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‘My master and Miss... warn’t nothing but poor white trash’: Poor White Slaveholders and their Slaves in the Antebellum South

Abstract:

While the majority of enslaved people lived on large plantations, there were a significant minority who lived on smaller farms where they and their families were the only slaves owned by their master (or mistress). This article uses 22 Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews conducted in the 1930s with former slaves from across the South to investigate the lives of enslaved people living with masters or mistresses that they described as ‘poor’, and argues that enslaved experiences on small farms owned by poor whites varied widely, but were marked particularly by violence, material deprivation, and intense loneliness.

Keywords:

Enslaved People; Poor Whites; Slaveowners; Works Progress Administration (WPA)

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When he was interviewed in the 1930s, former slave Charlie Davenport seemed to take pride in recalling that his master had been ‘one ob de richest en highest quality gentlemen in de whole country. Ize telling you de trufe, us didn’t ‘blong to no white trash’.¹ Although the ‘trufe’ Davenport reported to his white interviewer may in reality have been a result of the long-ingrained fear of reporting poor treatment by an elite white man to any other white person, his comments also indicate that the experience of belonging to a slaveholder who was ‘poor white trash’ was worse than—or at least, different to—the experience of enslavement on a large plantation. While the majority of enslaved people lived on large plantations, there were a significant minority who lived on smaller farms where they and their families were the only slaves owned by their master (or mistress). This is because the majority of slaveholders owned fewer than 10 slaves, with half of all slaveholders owning five or fewer in 1850.² In 1860, there were 103,612 slaveholders enslaving 523,636 people on farms or smallholdings with five or fewer slaves, and it is likely that most of them were children. These enslaved people made up 14.9 per cent of the enslaved population in the United States that year.³ Stephanie McCurry has argued that when calculating the amount of labour that the white men she calls ‘self-working farmers’ had to draw upon, it is important to note that small slaveholders were more likely to own women and children than (higher value) men. She found that in St. Peter’s Parish, South Carolina, owners of between five and nine slaves usually owned at most one or two male adult slaves, with the majority of their slaves being children.⁴ Although the sources are sparse, the experiences of these enslaved people, different as they may have been from those of larger slave communities, deserve further consideration.⁵

This article primarily uses 22 Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews conducted in the 1930s with former slaves from across the South to investigate the lives of enslaved people living with masters or mistresses that they described as ‘poor’.⁶ While a small sample, this selection includes a cross-section of enslaved people, with both ‘kind’ and violent masters, and a variety of work patterns, levels of deprivation, and access to a broader slave community, and thus hints at a range of experiences.⁷ While the WPA interviews have come under a great deal of criticism for their lack of reliability, they are some of the only sources available to begin to understand the lives of those enslaved by poor whites, whose farm records, if they ever did exist, have rarely made their way to archives.⁸ The nature of the WPA interviews, further, means that it is possible that these former slaves, [by a few of whom characterising went so far as to characterise](#) their former owners as ‘poor white trash’, were able to comment more freely on the violence and deprivation of the enslavement they had

endured than those who were enslaved by elite planters; white interviewers may have been more sympathetic to the idea that a 'poor' master was cruel towards his slaves.

Of course, 'poor' is a relative term, and can refer to more than economic status. It is possible that these interviewees were commenting on slaveholders' lack of refinement or civility, rather than their actual material wealth. However, ~~t~~There are two contexts in which these formerly enslaved people described their former owners as 'poor'. First, they juxtaposed their owners' poverty with the idea (likely held by both themselves and their interviewers) of the traditional, elite slaveholder with many slaves, and they recognised that they had endured a different experience of slavery. Second, and more importantly, speaking as they were during the poverty of the Great Depression, these former slaves had a clear understanding of what it meant to be 'poor'.⁹ Therefore when Susan Matthews remembered that 'my marster and mistis were poor folks'; Mollie Williams that 'Marse George was po''; Maggie Wesmoland that the man who married her mistress 'was poor and hated Negroes', we should take them at their word.¹⁰ It may be that the men who owned Susan Matthews, Mollie Williams and Maggie Wesmoland were what historians would call 'yeomen'; small slaveholders who owned land, a few slaves, and fit Stephanie McCurry's definition of 'self-working farmers'. Indeed, for most historians of the antebellum South, 'poor white' and 'slaveholder' are antithetical terms.¹¹ However, a strict definition excluding anyone who owned slaves from the class of 'poor whites' neglects the realities of the fluidity of slave ownership amongst the lower-class white population, and, perhaps more importantly, ignores the experiences of those they enslaved.

Further, regardless of the extent to which twenty-first century historians might quibble about definitions and characterisation, some former slaves described those who had held them in bondage not just as 'poor', but specifically as 'poor white trash'. Perhaps the most forthright former slave to call her owners 'trash' was Calline Brown. Enslaved in Mississippi, she remembered that her 'master and Miss was the meanest folks what ever lived. They warn't nothing but poor white trash what had never had nothing in their lives'.¹² Similarly, Charlie Crump described his former master, Davis Abernathy, as 'pore white trash tryin' ter git rich', and Lucretia Heyward told her interviewer that her mother, Venus MacKnight, had been purchased by a former overseer, Edward Blunt, who was 'poor white trash' but who 'had wuk haa'd and save he money and buy slave'.¹³ Historians have long debated the extent to which poor whites like Abernathy and Blunt internalised elite attitudes towards slavery and enslaved people; whether their elevated status as white men overcame any potential for class conflict.¹⁴ The evidence from these WPA interviews suggests that at least some poor whites sought to

own slaves, and as such, allied themselves in ideological, if not economic, terms with the slaveholding classes.

Poor whites came to own slaves through a variety of means. Some, possibly as a result of living amongst elite planters and seeing the profits created by slave ownership, simply desired increased wealth and status and worked to achieve it. Lucretia Heyward noted that while Blunt had managed to get some slaves, ‘he nebber git any land’ due to the outbreak of the Civil War.¹⁵ The aspirations of poor whites like Edward Blunt who decided to purchase human property and thus join the slaveholding classes are reflected in other interviews with former slaves. Dr George Washington Buckner’s interviewer noted that his master ‘along with several of his relatives had purchased a large tract of land . . . as Dr. Buckner remembers; land owners that owned no slaves were considered “Po’ White Trash”’. It seems that George Buckner believed that the purchase of his family as slaves by the white Buckners and their extended kin, who were ‘not wealthy enough to provide adequately for their comforts’, was an attempt to avoid the derogatory designation ‘poor white trash’.¹⁶ Former slave Austin Steward also explained that as both enslaved people and rich planters looked with ‘disdain’ on poor whites in their neighbourhood, he claimed that poor whites felt it necessary to buy or hire slaves ‘just to preserve their reputation and keep up appearances’.¹⁷ Allen Parker was hired by a succession of poor whites during his enslavement. While he was still a baby, his mother was ‘let out to a poor white’, and he was subsequently hired to at least four further ‘poor white’ men.¹⁸ Nancy Williams was also hired out, briefly, to a ‘po white trash’ family, after her master died. She described the terrifying experience of being auctioned to her interviewer in Virginia: ‘all de po’ white bacy-chewin’ devils stanin’ ‘roun waitin’ to get me. Den I yells loud’s I could, “I don’ wan no po’ white man git me! Ain’ wanna wuk for no po’ white man!”’¹⁹ This enslaved child, being sent to live with a poor white man by herself, when she was used to a large plantation upon which her family lived, had clearly internalised the fear of poor white slave ownership expressed by a number of other enslaved people. Mary Scott was also hired out as a child. Although this new master, Dock Hardy, was rich, he had ‘married a pore gal’, and according to Mary, the power of slave ownership ‘went to her head’.²⁰

Sometimes poor whites could obtain one or two slaves by buying those considered to be troublesome at low prices. William Singleton, who frequently ran away to the woods as a child after he was sold away from his mother, eventually exasperated his master to the point of sale when he was ten years old. ‘He virtually gave me away’, Singleton remarked of his sale for fifty dollars to a local ‘poor white woman’.²¹ Other poor whites could gain slaves at minimal

cost through coercion, trickery, or theft. Amelia Walker, who was interviewed in Virginia, recounted how enslaved women would sometimes leave their babies on the side of the road as they were being sold South, and that poor white men would steal them: ‘Some po’ white man who was too po’ to buy slaves would take dese little weaklins, raise ‘em, make ‘em work in his fields’.²² While this tale might have been apocryphal, Emily West’s analysis of enslavement petitions reveals that it was sometimes possible for whites to exploit the desperation of African Americans by cajoling them to volunteer to become enslaved, and that this was a way for poorer whites to ‘buy their way into the slaveholding class’.²³

Kinship networks that included wealthier relatives were a more frequent way for poorer whites to gain slave property. Alice Alexander, who was born on a large plantation with two or three hundred slaves belonging to Colonel Threff in Jackson Parish, Louisiana, was inherited along with her mother, her step-father, and two siblings by one of her master’s ‘poor kin folks’, Joe, upon his death. It is not clear whether Joe Threff owned any other enslaved people.²⁴ Calline Brown described how she and her family had been given to her mistress by her mistress’ sister, who ‘was poor white trash too.’ She and her husband had ‘got a little prosperous . . . and bought a few slaves’, she explained: ‘You know how some folks is when they gets up a little in the world. They wants to see their family pull out of the mire’.²⁵ Other slaves found themselves on farms belonging to poor whites when they were given to them as gifts. For example, Sarah Woods was given to Peter Sepah, a farmer with around 200 acres of land in York County, South Carolina, when he married. Sarah and her six children were the only slaves on Sepah’s farm; her husband, Dan, lived on another plantation nearby.²⁶ Other poor whites simply married into small slaveholding families. When she was a teenager, Betty Holland, the daughter of a slaveholding family in Arkansas, married a much older ‘poor man’ who, according to former slave Maggie Wesmoland, was an abusive alcoholic who ‘never had been used to Negroes and he didn’t like em’.²⁷ Mollie Williams recounted in great detail how her master, George Newsome, came to own her and her brother, Hamp. Newsome was from Virginia, and as a young man travelled to Mississippi to establish a plantation near Utica, although by 1850 he did not seem to have purchased any land.²⁸ While he was ‘po’’, according to Mollie, he had an uncle, John Davenport, who was wealthy. Initially, Newsome borrowed four enslaved men and one enslaved woman from his extended family when he ‘foun’ out you can’t make no crop wid’ out’n a start of darkies’, but he soon decided that he needed (or wanted) some slaves of his own. Davenport and Newsome attended a slave auction, and ‘Mr. John tol’ Marse George to pick hisself out a pair of darkies’. Newsome chose Mollie’s father, Martin,

and mother, Marylin, but could not afford to purchase both of them. According to Mollie, Davenport and Newsome made a deal: 'his Uncle John say he'd buy mammy an' den he would loan her to Marse George fer pappy. An' de fust chile would be Mr. John's, an' de secon' Marse George's, an' likewise'.²⁹ As Mollie and Hamp both belonged to George Newsome, the deal must have resulted in at least four further enslaved people becoming the property of the Davenports and Newsomes.³⁰

Slave ownership was an investment for both rich and poor whites, and Newsome was not the only 'poor' white man to begin with just one or two slaves but to have a clear intention of increasing his stock. As Susan Matthews put it, 'My marshter and Mistis liked for to have a lot of chillen 'cause that helped ter make 'em richer'.³¹ A 'Dr Pope' purchased Hardy Miller and Laura Beckwith from slave traders in Arkansas in 1862 because, according to Hardy, 'he was a poor white man and he wanted a pair of niggers'.³² Hardy and Laura were ten years old at the time of their purchase, but it is likely that Dr Pope's intention was to breed his 'pair of niggers' as soon as they were old enough, and thus to increase his slaveholding. Edward Blunt, the overseer who purchased Venus MacKnight, soon increased his property substantially, as Venus gave birth to nine children, including Lucretia Heyward. Lucretia did not mention the identity of her father, nor any adult male slaves owned by Blunt, so it is possible that Blunt was the father of these children, and that Venus was subject to repeated sexual abuse. Lucretia Heyward did note that 'Mr. Blunt nebber licked me, but Miss Blunt cut my back w'en I don't do to suit her'. If Lucretia was the offspring of Edward Blunt's continued sexual attention towards their enslaved woman, this might explain Blunt's wife's violent behaviour towards the enslaved child.

Unsurprisingly, violence like that endured by Lucretia Heyward was a prominent feature of the recollections of some of the former slaves belonging to poor whites who were interviewed in the 1930s. Some former slaves explained that poor whites were more likely to be violent towards their slaves, and for one, the threat of being sold to 'some po' white trash' was 'like damning a nigger's soul'. Acie Thomas, who lived on a large plantation of 150 slaves, claimed that his owners, Tom and Bryant Folsom, were never cruel, but that the poor whites who owned slaves in their neighbourhood were often so. Threatening a slave with sale to a poor white, according to Acie, 'allus broung good results—better than tearing the hide off'n him woulda done'.³³ Of course, rich owners could be just as violent towards their slaves as poor ones. Maybe enslaved people really believed that poor whites treated their slaves more violently than elite planters, or perhaps, by framing abuse as the result of the poverty and low

social status of a poor white owner, former slaves felt more able to comment on the violence they had experienced when they were interviewed. Maggie Wesmoland certainly claimed that poor whites were more violent towards their slaves than wealthy slaveholders. As noted above, her mistress was from a wealthier family than her husband, but she apparently could not convince her husband to treat Maggie and her fellow slaves as well as her father would have done. Maggie's master instilled terror in them through his excessive use of the lash: 'I was scared to death of him—he beat me so', she explained. She described how she was 'scarred up all over now where he lashed me. He would strip me naked and tie my hands crossed and whoop me till the blood ooze out and drip on the ground when I walked'. Maggie attributed his violence to the fact that he was poor, and that she never knew what would please him. She explained that he had 'never been used to nothin' and took spite on me everything happened'.³⁴ Nancy Williams' fears about the dangers of living with a poor white slave master were soon fulfilled when she was brutally punished for 'causing' the baby she had been charged with minding to choke. 'De bigges' ole po' white lie!' she exclaimed to her interviewer, explaining that 'Den dat devil took me an' carry me out do's de col'es' mo'nin in de year, cross my han's tied an' thowd me on de groun' an' whup me wid a leather paddle tel I couldn' holler'. In response, Nancy ran away, back to her rich master and the relative safety of a large plantation.³⁵ Similarly, Mary Scott claimed that while her 'rich' master Dock Hardy was 'good' to her, the 'pore gal' he had married was 'mean', and 'had him whoop me a time or two for nothin''. She showed her interviewer a scar on her head that she had had since she was a child as a result of her mistress' violence. In a dispute about whether some butter had completed churning, Mary's mistress 'threwed a stick of stovewood' at her, hitting her on the head and causing blood to 'stream' down her face. The interviewer described the scar, at least seventy years later, as 'a puffed-out, black, rusty, not quite round place, where no hair grew'.³⁶

A household production task like churning butter was just part of a range of work that those enslaved by poor whites might be required to complete. Former slaves who grew up on small farms made sure to emphasise to their interviewers the hard work that they had been forced to do as children under slavery: they were neither allowed nor able to play, not least because they were often the only children on the farm. As Perry Lewis explained, 'As I was on a small farm, we did not come in contact much with other children', although he did remember playing marbles.³⁷ Like Mary Scott, Lucretia Heyward was primarily employed in the house, where she 'Wuk all day. I polish knife and fork, mek bed, sweep floor, nebber hab time for play game'.³⁸ So was Nancy Williams, who exclaimed that on arrival at the poor white farm,

she was told by her mistress ‘to min’ de baby, give it some toas’; wash dem dishes an’ git dem tatoes peeled for cookin’ dinner. Po white trash gimme dat bundle o’ wuck to do!’³⁹ Susan Matthews had a similar experience; she ‘didn’t have much time fer playin’ because she was ‘allus busy waitin’ on my mistis’. Taking care of her mistress was a twenty four hour job, it seems, as Susan ‘slep’ on the foot of her bed to keep her feets warm and everywhere my mistis went I went to’.⁴⁰ George Washington Buckner was given to one of his master’s sons, becoming ‘his playmate and companion as well as his slave’. Although they were the same young age, ‘Mars’ Dickie’ seemed to understand his role as slaveowner, as enslaved George was required to look after his clothing, polish his boots, and tidy up his toys.⁴¹

Charlie Crump, on the other hand, worked outside. He ‘toted water, case dat’s all I wuz big enough ter do’, and the constant carrying of buckets on his head wore his hair ‘plumb off’.⁴² Rachel Hankins explained that on the small farm on which she was enslaved, they raised cotton and corn, which they had to pound by hand. The slaves also made their own clothes from home-spun cotton, split rails, made fences, and in the winter, were set to ‘bushing and clearing’. ‘You see how rough my hands is?’ she asked her interviewer.⁴³ Eliza Holman recalled that her father acted in a range of roles on the small farm upon which she and her parents were the only slaves. While her mother was the ‘cook an’ housekeepah’, her ‘Pappy am de field hand, coachman, an’ ever’thing else dat am needed to do ‘roun’ de place’.⁴⁴ Many of the farms on which these slaves worked were primarily focused on subsistence or truck farming, rather than profit-oriented rice, tobacco, cotton, or sugar. Menellis Gassaway described a ‘small farm’ on which his family, as the only enslaved people, ‘raised farm vegetables and grain, consisting of corn and wheat . . . besides we raised hogs and a small number of other stock for food’.⁴⁵ As Henrietta McCullers, who was enslaved on a small farm in Wake County, North Carolina, recalled, ‘most of our lan’ wuz planted in feed stuff fer us an’ de cattle’. She noted that although her master was disabled—or in her words ‘too puny to wuck’—her mistress, Betsy Adams, ‘wus a wuckin’ woman, an’ she made us wuck too’. Indeed, probably one of the most significant differences between a poor white slaveholder and his (or her) wealthier counterpart was the need to work alongside his slaves in manual labour. Betsy Adams’ husband only owned one male slave, ‘Uncle Mose,’ to tend the 100 acre farm, so ‘he had had to have some help’ in the form of additional white labour.⁴⁶ Similarly, Ben Lawson, as the only slave on the farm, did ‘general farm work, hoeing, plowing, harvesting the crop of wheat, corn, barley, oats, rice, peas, etc’. As Ben was merely a child during slavery, his mistress employed ‘poor white help’ at harvest time. However, this did not prevent her from ensuring that Ben was always working.

As he explained, ‘So’s dere would be work for me to do . . . I would pounder out wheat all day long, even though dey could have thrashed it as dey did de biggest part of it.’ For Jane Brazier, Ben’s mistress, it seems that it was preferable to have him employed in a pointless task than to enjoy his childhood. As Ben put it, ‘there wasn’t no children for me to play with and it seem like I never was a child but was just always a man’.⁴⁷ Enslaved children on small farms, just like those on large plantations, were often forced to undertake manual labour that prevented them from experiencing childhood.

Due to poor white slaveholders’ financial hardship, or perhaps merely their meanness, enslaved people on small farms also suffered from poor quality housing, clothing, and food. Like those on larger plantations, most of the families enslaved by poor whites lived in small cabins built from wood or stone.⁴⁸ Eliza Holman thought that the cabin she grew up in was ‘a good place’ in comparison to what she had heard about other slave quarters. ‘Thar am a wood flooah, two windahs wid glass in dem an ob co’sse weuns have de fiah place an’ sich’, she told her interviewer of her two-room log cabin.⁴⁹ In contrast, George Washington Buckner remembered a cabin ‘of the crudest construction’, with ‘merely holes’ for windows and only ‘bark shutters’ to keep out the elements.⁵⁰ Other former slaves recalled that they lived in similar conditions to their owners, which probably speaks more to the poverty of the poor white slaveholders than the good treatment of the enslaved. Henrietta McCullers, for example, explained that ‘we slept in de same kind o’ bed she slept in’.⁵¹

Several former slaves spoke at length about their recollections of the pain and suffering caused by going without shoes throughout their childhood. While owners of large plantations could be equally mean about providing adequate footwear to their slaves, those who grew up on small farms tended to attribute their deprivation to the poverty of their poor white slaveowners. Calline Brown, for example, told her interviewer that ‘They ain’t got no money to buy us no clothes, or shoes, so we goes in rags, and barefooted, even in the winter’.⁵² Mr Cargo, the poor white man who married Maggie Wesmoland’s mistress, also apparently refused to buy her shoes. Instead, ‘Miss Betty made me moccasins to wear out in the snow’ out of ‘old rags and pieces of his pants’, but these were not substantial enough to prevent the Arkansas winter causing frostbite, ‘risings’, and ‘solid sores’ to form on Maggie’s feet when they were ‘cut’ by the ice.⁵³ Rachel Hankins’ feet ‘never saw a shoe’ until she was fourteen; that is, until emancipation.⁵⁴

Of all the deprivations suffered by enslaved people belonging to poor whites, however, hunger was mentioned most frequently. A careful reading of former slaves' testimony about food—or the lack of it—reveals the extent of poverty on some small farms. A number of those interviewed remembered that they ate the same meals as their owners, but this was more likely out of necessity than generosity on the part of the master. For example, George Woods seems to have told his interviewer that he and his family ate 'the same food that the white folks did', which the interviewer interpreted as meaning 'they had plenty to eat'. However, George also described how 'as the wheat got scarcer they did not have much wheat to eat'.⁵⁵ For George Woods and his family, then, a bad harvest may have meant near-starvation, unless they were able to find additional sustenance elsewhere. Susan Matthews remembered that her 'marster and the white an colored boys would go hunting', and the resulting squirrels, rabbits, and possums they all shared meant that 'we never did go hongry'.⁵⁶ Her poor white master, perhaps because he could not afford to purchase meat for his family or his slaves, instead supplemented their diet with wild meat that he hunted with their help. Similarly, Henrietta McCullers told her interviewer that 'We et de same rations what she et', and even when her mistress Betsy Adams had 'company', she 'ain't neber fix better fer de company dan fer us'. Based on evidence like this, Henrietta's story was titled 'A Good Mistress' by the North Carolina WPA office, but it is possible that Betsy Adams simply could not afford to 'fix' her visitors better food than that she provided her slaves.⁵⁷ Rachel Hankins explained that while the farm raised 'plenty of grub' in the form of various vegetables, her master and mistress, who had a 'large family', ensured they rationed this food carefully. Although there were cows and chickens on the farm, Rachel and her family only received milk occasionally, and could not eat butter or eggs.⁵⁸ Ben Lawson and Lucretia Heyward only recalled being able to eat the 'scraps' leftover from the white family's table on their respective small farms.⁵⁹ Food deprivation was particularly extreme on the small farm belonging to Davis Abernathy, on which Charlie Crump was enslaved. According to Charlie, Abernathy believed 'dat empty niggers am good niggers an' dat full niggers has got de debil in dem', so gave his slaves only one meal a day. Charlie and his family therefore supplemented their meagre diet with whatever they could find, stealing animals to eat whenever they could. 'When we got hongry an' could fin' a pig, a calf or a chicken, no matter who it had belonged to, it den belonged ter us', he explained.⁶⁰ Like slaves on larger plantations, enslaved people on small farms were active participants in the informal economy when they were able to steal, grow, or buy additional food or other wares to ameliorate their enslavement.

Some of those enslaved on small farms, especially if they were the only slaves in the area, may have been no more than peripheral members of the ‘slave community’ that historians have emphasised on larger plantations, but they certainly were not excluded entirely. Although slaves were not permitted to travel off the farm without permission, Charlie Crump remembered enslaved people ‘from all over de neighbourhood gang up an’ have fun anyhow’, socialising and shooting craps.⁶¹ Henrietta McCullers recalled that they had ‘a co’n shuckin’ onct a year, an’ of course, a heap of prayer meetin’s an’ a few socials’.⁶² Corn shuckings were particularly mentioned as occasions when enslaved people on small farms were able to socialise with large numbers of other slaves in their neighbourhood. As George Woods recalled, at that time of year, both black and white people would gather at one of the large plantations, ‘and they all had a good time’. At the end of the corn-shucking, according to George, the slaves performed a kind of charivari on the owner of the plantation, as they carried him on their shoulders, ‘singing and laughing’, before they ‘then would carry the man into his house, pull off his hat, and throw it into the fire; place him in a chair; comb his head; cross his knees for him and leave him alone’.⁶³ This ritual, which allowed enslaved people—and perhaps even their poor white owners—to challenge the authority of elite planters through public embarrassment was a brief moment of satisfaction in lives otherwise marred by poverty, deprivation, and back-breaking labour.

Nevertheless, some of those interviewed seemed to remember their poorer owners somewhat favourably. ‘Us rather have ‘em poor and good than rich and mean’, one former slave told an interviewer in Georgia.⁶⁴ G. W. Pattillo, who was enslaved by an illiterate farmer called Joseph Ingram in Paulding County, Georgia, gave his interviewer the impression that Ingram was ‘very lenient and kind to his slaves’, as he worked alongside them and protected them from the violent excesses of the patrollers in the neighbourhood.⁶⁵ However, slaveholding was precarious for a poor white. Hannah Scott’s ‘poor folks’, who she apparently called ‘White Pa’ and ‘White Ma’ on account of their kind treatment, were forced to sell her and her family to a wealthier slaveholder, Bat Peterson, as a result of mounting debts. Her former master tried to repurchase his former slaves a few years later, presumably when his financial situation improved, but to no avail, as Peterson refused to sell them.⁶⁶ Perhaps, like the Folsom brothers who enslaved Acie Thomas, Peterson made it a habit to ‘buy out’ poor whites whenever possible ‘by fair means or foul’.⁶⁷

No matter how ‘good’ they claimed their masters were, all of those formerly enslaved by poor whites were glad to be free. Charlie Crump told his interviewer candidly, ‘I’d ruther

be a nigger any day dan to be lak my ole white folks wuz'.⁶⁸ Poor white slaveholders were in many ways much like their rich counterparts: they could be violent, malicious, and mean; they were incentivised by status and wealth rather than any humanitarian concerns. Sometimes their own poverty could lead to appalling levels of deprivation for those men, women, and children enslaved on their small farms. Although they often worked alongside their owners in the fields or in the house, those enslaved by poor whites did not, on the whole, remember their masters fondly. Enslaved experiences on small farms, of course, varied widely, [and due to the scarcity of the sources it is difficult to say whether the intimacy of small-scale slavery resulted, overall, in a 'better' or 'worse' experience for these enslaved people than those on large plantations.](#) However, on reading their recollections, one gets the sense that the lives of these enslaved people, living alone or with only their immediate families, were marked above all by intense loneliness. Boys like Perry Lewis with no friends to play with; girls like Maggie Wesmoland and Calline Brown whose bare feet were cut by ice: these are memories of extreme hardship and pain endured in isolation, without the support of a wider slave community. At the end of her interview, Lucretia Heyward was apparently asked if she hated her former master (as one might expect after the suffering and violence she had related). 'No, I ain't hate um', she replied of poor white Edward Blunt, who had worked so hard to become a slaveholder, 'He poor white trash but he daid now'.⁶⁹

¹ George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Vol. IX (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972): 35.

² James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders*, (New York: Vintage, 1982): 39.

³ *1860 United States Federal Census* (accessed at <http://www.ancestry.com>).

⁴ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): 48-49.

⁵ The extensive scholarship on enslaved experiences has tended to focus on the lives of those living on large plantations. Most notably, see John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1984). In contrast, scholarship on the relationship between enslaved people and 'poor whites' has tended to focus on nonslaveholders. See, for example, Eugene D. Genovese, "'Rather be a Nigger than a Poor White Man": Slave Perceptions of Southern Yeomen and Poor Whites,' in Hans L. Trefousse (ed.) *Toward a New View of America: Essays in Honor of Arthur C. Cole* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1977), 79-86; Timothy J. Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001); Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006). [An important exception is Diane Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small-Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865* \(Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010\), which investigates the experiences of both slaves and their owners living on small farms in Missouri.](#)

⁶ These 22 interviews are all of those available in which the former slave explicitly described his or her former owner as 'poor,' based on a search of the digitised interviews held at the Library of Congress. It is likely that a larger number of the WPA interviews were conducted with enslaved people who believed their owners to be poor, but as rich masters were just as likely to deprive their slaves of food and clothing, it is not possible to

make a distinction unless the former slave made a specific comment about the status of their owner. [While ‘poor’ is a subjective term, as discussed further below, it is important that investigations of enslaved experiences begin with the words of slaves themselves.](#) Where the interviews can be supplemented by other records—[including the actual size of a slaveholding](#)—this has been [included in the notes.](#) ~~done.~~

⁷ That said, these 22 interviews are certainly not necessarily representative of a broader enslaved experience. It is impossible, for example, to draw any conclusions about regional distinctions with such a small sample.

⁸ For more on the debates over the reliability of the interviews, see especially: John W. Blassingame, ‘Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems’, *Journal of Southern History* 41:4 (1975): 473-492; C. Vann Woodward, ‘History from Slave Sources’, *American Historical Review* 79:2 (1984): 470-481; Norman R. Yetman, ‘Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery’, *American Quarterly* 36:2 (1984): 181-210; Donna J. Spindel, ‘Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27:2 (1996): 247-261; Sharon Ann Musher, ‘Contesting “The Way the Almighty Wants It”’: Crafting Memories of Ex-Slaves in the Slave Narrative Collection’, *American Quarterly* 53:1 (2001), 1-31; William Dusinberre, *Strategies for Survival: Recollections of Slavery in Antebellum Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009): 1-11. The most recent work on the interviews, which emphasises the racial context of the 1930s, is Catherine A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers’ Project* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

⁹ For more on the role of the Great Depression in shaping the interviews, see Stephanie J. Shaw, ‘Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to study the Impact of the Great Depression,’ *Journal of Southern History*, 69:3 (2003), pp. 623-658.

¹⁰ Rawick, *American Slave*, Vol. IV: 116; Vol. IX: 157; Vol. II: 99.

¹¹ There is a great deal of debate about exactly which people constituted the class of ‘poor whites’ in the South, but that they did not own slaves is usually one of the defining factors. The most recent attempt at a definition is David Brown, ‘A Vagabond’s Tale: Poor Whites, Herrenvolk Democracy, and the Value of Whiteness in the Late Antebellum South,’ *Journal of Southern History* 79:4 (2013): 799-840. Another useful overview is Samuel C. Hyde Jr., ‘Plain Folk Reconsidered: Historiographical Ambiguity in Search of Definition,’ *Journal of Southern History* 71:4 (2005): 803-830.

¹² Rawick, *American Slave, Supp. Series 1*, Vol. VI: 235.

¹³ Rawick, *American Slave*, Vol. XI: 213; Vol. XIV: 279. Davis Abernathy did not quite ‘get rich’, but he did increase the value of his real estate from \$700 to \$1500 between 1850 and 1860. By 1860 the value of his personal estate was \$6000, and he owned six slaves (two adults and four children), most likely Charlie Crump and his family. *1860 United States Federal Census*.

¹⁴ See, for example, J. Wayne Flynt, *Dixie’s Forgotten People: The South’s Poor Whites* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979); Lacy K. Ford Jr., ‘Popular Ideology of the South’s Plain Folk: The Limits of Egalitarianism in a Slaveholding Society,’ in Samuel C. Hyde (ed.), *Plain Folk of the South Revisited* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1997): 205-227; Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Labourers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998). For analyses of poor whites which emphasise their relationships with the enslaved, rather than slaveholders, see Timothy J. Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001); Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2006).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. V: 28. By 1860, William S. Buckner had land valued at \$2500, and a personal estate valued at \$8024. This included sixteen enslaved people, of whom seven were children. *1860 United States Federal Census*.

¹⁷ Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman* (Rochester, NY: William Alling, 1857): 101.

¹⁸ Allen Parker, *Recollections of Slavery Times* (Worcester, MA: Chas. W. Burbank, 1895): 10, 41, 75, 83.

¹⁹ Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), 318.

²⁰ Rawick, *American Slave*, Vol. II: 124.

²¹ William Henry Singleton, *Recollections of My Slavery Days* (Peekskill, NY: Highland Democrat, 1922): 5.

²² Perdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*: 292.

²³ Emily West, *Family or Freedom: People of Color in the Antebellum South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 85-88.

²⁴ Rawick, *American Slave*, Vol. XII: 6.

²⁵ Rawick, *American Slave, Supp. Series 1*, Vol. VI: 235.

²⁶ Rawick, *American Slave*, Vol. XIV: 247.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. II: 99.

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- ²⁸ George M. Newsom lived in Hinds County, Mississippi. His occupation is listed as ‘farmer’, although he owned no land of his own. *1850 United States Federal Census*.
- ²⁹ Rawick, *American Slave*, Vol. IX: 157-158.
- ³⁰ Newsome certainly increased his personal wealth during the last years of slavery. By 1860, his land was valued at 3,706 dollars, and his personal wealth at 11,720 dollars. *1860 United States Federal Census*.
- ³¹ Rawick, *American Slave*, Vol. IV: 116.
- ³² *Ibid.*, Vol. II: 74.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, Vol. III: 328.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. II: 99.
- ³⁵ Perdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*: 318.
- ³⁶ Rawick, *American Slave*, Vol. II: 124.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII: 49. Perry’s master was farmer Thomas Tolson, who owned five slaves, three of whom were children in the 1850s. See *1850 United States Federal Census*, *1850 United States Federal Census—Slave Schedules*, *1860 United States Federal Census*.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. XIV: 279.
- ³⁹ Perdue, *Weevils in the Wheat*: 318.
- ⁴⁰ Rawick, *American Slave*, Vol. IV: 116.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. V: 28.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, Vol. XI: 214.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, Vol. II: 155.
- ⁴⁴ Rawick, *American Slave, Supp. Series 2*, Vol. V: 1771.
- ⁴⁵ Rawick, *American Slave*, Vol. VIII: 17.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. XI: 74. James and “E” Adams lived in Wake County on a 700 acre farm. He owned one female adult slave and six children, and his household also contained two young white men, who may have worked as labourers on the farm. By 1860, James Adams no longer had additional white men living on his farm, which had grown to 2600 acres. By this time his personal real estate was valued at 10,205 dollars, and he owned 11 slaves, five of whom were children. See *1850 United States Federal Census*, *1850 United States Federal Census—Slave Schedules*, *1860 United States Federal Census*.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. XIII: 176-177.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. XII: 6; Vol. VIII: 17; Vol. XIV: 247.
- ⁴⁹ Rawick, *American Slave, Supp. Series 2*, Vol. V: 1771.
- ⁵⁰ Rawick, *American Slave*, Vol. V: 27.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. XI: 73.
- ⁵² Rawick, *American Slave, Supp. Series 1*, Vol. VI: 235-236.
- ⁵³ Rawick, *American Slave*, Vol. 11: 102.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. II: 155.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. XIV: 248.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. IV: 116.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. XI: 73.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Vol. II: 154.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. XIII: 176; Vol. XIV: 279.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol XI: 213.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 73.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, Vol. XIV: 249.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. IV: 291.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 166,
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. XVI: 6.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. III: 328.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. XI: 215.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. XIV: 281.