In terms of at least breaking even or making something of a profit, however small, farming proved to be a stable and safe mode of life in Lawrence County in the 1850s.

Table 13. Percentage of farm households that gained in net wealth between 1850 and 1860.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Households*</th>
<th>Whole County</th>
<th>Northern District</th>
<th>Southern District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landowners</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
<td>70.2%</td>
<td>74.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonlandowners</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the county as a whole, many farmers saw a significant gain in net wealth during the 1850s. Landowners fared better than nonlandowners, and generally the more resources one had, the more resources one was able to gain. On average, landowning farmers saw an average gain in net wealth of about $10,000, while nonlandowning farmers increased by an average $5,500. In

* These are the households who remained in Lawrence County between the two censuses.
terms of potential losses, landowners had much more to lose than nonlandowners: Landowners who decreased in net wealth showed an average loss of about $4,500, while nonlandowners only lost an average $800. The median value shows that by far the majority of farmers made only modest gains: as a median, landowners gained about $800 and nonlandowners about $350 (see Table 14).

Table 14. Average gains and losses in net wealth for landowners and nonlandowners in whole county

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whole County Avg. Gain</th>
<th>Avg. Loss</th>
<th>Median</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landowners</td>
<td>$10,151</td>
<td>-$4,495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonlandowners</td>
<td>$5,549</td>
<td>-$772</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dividing the two districts demonstrates the greater economic opportunities available to a farmer in the northern district, but also the greater risks. In large part because most of the large planters, who were capable of such high yields, were located in the northern district, the average growth in net wealth for both landowners and nonlandowners there was higher there than in the southern district. Landowning farmers in the northern district on average gained nearly $23,000 in the 1850s, while landowners in the southern district averaged gains of about $4,000. Nonlandowning farmers similarly had a higher capacity for gains in the northern district, being tenants to more arable and productive land: they averaged a gain of about $10,000, while nonlandowners in the southern district averaged gains of only about $3,000. On the other hand, farmers in the southern district did not show so great a disparity between the successes of landowning and nonlandowning farmers: landowners averaged a gain of $4,000 to

140 Several large farmers in the northern district, the “renters” of the previous chapter, were classified as nonlandowners and showed very large gains, inflating the average gain in wealth for nonlandowners far above the majority of farmers.
nonlandowners’ $3,000. Once again, the availability of land in the southern district made at least moderate gains very possible for landowners and tenants alike.

Agriculture in the northern district, on the other hand, involved large investments, high risks, and heavy competition for land, labor, and access to markets. Just as farmers saw the possibility of making great gains, they faced substantial losses if their ventures failed. Planters in the northern district, who no doubt invested heavily in land, slaves, and cotton, faced a much higher risk of loss than the generally smaller farmers that predominated in the southern district. Landowners in the northern district saw an average loss of nearly $10,000, while those in the southern district averaged losses of less than $1,500. Nonlandowners also faced considerably higher losses in the northern district than their counterparts in the southern district, over $1,000 on average in the north compared to an average $350 in the south. Any involvement in the plantation system, even as a tenant, had high stakes (see Table 15). The median values of all farmers, both those who gained and who lost net wealth, indicate that for nonlandowners, loss or very meager gain was the norm, while for landowners, the gains of the majority of farmers were dwarfed by those of the wealthiest planters—but for small farmers who began with little, these gains were nonetheless substantial.

Table 15.  Average gains and losses for landowners and nonlandowners by district

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Northern District</th>
<th>Southern District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landowners</td>
<td>$23,188</td>
<td>-$9,612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonlandowners</td>
<td>$9,873</td>
<td>-$1,189</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These numbers demonstrate, more than anything, that those who had, had the capacity to gain more. Most nonlandowning tenant farmers typically did not tenant large amounts of land, and so naturally whatever gains they made were orders of magnitude lower than those of the largest landowning farmers. But did landownership itself, above merely having access to land, make a significant difference in the long-term economic outcomes of farmers?

To answer this question, I examined nonlandowners and landowners on closer economic footing with each other, those who both operated small farms, either owning them or tenanting them; in particular those with farms with between ten and forty improved acres—a definition which includes, as we have found, the majority of yeoman farmers. To begin with, these farmers reiterate the trend that owners of property had a higher likelihood of remaining in the county than the propertyless: about 46 percent of landowning yeomen remained in the county by 1860, but only 37 percent of tenant farmers. Of landowners, 107 farmers remained by 1860, and 63 nonlandowners remained. Both groups of smallholders resided predominantly in the southern district; in fact, so few lived in the northern district as to make a separate consideration of the northern district statistically unviable.141

In comparing the two groups, the farmers who owned their land showed a small but consistent advantage over those who did not. Small landowners were somewhat more likely to gain in net wealth than nonlandowners, 70 percent as compared to 67 percent; both percentages were below the average for the whole county. Landowning farmers showed a higher average gain in net wealth than nonlandowning farmers, but not by a great margin: landowners averaged about $1,400 and nonlandowners about $1,100. But a difference is even more evident in the median values: the median gain for nonlandowners was about $300, while for landowners the

141 Only 21 landowners and 8 nonlandowners operated farms of 10 to 40 acres in the northern district.
median gain was roughly twice that at over $600. It is also apparent that landowners also had more to lose than nonlandowners: the average loss of landowners was nearly double that of nonlandowners (see Table 16).

Table 16. Average change in net wealth over ten years for landowning and nonlandowing small farmers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% Gained</th>
<th>Avg. Gain</th>
<th>Avg. Loss</th>
<th>Median</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landowners</td>
<td>70.1%</td>
<td>$1,355</td>
<td>-$617</td>
<td>$405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonlandowners</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>$1,125</td>
<td>-$315</td>
<td>$253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite the insufficient sample size of small farmers in the northern district, some general observations can be made about them. On the whole these farmers fared poorly compared to those in the southern district: twelve of the twenty-one landowners, about 60 percent, and only two of the eight nonlandowners, successfully gained in net wealth over the decade. The median value for the change in net wealth of landowners was only thirteen dollars; and nonlandowners saw a median loss of more than $100. The northern district, where farmers faced heavy competition with planters for access to land, labor, and services, was a most inhospitable environment for small yeoman farmers.

It seems, then, that landownership did make a significant difference in the economic fortunes of farmers. The value of private property ownership to a farmer’s yeoman independence and identity, as opposed to mere access to land, so paramount in the minds of these farmers, was a tangible reality.142 Those who owned land had the means to produce crops and a higher capacity for gaining wealth than those who did not, and so landowners had a greater likelihood of succeeding in the agricultural economy than nonlandowners. Landowners on the average

gained substantially more wealth than nonlandowners; but those who were heavily invested in land and slaves, especially in the northern district, faced the possibility of losing much more than those who were not. Most tellingly, in considering small farmers with forty acres of improved land or fewer, whose only distinguishing trait as far as the census is concerned is whether or not they owned their land, those farmers who owned land fared better on average than those who did not, both in their probability of success and their average gain of net wealth.

At least by the measure of landownership, the distinction between yeoman farmers and other small farmers thus seems to be a valid one. By owning their land, and not being beholden to a landlord, they had the possibility of being to some extent independent and self-sufficient, and of acquiring wealth by their toil. But what about the distinction between slaveholder and nonslaveholder? Was the ownership of slaves in itself a meaningful class distinction? Were slaveholders necessarily on better economic footing than nonslaveholders, by the mere fact of owning slaves? We may examine this question by a similar method.

**Marginal Value of Slaveholding**

In the society of the 1850s, many farmers in the South viewed slaveholding as a mark of status. Even to own one slave made even the smallest farmer a member of the “ruling race.”¹⁴³ Historians often take for granted that slaveholders were a class apart, and that slaves were a primary means of production on the large plantations of the cotton South. But the enduring question of whether or not slavery was profitable takes on a different aspect for small farmers only marginally involved than for large planters heavily invested in the plantation system. In terms of labor, were slaves merely additional hands to a yeoman household, comparable to a

farmer’s free sons,\textsuperscript{144} or was the nature of slave labor inherently different, in such a way as to affect the farm’s economic outcome?

Certainly, considered on the whole, slaveholders were more prosperous than nonslaveholders. The slaveholding class included all the largest planters, so immediately a comparison of slaveholders and nonslaveholders faces a difference of size and scale in addition to any economic measure. The definition of our measure of net wealth includes the value of slaves, so large slaveholders, especially those acquiring more slaves, are bound to have an advantage in a comparison of net wealth, as well as the means to produce more. A more indicative comparison would be to compare only slaveholding and nonslaveholding yeomen.

In 1850, 102 yeoman households resided in the northern district, of whom nearly 40 percent were slaveholders. 344 yeoman households lived in the southern district, where only one in four owned slaves. Yeoman nonslaveholders had a marginally greater chance of success over the decade of the 1850s: in the county as a whole, 73 percent of yeoman slaveholders gained net wealth, and 74 percent of nonslaveholders. The potential yield, however, was nonetheless greater for slaveholders: all yeoman slaveholders in the county gained on average about $4,300 in net wealth, as compared to yeoman nonslaveholders, who gained only an average $1,800. Remarkably, both slaveholders and nonslaveholders in the southern district out-performed their counterparts in the northern district: yeoman nonslaveholders in the southern district gained an average $4,900, against which slaveholders in the northern district only netted an average $2,800. Nonslaveholders in the southern district also fared better than those in the northern district, making on average $1,200, as compared to northern district nonslaveholders with an average gain of $900. This demonstrates well the hostile environment the northern district posed to small

\textsuperscript{144} McCurry, \textit{Masters}, 58-60.
farmers. This is even more evident in the fact that only 58 percent of yeoman nonslaveholders in the northern district successfully gained net wealth, compared to 75 percent of slaveholders. In the southern district, nonslaveholders again fared generally better than slaveholders: 77 percent of yeoman nonslaveholders succeeded, but only 72 percent of slaveholders did (see Table 17). Overall, both slaveholders and nonslaveholders tended to succeed, and at relatively equal numbers; but slaveholders gained significantly more.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Who Gained in Wealth</th>
<th>Whole County</th>
<th>Northern District</th>
<th>Southern District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slave</td>
<td>Nonslave</td>
<td>Slave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72.6%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
<td>73.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average Gain, Net Wealth</th>
<th>Whole County</th>
<th>Northern District</th>
<th>Southern District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$4,300</td>
<td>$2,768</td>
<td>$4,856</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1,129</td>
<td>$920</td>
<td>$1,169</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average Loss, Net Wealth</th>
<th>Whole County</th>
<th>Northern District</th>
<th>Southern District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-$973</td>
<td>$792</td>
<td>-$1,029</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-$486</td>
<td>-$615</td>
<td>-$426</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Median (Gains and Losses)</th>
<th>Whole County</th>
<th>Northern District</th>
<th>Southern District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$1,759</td>
<td>$2,281</td>
<td>$1,736</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$408</td>
<td>$32</td>
<td>$491</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average, though, slaveholders were more likely than nonslaveholders to have, by virtue of already having the wealth with which to buy slaves, more resources in land and other property than nonslaveholders. Even in an examination of only yeomen, our sample is inherently biased and not necessarily a true reflection of the value of slaveholding alone. Thus, a more appropriate test would be to examine two groups of farmers with small landholdings. Both groups hold between one and eighty acres of improved land, and were on otherwise equal economic footing with each other. There is only one visible difference between them: the ownership of a single slave.
Narrowing the field of slaveholders to only those farmers who owned one slave, however, limits the size our sample considerably. 374 yeoman households owned between one and eighty acres of improved land in 1860, about 84 percent of all yeomen in the county. 286 of these, or three fourths, were nonslaveholders. About one half of those, 139 households, remained in Lawrence County, giving us a fair sample of small nonslaveholders to examine. Of the 88 slaveholders who owned farms of between one and eighty acres of improved land, 42 of them, exactly one half, owned only one slave. By 1860, only twenty of these farmers remained in the county—edging dangerously close to an insufficient sample size. But we can still draw some meaningful conclusions from their experiences.

It appears that nonslaveholders had a safer investment, not investing in slaves, and generally making use only of their own hands and family: nearly three fourths were successful in gaining net wealth. Particularly in the southern district nonslaveholders had a high rate of success, where 77 percent of them gained wealth. Only 60 percent were successful in the northern district. These numbers and conclusions are consistent with the examination of all yeoman nonslaveholders above (see Table 17).

Even from the small sample of single-slaveholding, small yeomen, it seems that this approach faced an uphill struggle: only twelve of the twenty, 60 percent, were successful in gaining wealth. Their average gain in net wealth, however, was $3,000, compared to an average of $1,000 for nonslaveholders—giving the appearance that slaveholders, even of a single slave, were significantly more successful than nonslaveholders. A closer look at the data shows that certainly, slaveholders on average achieved greater wealth than nonslaveholders. Six of the eleven successful slaveholders netted over $3,000 each, with the top two growing by $5,500 and $6,700; but on the other hand, these numbers were not outside the range of possibility for
nonslaveholders. Though only a few nonslaveholders, the top five percent, were so successful, they too grew by $3,000 and more, with the top two growing by $5,200 and $5,600. The vast majority of nonslaveholders, though, over a third of those who succeeded, gained in wealth by less than $1,000 (see the widely uneven distribution in Figure 7). The median gain for all slaveholders was about $1,000, and for nonslaveholders only about $400. In terms of loss, even a small, slaveholding yeoman faced a greater chance of loss than a nonslaveholder, and a greater potential to lose much: 40 percent of slaveholders failed, and the average loss for slaveholders was about $700. The 26 percent of unsuccessful nonslaveholders lost on average about $500 (see Table 18).

Table 18. Change in net wealth between 1850 and 1860 for yeoman slaveholders (of one slave) and nonslaveholders, both owning farms of between 1 and 80 acres of improved land

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slaveholders</th>
<th>Nonslaveholders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of Success (Gain in Net Wealth)</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Gain in Net Wealth</td>
<td>$3,068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Loss in Net Wealth</td>
<td>-$719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median (Gains and Losses)</td>
<td>$984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum Change in Net Wealth</td>
<td>$6,667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum Change in Net Wealth</td>
<td>-$1,519</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>2422.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even with the ownership of only one slave, it is apparent that slaveholding altered the economic landscape significantly for a yeoman farmer. Though his prospects were economically more uncertain, and success was more difficult, the potential for gain and advancement was greater. On the other hand, for a nonslaveholder, relying solely on one’s own labor offered economic security and the strong likelihood of success through hard work. At least at the level of

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145 The average gain in net wealth for both slaveholders and nonslaveholders was consistent between the two districts.
these small farmers, slaveholding was not a requirement for gain, nor was the lack of it an insurmountable impediment. The distinctions visible above nonetheless give support to the notion of a “slaveholding class” distinct from nonslaveholders in terms of its economic behavior and potential.

**Figure 7**
Cumulative distribution of change in net wealth among small yeoman slaveholders (holding one slave) and nonslaveholders, both owning farms of between 1 and 80 improved acres.

Frank Owsley’s studies of the “plain folk” present a class of successful middling farmers for whom landownership and slaveholding were avenues to economic prosperity and progress. So far we have seen confirmed that landownership and slaveholding both did indeed significantly augment a yeoman farmer’s performance in the cotton economy. To this extent,
Owsley’s arguments have been on target. But his further-reaching claims concerning their class mobility and long-term success in the southern economy must bear deeper scrutiny.

**Decline of the Yeomanry**

Frank Owsley presented a sunny and tranquil picture of the South in the 1850s, one in which the “plain folk” lived and worked alongside wealthy planters in comfort and ease. They were not oppressed by the plantation economy, for they participated in their own separate farm economy. They experienced no competition or class conflict with their neighbors, but deferred to the political and economic leadership of planters out of genuine respect for their qualities of character and judgment and their devotion to the public service of the community. This social harmony was guaranteed by the yeomanry’s knowledge that the way was ever open to their economic success, a path blazed by the planters before them whom they could easily follow; and many did, thanks to an abundance of cheap land and high market prices for their farm goods and livestock. In Owsley’s view, “the [plain folk] were not only economically secure, but on the whole their position was, when considered over a period of years, constantly improving.”

Linden’s critique soon rained on Owsley’s idyll, and the historical profession promptly backed away from Owsley’s propositions. In the light of seventy years of historiography on southern plantations and slavery, many of Owsley’s claims seem fanciful on their face. But while Linden’s criticism was valid and warranted in many respects, it focused heavily on the position of the southern yeomanry in southern society as a whole and in relation to the planter class, and on the constancy of this situation, rather than any consideration of change over time. This distracted from one unique aspect of the work in particular: Owsley’s linkage of the 1850 census to the 1860 census, and his tracking of individual farmers between the two. It is based on this

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research, presumably, that Owsley could make the claim that the position of yeoman farmers was
generally improving. This thesis has attempted to recapture that focus, linking individual farmers
and farms across the decade, and to address the question: was the economic position of yeoman
farmers “constantly improving”?

Many yeoman farmers did make steady gains in wealth through the period—and at first
glance it would appear that most farmers were indeed “constantly improving” their situation. But
the nature of this analysis already includes an inherent bias: those farmers who remained in the
county from 1850 to 1860 were more likely to have been those who were succeeding in the
economy than those failing. 73 percent of yeomen households that remained in the Lawrence
County gained in net wealth; but about 52 percent of yeoman households present in 1850 had left
the county by 1860. The best we can say for certain, then, is that at least 35 percent of yeoman
households gained in net wealth. We cannot draw a conclusion about the overall prosperity of
yeomen farmers from these data.

But we can draw conclusions about the position of the farmers who remained. It is true
that many yeomen made absolute gains. In addition to 73 percent gaining in our measure of total
net wealth, 72 percent of yeoman households gained in real property value and 62 percent gained
in improved acreage for their farms. Per expectation, farmers in the southern district were more
likely to have seen gains than those in the northern district: only 68 percent of yeomen in the
northern district gained real wealth and only 45 percent gained improved acreage, compared to
73 percent in the southern district who gained real property and 66 percent who gained improved
acreage (see Table 19). Judging by these numbers alone, it would appear that a majority of
yeoman farmers were prospering and “constantly improving.” But as Linden suggested, we
should also consider the relative position of yeomen in the society as a whole.
Table 19.  Gains in property and net wealth among yeoman households from 1850 to 1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Whole County</th>
<th>Northern District</th>
<th>Southern District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yeoman households in 1850</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… Who remained to 1860</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… Who gained in real property</td>
<td>155 71.8%</td>
<td>32 68.1%</td>
<td>123 72.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… Who gained in improved acreage</td>
<td>133 61.6%</td>
<td>21 44.7%</td>
<td>112 66.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… Who gained in total net wealth</td>
<td>158 73.1%</td>
<td>30 63.8%</td>
<td>128 75.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the economic position of yeoman farmers as a class is examined relative to the rest of society, the gains and successes of yeomen do not appear so bright. The average net wealth of a yeoman farmer in 1850 was about $1,600—$2,100 for a yeoman in the northern district and $1,500 for one in southern district. Though yeoman in the northern district faced more competition and many did not succeed economically, those who did succeed had the potential to gain more wealth than their southern counterparts. By comparison, however, the average net wealth for all households in Lawrence County was more than twice that of yeomen, and showed the great disparity between the wealthier northern district and the more yeoman southern district: $3,900 was the average net wealth for the county as a whole, but the average household in the northern district held $7,000, while the average in the southern district held only $1,950—close to the average for yeomen, who were the majority there.

Between 1850 and 1860, yeoman farmers who remained in the county gained an average of $1,300 in net wealth—an average weighted by the top 15 percent of yeomen, who gained in excess of $4,000 in net wealth between 1850 and 1860. The most successful yeoman, Reason Young, a farmer in the southern district, gained over $22,000 in a combination of land and slaves. The mean gains in the northern and southern districts were close: $800 in the north and $1,500 in the south. But the median value of about $500 for the whole county is more representative of the majority of yeomen. Remarkably here, too, it is apparent that small farmers were on average
more successful in the southern district than in the northern district: the median in the north was only $200, compared to a median of $500 in the south.

By contrast, the average gain in net wealth for all households that remained in Lawrence County between 1850 and 1860 was about $4,900—$9,000 in the northern district but only $2,500 in the southern district. $1,700 was the median increase for all farmers remaining in the county, but again this reflects a vast disparity: the median in the northern district was $4,000, and about $1,400 in the southern district. The wealthiest of planters were clearly outpacing the rest of society in the booming economy of the 1850s.

And we most clearly see that to be the case when we examine the growing distance between the average net wealth of yeomen and that of the whole society. The average net wealth of yeomen in 1860 was $1,600, nearly the same figure in both the northern district and the southern district. The average net wealth of all households in Lawrence County in 1860 was $3,900: $7,000 in the northern district and $1,900 in the southern district. Between 1850 and 1860, the average net wealth of all households in the county increased by 77 percent. The average net wealth of yeoman farmers, however, increased only by 26 percent. In 1850, the average net wealth of yeomen was 41 percent of that of the all households. By 1860, yeoman net wealth was only 30 percent of the overall average. These figures are clear. Rather than “constantly improving” economically, the position of yeoman farmers in society was declining. Compared to the planters who were becoming extravagantly wealthier, yeomen were becoming poorer.

But, after all, yeomen were gaining in wealth, were they not? Were they not better off in 1860 than they were in 1850, ending with more land and resources? It is true that on average, the net wealth of all yeoman households in Lawrence County grew by about a third, and that of the
households that remained in the county between 1850 and 1860, 73 percent gained in net wealth by some measure. If these farmers had lived in an isolated area, and did not face competition for land and markets from their planter neighbors—or if, as Owsley claimed, farmers and planters operated in different, non-competing economies—then this growth could be considered as genuine prosperity for yeomen. But the fact of the limited success and greater difficulty of farmers in the northern district shows clearly that competition with planters did impede the fortunes of yeomen, and not even those farmers in the southern district, who shared access to markets, would have escaped all competition’s effects. Those yeomen who were succeeding were not declining in absolute terms, but relative to the outstanding progress of the rest of the economy, they were stagnating.

In terms of class mobility, stagnating is exactly what yeomen were doing. Contrary to Owsley’s argument that many yeoman farmers were becoming planters, only two heads of the 446 yeoman households in Lawrence County in 1850—less than half of one percent—acquired more than 200 acres of improved land and twenty slaves by 1860 to meet the definition of a planter.147 A third, William Lackey, an Irish immigrant, also gained twenty slaves and more than 200 acres of improved land by 1860, but he came from even humbler roots, not owning any land at all in 1850 and not being classified as a yeoman.

Another demonstration of the “class immobility” of yeomen, is that only ten yeoman heads of household in 1850, about 5 percent, managed to gain more than 200 acres of improved land and more than 5 slaves by 1860, to no longer meet the definition of the yeoman class. Six others met only the land criterion. Contrary to Owsley’s claim that nonslaveholding yeomen easily became slaveholders, only twelve yeomen who held no slaves in 1850, about 8 percent of

147 These were Reason Young, mentioned above, and Hodge L. Stephenson.
those who remained by 1860, had acquired any by the end of the decade. At least in Lawrence County, the “economic door” from yeomanhood to the planter class, which Owsley claimed was “kept unlocked,” appears to in fact have been a substantial obstruction.

In the stiff competition of the 1850s, a yeoman’s hold on the sole factor separating him from the ranks of the poor, his land, was often tenuous. Not only were yeomen failing to advance, but some failed to even maintain their status as yeomen. 54 households, about 12 percent of yeoman households in 1850, dropped out of the yeoman class by 1860 because they no longer owned their land. 22 of these households were in the northern district, accounting for one out of five yeoman households there in 1850. Most yeomen who became landless appear to have become tenant farmers or to have left agriculture altogether.\textsuperscript{148}

On the other hand, there was mobility into the yeoman class from below. Between 1850 and 1860, 100 farmers who had been landless in 1850 acquired land. About four-fifths of these upcoming landowners resided in the southern district, where open land was available and successful farmers had the opportunity to buy it. Meanwhile, about half of the existing yeomen from 1850, 230 households, had left the county, and these new ones rose to fill their ranks, making up about a quarter of yeomen in Lawrence County by 1860. Only 107 new yeoman households migrated into the county by 1860, marking a net loss. In all, the number of yeoman households in the county declined from 446 in 1850 to 391 in 1860. Despite this decline, with overall contraction of population in the county, the percentage that yeomen made up of the entire population remained about the same, about 30 percent of households.

\textsuperscript{148} This excludes an additional 22 households who claimed substantial real property on the 1860 population schedule, though they did not appear on the agricultural schedule. Some of these appear to have owned land but not been directly involved in agriculture, stating different occupations. Several others identify themselves as farmers, and may have been omitted from the agricultural schedule on accident.
Beyond this apparent constancy, however, there were marked shifts in the distribution of resources. We have already seen the economic stagnation and lack of class mobility of the yeoman class. In the economy around them, moreover, the ownership of land and slaves shifted away from yeomen and more and more into plantations.

**Concentration of Land and Slaves**

It is common historical wisdom that southern slavery was expanding up until the eve of the Civil War, particularly on the western frontier. But in Lawrence County, Alabama, even as large plantations came to control more and more of the farmland, it actually contracted. The frontier had moved on. Between 1850 and 1860, in fact, many farmers from Lawrence County moved westward to Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas in search of open land and brighter prospects, accounting for the exodus of many yeoman farmers. As the white population of Lawrence County decreased by about 15 percent, both the number of slaves and the number of slaveholders decreased also.

In one sense, however, slavery did expand in Lawrence County: from the northern district into the southern district. Though the overall number of slaves in the county decreased by only about 1 percent, the number in the northern district decreased by 5 percent, and in the southern district, it rose by over 12 percent. Meanwhile, the number of slaves per slaveholder increased sharply, from 13.4 in 1850 to 17.8 in 1860, an increase of about a third (see Table 20). Slaves were becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer masters, and those masters were moving into lands where previously few slaves had worked.
Table 20. Changes in slave population and distribution between districts between 1850 and 1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Whole County</th>
<th>Northern District</th>
<th>Southern District</th>
<th>Whole County</th>
<th>Northern District</th>
<th>Southern District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of slaves</td>
<td>6,852</td>
<td>5,224</td>
<td>1,628</td>
<td>6,809</td>
<td>4,981</td>
<td>1,828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.6%</td>
<td>-4.7%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of slaveholders</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-25.2%</td>
<td>-28.9%</td>
<td>-21.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slaves per slaveholder</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of White households holding slaves</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In particular, slaveholding was becoming a decreasingly yeoman activity. In 1850, 30 percent of yeoman farmers owned at least one slave. By 1860, this number had dropped to only 10 percent. The number in 1850 is tilted significantly by the fact that in the northern district in 1850, 40 percent of yeomen owned slaves, as they sought to compete neck-and-neck with planters. Even in the northern district in 1860, however, only 10 percent of yeomen held slaves. Only twelve yeomen bought into slavery between 1850 and 1860, 7 percent of the nonslaveholders—but eighteen yeomen who were slaveholders in 1850, or 23 percent of yeoman slaveholders, had given up their slaves by 1860. Thirteen of these farmers simultaneously gained in real property over the decade, indicating that their decision to relinquish their slaves might not have been due only to economic failure or necessity. Another six yeomen who were slaveholders in 1850 had parted with one or more of their slaves by 1860, rather than bought more. If slavery was expanding, it was certainly not expanding in the yeoman class of Lawrence County.

Slaves in Lawrence County, meanwhile, were becoming increasingly concentrated on large plantations. In 1850, one in four slaves lived on a farm of under 200 improved acres. By 1860, only one in ten did. In 1850, 30 percent of slaves lived on plantations of a thousand or
more improved acres. By 1860, half of them did. 70 percent lived on farms of 500 or more improved acres (see Tables 21, 22). Even as the overall percentage of households in the county who owned slaves declined, slaveholding became increasingly concentrated among large farmers.

Table 21. Distribution of slaves by farm size in 1850

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Improved acres</th>
<th>Whole County</th>
<th>Northern District</th>
<th>Southern District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Farm</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–24</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–49</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–99</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100–199</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200–299</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300–499</td>
<td>1,131</td>
<td>773</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500–999</td>
<td>1,196</td>
<td>916</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000+</td>
<td>2,138</td>
<td>2,095</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Whole County</th>
<th>Northern District</th>
<th>Southern District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Farm</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–24</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–49</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–99</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100–199</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200–299</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300–499</td>
<td>830</td>
<td>485</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500–999</td>
<td>1,423</td>
<td>1,108</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000+</td>
<td>3,144</td>
<td>2,718</td>
<td>426</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 22. Distribution of slaves by farm size in 1860

Yeoman farmers were losing ground. Despite yeomen remaining the same percentage of the population, the distribution of economic resources in Lawrence County was shifting. Land, too, came to be concentrated in large plantations. While in 1850 small farmers with farms of
fewer than 200 improved acres had owned 30 percent of all improved land in the county, by 1860 they owned only 20 percent. From a county whose southern district had been predominantly populated by yeomen in 1850, where yeomen held as much as 63 percent of improved land, and where not a single plantation of over 1,000 improved acres had laid stake, by 1860 plantations of this size held nearly 20 percent of land in the southern district, nearly 60 percent in the northern district. Farmers of fewer than 200 improved acres declined to holding only 43 percent of land even in the southern district. In terms of real property value, yeomen went from holding a share of nearly 10 percent of value in the county in 1850, to holding only 4 percent in 1860. For the hundreds of farmers who emigrated from the county between 1850 and 1860, this planter dominance no doubt played a role in their decision to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

Clearly, Owsley’s vision of prosperous yeomen living in economic security and harmony with their planter neighbors did not manifest itself in Lawrence County. Rather than attaining wealth and status as planters, through an “open door” to success, yeoman farmers struggled to maintain their position even as planters were prospering. The “yeoman democracy” of Owsley’s thesis, if it ever existed, was quickly passing away.
Epilogue

The furor of the 1850s culminated in 1860 with the election of Abraham Lincoln as president and the threat of secession by the southern states. In Lawrence County, no presidential candidate had won a majority, but Union Democrat Stephen A. Douglas won the county vote by a narrow plurality, with another large segment of votes for Constitutional Union candidate John Bell. In the election of delegates to Alabama’s secession convention in December 1860, Lawrence County, together with the whole of northern Alabama, voted overwhelming for candidates of the cooperationist ticket, who rejected immediate and separate state secession in favor of a secession only by the united South.\textsuperscript{149} Moulton attorney and state legislator James S. Clark, one of Lawrence County’s two delegates, in response to fire-eater William Lowndes Yancey’s motion to take up the ordinance of secession, stood and made an impassioned speech against immediate secession. “Southern sentiment is opposed to separate State secession; and if not a majority, at least a large minority of our own people are violently hostile to it,” Clark proclaimed. “Shall we ever live to behold the day when Alabama . . . shall find herself torn, convulsed and rent in twain by the dissensions of her own people? Shall the martial roll of the

warlike drum ever be heard reverberating through the deep ravines of the Sand Mountains, calling the clansmen of the hills against our brothers of the South?”

Clark’s admonition proved prophetic. With the coming of war, Lawrence County’s population was indeed divided among itself. Many families, especially in the hills of the southern district, remained loyal to the Union. Precise numbers are difficult to come by, but Lawrence County provided numerous soldiers to both the Confederate and Union armies. Nearly a hundred Lawrence County citizens made claims to the Southern Claims Commission following the war, professing to have been faithful to the Union and claiming losses at the hands of the Union Army.

According to conventional wisdom, common people throughout most of the South supported the Confederacy, and certainly made up the bulk of her armies, but there are clear

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151 Spencer A. Waters, *Confederate Soldiers of Lawrence County, Alabama* (Moulton, Ala: self-published, 1992), 7: “In Lawrence County … homes would be divided in their beliefs. One brother fighting for the [Confederate] Cause, while another fought for the Union…” In 2006, a controversy erupted over the Sons of Confederate Veterans’ plans to erect a Confederate monument on the lawn of the Lawrence County Courthouse in Moulton (where, perhaps as an indication of lack of sentiment toward the Confederacy following the war, none had ever been before), and the movement in response to likewise erect a monument to Lawrence County’s Union soldiers. Both monuments were eventually placed. Clyde L. Stancil, “Union monument – will it reunite Lawrence County?” *The Decatur Daily* (Decatur, Alabama), 11 April 2006, http://legacy.decaturdaily.com/decaturdaily/news/060411/union.shtml (accessed 28 November 2013).

152 National Archives and Record Administration, *Southern Claims Commission Approved Claims, 1871–1880: Alabama*, NARA Microfilm Publication M2062, 36 rolls; ARC ID: 566157, records of the Accounting Officers of the Department of the Treasury, Record Group 217, and *Barred and Disallowed Case Files of the Southern Claims Commission, 1871–1880*. NARA Microfilm Publication M1407, 4289 fiche. Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, Record Group 233, databases online at Fold3.com as “Southern Claims Commission Approved Claims, 1871–1880: Alabama” and “Southern Claims Commission: Barred and Disallowed Claims,” http://www.fold3.com/ (accessed 28 November 2013); Margaret M. Storey. *Loyalty and Loss: Alabama’s Unionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), in which testimony from the approved claims of several Lawrence County residents is used throughout. The majority of filed claims from Lawrence County, 64, were disallowed on the grounds that the claims of many claimants’ loyalty to the Union throughout the war were doubtful. Only 25 claims were approved.
indications that this support was not unanimous among the yeomanry of Lawrence County. A number of Lawrence County yeomen served in the First Alabama Cavalry, Alabama’s best-known Union Army regiment.153 Southern Claims Commission reports attest to pockets of Union support among the yeoman population. Edmond Dutton, a yeoman farmer living in the southeastern corner of the county, was well known as a Unionist leader in his community.154 These examples are not unusual—or surprising.

The yeomen of Lawrence County, as our evidence has shown, were becoming less and less invested in slavery, and especially in the southern district where few slaves even lived, most would have felt no threat from the idea of freed slaves. Even more so than in other parts of the South, the economy and society of yeomen in Lawrence County depended little on the institution of slavery. The growing competition for land and services between yeomen and planters gave the yeomen no incentive to support the planters’ cause, and in fact reason to oppose it. Contrary to Owsley’s argument that yeomen saw no conflict with planters, the evidence of such a conflict in economic terms is manifest. On the other hand, Owsley’s claim that through “ingenuity, heartbreaking toil, patient endurance, self-denial, and physical toughness” yeoman farmers “[survived] the Civil War and Reconstruction and [restored] their farm economy”—thus “[rescuing] the South from complete and perhaps final ruin”—may contain an element of truth.
BIBLIOGRAPHY
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Joseph Thomas Richardson
joseph.t.richardson@gmail.com

EDUCATION

Bachelor of Arts, History, University of Alabama in Huntsville, 2009

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Teaching Assistant, 2010–2012
University of Mississippi
Courses: History of Europe to 1648, History of Europe since 1648,
History of the U.S. to 1877, History of the U.S. since 1877

Tutor/Teacher, 2009–2012
Veritas Classical School, Madison, Alabama
Subjects: History (Grades 7 & 8 and 9–12), Latin (Grades 7 & 8), Greek (Grades 9–12),
English Grammar and Vocabulary (Grades 7 & 8 and 9–12)

HONORS AND AWARDS

John W. Odum Memorial Prize in Southern History, 2011
University of Mississippi
Paper: “Discovering the Plain Folk: Frank Lawrence Owsley
and History from Manuscript Census Returns”

Dr. John Rison Jones Award for Southern History, 2009
Sponsored by Huntsville–Madison County (Alabama) Historical Society
University of Alabama in Huntsville
Outstanding Classical Studies Award, 2009
University of Alabama in Huntsville

Sigma Tau Delta, University of Alabama in Huntsville, 2009
Phi Alpha Theta, University of Alabama in Huntsville, 2007

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