

**Rudeness and Refinement:  
The Everyday Politics of Respectability  
in Hancock County, Georgia  
1793–1860**

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[I]n what else besides negroes were these rich men [slaveholders] better off than when they called themselves poor? Their real comfort, unless in the sense of security against extreme want, or immunity from the necessity of personal labor to sustain life, could scarcely have been increased in the least. There was, at any rate, the same bacon and corn, the same slough of a wagon channel through the forest, the same bare walls in their dwellings, the same absence of taste and art and literature, the same distance from schools and churches and educated advisers, and . . . [the lack of] anything elaborate or finely finished—the same makeshift furniture.

Fredrick Law Olmsted, *Journey in the Back Country*

Tourists who traveled the Old South littered its cultural landscape with apparent paradoxes: the uneasy juxtaposition of pious restraint and raucous amusements, of grace and refinement alongside violence and brutality, of aspirations toward luxury and ease amidst Calvinistic prescriptions toward austerity and hard work. For many of those gentlemen who wrote reports of their travels, the measure of any civilization lay in the character of its economic and political elite; they held the region's great slaveholders responsible for the South's peculiar culture. Using the South and its people as cultural foils, the typical traveler both essentialized the region and magnified its distance from their own: against the cool, calculating, industrious Yankee entrepreneur, cavalier planters were cast as enigmatic and given to extremes; they were said to be warm-hearted yet hot-tempered, refined yet reckless, to be generous and hospitable to friends yet brutal to slaves, and to value genteel leisure above business routine.<sup>i</sup> Others attributed southern idiosyncrasies to the coexistence of culturally diverse groups within the region, whether distinctions among them are derived from race, descent, economic stratification, the exigencies of the frontier, or some combination of these. William Byrd first mapped a distinct geographic and cultural divide within the South in the early eighteenth century;<sup>ii</sup> the idea that southern society was a peculiar amalgam of chivalrous aristocrats, degenerate frontiersmen, and utterly degraded slaves gained ever more numerous and vocal adherents over time.<sup>iii</sup> Historians, too, have grappled with similar conundrums: was the culture of the Old South more aristocratic than bourgeois? More vulgar than refined? Why was violence so pervasive, while social cohesion among whites seemed so solid? Was the planter worldview hegemonic, or did enslaved blacks and non-slaveholding whites mount serious challenges to its sway?<sup>iv</sup> Was there, in short, a single southern culture or were there many?

My dissertation has examined the demarcations of rudeness and gentility in Hancock County, Georgia, between the advent of the cotton gin in 1793 and the eve of the Civil War in 1860. Drawing on the insights of scholars who have studied the spread of consumer goods in early modern England and colonial America, as well as on studies of the divergence between middle- and working-class cultures in industrializing northeastern cities of the antebellum United States, I have examined how gentility, or its absence, intersected with race, class, and gender. I have asked: Did gentility remain the exclusive preserve of planter households during the antebellum era? If so, did planters and their kin seek to instill polite behavior in their neighbors or to use it to preserve existing social boundaries and maintain social distance? Did non-slaveholding whites lay claim to respectability through the acquisition of polite manners, the beautification

of their homes, and the consumption of luxury goods? Did free blacks? Poor whites? Slaves? If so, were there differences in the way respectability was defined and goods were used to construct identity? If not, did these groups use "rudeness" as a means of defying planter hegemony?

Historians of the antebellum North have identified a profound transformation in American values dating from roughly the 1790s to the 1860s. Recent studies suggest that over this period, the majority of Americans adopted and democratized elements of genteel culture—previously the exclusive preserve of an elite sliver of society—bringing dramatic changes in the appearance, behaviors, and material culture of middling, and in some cases, working-class Americans. Goods once defined as luxuries became necessities, homes became larger and incorporated parlors, proper levels of education and etiquette became pre-requisites to respectability.<sup>v</sup> However, according to a recent study, although aspirations toward refinement were nearly universal among middle-class Americans by the mid-nineteenth century, the South steadfastly resisted the trend. In this region alone, according to one of the foremost scholars of the "refinement of America," the elite maintained its monopoly on gentility:

[T]he burden of testimony still upholds the image of southern culture as a desert with oases—judged by the canon of genteel geography. A small number of mansions, primarily in cities and towns, but also on farms, upheld by libraries, academies, and concert halls, were the oases of refinement on a culturally bleak landscape. The modest vernacular culture that permeated the northern middle class scarcely reached the South.<sup>vi</sup>

My study has traced the spread of gentility in a single Georgia county, with particular emphasis on how demarcations of rudeness and civility reveal cultural cleavages or cohesion across social lines of race, class, and gender.

In 1793, the Georgia legislature created Hancock County from territory drawn from neighboring counties Greene, to its north, and Washington, to its south. The county lines ran 22 miles up and 20 across, comprising roughly 400 square miles of farms, woods, a few rough roads, and large tracts of poor-quality, unclaimed land. Although the territory was only officially wrested from the Creeks in 1790, here and there were small, established white settlements: at the county's northwestern edge was congregated the village of Powellton, dating back to at least 1786, the year its Baptist Church had formed with twenty-six members.<sup>vii</sup> Only a crossroads and stagecoach stop marked the county's center, soon to be laid out as the county seat of Sparta. Originally, the principal cash crop here was tobacco, but in the decades following the advent of the cotton gin in 1793, white settlers carried inland a plantation regime based on the extensive use of slave labor, underpinned by a racist ideology that defined blacks as naturally servile and incapable of independence. Proslavery ideologues maintained that this racially defined "mud-sill" class sustained equality and independence of all whites, a useful fiction to which palpable class and gender inequalities among whites gave lie.<sup>viii</sup>

In 1794, the year the first Hancock County tax list was compiled, there were under 1500 households countywide. Roughly two-thirds of white households owned no slaves. Among the third which did, sixteen household heads figured as small planters;<sup>ix</sup> ninety-seven percent of all slaveholders owned fewer than twenty slaves and eighty-six

percent owned nine or fewer. Land was widely, but unevenly distributed, with roughly sixty percent of taxpayers reporting owning some land. Still, forty percent of the population lacked this crucial means of securing economic independence.<sup>x</sup> Even among landowners, just under half of all households owned tracts of poor quality land, identified and assessed by the tax collector as "third quality" or "pine land."<sup>xi</sup> By 1810, the total population had grown to just over 13,000, roughly half of whom were free and white, just under half of whom were black and enslaved; there were twenty-five free people of color living in the county.<sup>xii</sup> Over time, land and slave-ownership grew more and more heavily concentrated among the tiny minority of plantation owners.

After 1810, the white population began to decline and the slave population to grow, a pattern that generally prevailed for the remainder of the antebellum era.<sup>xiii</sup> Between 1802 and 1860, the number of slaveholders in Hancock County declined from 819 to 410, while the average number of slaves held by each increased from around six to roughly twenty. By the end of the antebellum era, the top five percent of Hancock planter families owned more than half the land and forty percent of the slaves in the county, and their holdings in real and personal property averaged \$70,000. At the same time, a third of the white population remained landless and slaveless and another third owned land but no slaves.<sup>xiv</sup> Occupational data was not collected by census takers until 1850. Most households were engaged in some form of agriculture, but ten percent of those listed on the census as gainfully employed in 1860 were mill-workers (n=96), none of whom owned slaves or property. There were, in addition, 116 tradespeople, 139 overseers, and 198 farm laborers, the minority of whom reported owning any property. 110 others listed no occupation at all and may have lived as subsistence squatters on marginal unclaimed land.<sup>xv</sup>

While the majority of white settlers to middle Georgia were non-slaveholders or small slaveholders, the region also drew a handful of wealthy migrants, the most notable of whom was Colonel William Bird. Born on the famous entailed Pennsylvania estate, "Birdsborough," Bird migrated first to Alexandria, Virginia, where he married a "noted belle," then in 1794 to the Shoals of Ogeechee, between Hancock and Warren Counties, where he built a textile mill and iron foundry.<sup>xvi</sup> One of the few contemporary descriptions of an early settlement in upcountry Georgia was written by Sarah Hillhouse, the wife of an apparently well-to-do merchant who had left New England to open a country store in the new town of Washington, Wilkes County, fifty miles north of Augusta and just northeast of the area that would become Hancock County. Sarah liked the town although it was small (as she said, "very compact"), not twenty miles from "the Indian Lands," and consisted basically of no more than a jail, a court house, and "a good Latin and Grammar School." Coming from New England, she was astounded by the fertility of the soil in the surrounding countryside, but less enamored by those who cultivated it: "a flock of Wolves," she said, "as I may properly call many of the inhabitants of this state." Sarah considered herself one of "a few, and a very few, Worthy good people in the Country." In general, she thought Georgia countryfolk "the most prophane, blasphemous set of people" imaginable. Country people came to town daily, she said, as long as they had money, to buy liquor and lounge on a log not "1 rod from the store." On court or market days, customers were "fourteen or sixteen hundred standing so thick that they look like a flock of Blackbirds, and perhaps not one in fifty but what we call fighting drunk. . . . It is impossible in your part of the world," she

explained to her father in the Puritan town of Old Hadley, "to conceive what Language is used at such times." Such customers made for good business, Hillhouse admitted, but she couldn't imagine raising children here.<sup>xvii</sup> Sarah Hillhouse did, eventually, raise children and grandchildren in Washington, though her granddaughters were educated, not at the local Latin and grammar school, but at a New Haven boarding school.<sup>xviii</sup>

Just a decade later, Sarah Hillhouse's son-in-law, Felix Gilbert, grieving deeply over the death of his wife, wrote a sister in Virginia, asking that she take in an orphaned niece he had been caring for. Felix hoped that his sister's home might provide a better environment for the teenaged girl than his, and, echoing his mother-in-law, suggested that the social climate in Washington might be inappropriate for an impressionable young girl. Felix complained, however, not that Washington was too rude and unruly an environment for youth, but that it was over-refined. The "present state of society here amongst those of her age & sex is in my opinion peculiarly unfavorable—I never have known a time when pleasure & dissipation seem so entirely to have engrossed the minds of the young—& when so little attention was paid to solid & useful acquirements—French, Music, painting, dancing are almost the sole studies—& even these they acquire in such a very superficial way as to be of no service, even were they of that sort that could add to usefulness, to amiability or respectability." *His sisters* "had no education of this showy superficial sort—yet who were better Wives, Mothers, Neighbors, friends, than you all?"<sup>xix</sup>

Neither Sarah Hillhouse nor Felix Gilbert were disinterested observers. Sarah Hillhouse did not wish her parents to send her children to Washington, and Felix Gilbert did not wish to raise his niece alone. But is there more to the perplexing discrepancies between their characterizations of local culture than self-interest alone? Had the rough unruliness of the frontier given way in little more than a decade to pretension and somewhat shabby attempts at gentility? Or did Sarah Hillhouse and Felix Gilbert emphasize real but conflicting cultural strains within the same geographic setting? That is, did Gilbert refer to the culture of the "few, very few, Worthy people" in town, while Hillhouse caricatured the "unworthy" plain folk from outside its bounds?

By the early 1800s—well into the region's first cotton boom—the circle of those Sarah Hillhouse might have considered worthies had grown considerably, as did evidence of cultural refinement. Sparta's first newspaper began publication at this time; its columns included an obituary for a Powellton woman remembered for her "urbanity of manners" and "cultivated and intelligent mind," a technique for cleaning white silk patent lace, and advertisements for thoroughbred studs.<sup>xx</sup> One local store advertised an "extensive and excellent assortment of Merchandize" imported from New England and New York, including "silk and cotton suspenders, men's and women's cotton hose, men's silk hose, worsted hose, and silk and worsted hose, Pic Nic Gloves, bandana handkerchiefs, men's beaver and plater hats, morocco and kid slippers, misses morocco slippers, men's fine and coarse shoes, table knives and forks, waiters and sugar boxes, brass candlesticks, and 'Some Useful Books.'"<sup>xxi</sup> By this time, too, some locals were incorporating parlors into their homes. After a formal ball in 1806, a young doctor in the area accommodated at least nine overnight guests at his "Bachelor's Retreat" consisting of at least four rooms, two fireplaces, and a superlative set of crystal so delicate it took his sister hours to clean.<sup>xxii</sup> Sparta's municipal authorities enacted ordinances designed to contain the sorts unruliness of which Sarah Hillhouse

complained. The Board of Commissioners imposed hefty fines for "discharging a gun, pistol, or cannon within town limits," for "running a horse or horses through the streets of town," and for failing to remove from town lots all "all putrid substances, either animal or vegetable [sic]." <sup>xxiii</sup>

Local grand juries, appointed by the state legislature from a pool of substantial property owners, made routine presentments against citizens for blasphemy, profanity, and "loose and licentious conduct." Of particular concern were the tipping shops where the lower sort congregated to drink and brawl, especially those whose proprietors sold liquor to slaves, threatening both masters' authority and the racial divide. Common too were presentments against those who challenged the solemnity and authority of the court. Sometimes such challenges could be indirect, as when Benjamin Anderson and William Cureton were presented for "profanity and rioting in the court yard in the time of court" and for "horse racing through the streets of Sparta on public days." Others blatantly mocked the court itself, as when Martin Johnson was cited for "profane swearing at the window of the court-house—as well as immodest & immoral conduct in the courtyard," and Seth Tatum for "insulting the Justices of Court of Capt Scott's District, while [they were] sitting in their judicial capacity." <sup>xxiv</sup> At the same time, evangelical churches, typically yeoman strongholds, collectively disciplined both black and white members for similar breeches of propriety including drunkenness, profanity, interpersonal violence, and adultery. <sup>xxv</sup>

Accommodating refinement to the ruder realities of rural life in a small frontier community posed formidable obstacles. The notoriously poor roads of Georgia's interior upset carriages and sent tumbling women in silk and men in broadcloth. Revelers returned from formal balls to find their finery coated with dust. Brussels carpets contended with muddy workboots. Those living in the little villages or on the big plantations of Hancock County differentiated their "country" existence from the "fashionable life" of the city. They conceded that cosmopolitan centers like Paris and New York, as well as southern cities like Charleston and Savannah, set the standards for fashion, and women attended closely to stylistic shifts there. <sup>xxvi</sup> On the basis of good evidence, gentlefolk in the newer sections of Georgia worried that their cosmopolitan and low-country peers might perceive them to be rustic provincials. As the wife of Washington, Wilkes-County merchant David Hillhouse complained, the ladies in Savannah seemed to expect "awkward embarrassment [from us] *Crackers*" at their lavish gatherings. She was kept, she said, "in a constant flutter among the butterflys of Savannah," where an endless succession of balls, dinners, and social teas smacked of a deliberate attempt to "overindulge us with civilities." <sup>xxvii</sup>

With barely concealed jealousy, Maria Bryan, the teenaged daughter of Hancock County, Georgia planter, Joseph Bryan, described the change a lengthy vacation in Augusta had wrought upon her cousin Catherine Wales. Catherine now spoke knowledgeably about theater, her appearance had "very much improved," and everyone in town remarked upon her "acquisition of 'the indescribable air of ton.'" Next to Catherine, Maria felt awkward and gawky, "as unpolished and inelegant as ever." She wondered if she would ever acquire such sophistication, and declared that "these airs and graces (if not appearing as if put on), this look of high life, these marks of refinement betokening a soul of superior cast" were what she had "always desired next to

beauty. . . ." Maria longed for the "sweets of fashionable life in Augusta," and thought it little wonder that Catherine despaired of "returning to the humdrum sort of life we lead here at Mt. Zion."<sup>xxxviii</sup> Because neither Mt. Zion nor Sparta offered much by way of amusement, Maria cherished visits to her sister in Augusta, seventy-five miles and at least a day's travel away. In the city, one might meet new beaux, shop in style, attend the races, or enjoy from an ornamented box-seat the operas, plays, and concerts staged at the newly remodeled Augusta Theater.<sup>xxxix</sup> Shopping Sparta's main street, which struck one particularly uncharitable visitor as "a dirty succession of shops & low built houses," could not compare to the crowded spectacle along Broad Street in Augusta where the ladies out shopping (the same traveler observed) "always appear full-dressed,—in nine cases out of ten, attired in the richest silks, or satins, with leghorn hats trimmed in pink satin, & artificial bouquets."<sup>xxx</sup>

Maria Bryan's command of the "genteel airs and graces" was far more assured than modesty and insecurity allowed her to admit. By the age of sixteen, Maria spoke fluent French, read widely and voraciously, and wrote gracefully. Possessed of an excellent classical education, she studied and taught Latin, ancient history, Newtonian astrophysics, and literature.<sup>xxxxi</sup> On occasion, she helped the director of Mt. Zion Academy correct his male students' essays, a task she completed with ease and vigor, dashing off her remarks so quickly that her handwriting was difficult to decipher. She quite confidently pronounced the young men's essays to be "rude efforts" and "as high sounding nonsense."<sup>xxxii</sup> If her education was more thorough and intellectual than the lessons in grace and polish that sufficed for many of her contemporaries,<sup>xxxiii</sup> neither did it preclude these. Maria played both the guitar and the piano-forte with some skill, and instructed a niece and nephew in music, French, and voice.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Bryan did not hesitate to praise those she considered particularly elegant or polished, nor to criticize those who fell short of "refinement in thought, word, or deed."<sup>xxxv</sup>

Although Maria Bryan might complain of the "hum-drum life" in Hancock County and Mrs. Hillhouse might criticize Savannah society for carrying "luxury and extravagance" to extremes unimaginable in America,<sup>xxxvi</sup> the pronounced tendency among this elite to locate the aristocratic excesses of refinement elsewhere, served to legitimate, not repudiate, its local variant. Indeed, travel to the primary sites where America's genteel gathered was essential to sustaining their local claims to social superiority. Those locals who could afford to do so summered in fashionable resorts like Fire Island and Saratoga Springs, wintered in Savannah, toured Europe, frequented Augusta, Savannah, and Charleston, shopped in New York and Philadelphia. They sent their girls to boarding schools in Charleston and New Haven, their boys to West Point, South Carolina College, Yale. Because the state had no system of common schools, few beyond the wealthy received even a secondary-school education. Those whose parents or benefactors could spare the expense of extra-local education gained entrée to influential connections and were introduced to the broader cultural universe. The informal education such schools provided was perhaps as crucial as the formal education they provided. Daniel R. Hundley, a self-professed "southern gentleman," wrote with characteristic disdain of the tiny minority of "state students" who were educated free of charge at the University of Virginia in the mid 1800s. If the segregated housing assigned these farm boys wasn't sufficient to set them apart from gentlemen's sons, their appearance was; invariably, Hundley said, they arrived "clothed in suits of russet, with

freckled sun-tanned faces, large red bony hands, loose matted locks of hair" and empty pockets.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Coarse home-dyed apparel, unkempt hair, and the physical imprint of hard work out of doors were as important markers of social position as wealth. These students, Hundley thought, stood and walked differently than gentlemen as well. College seemed to have a "talismanic influence upon those who shed their muted homespun of their mothers' make, invested in 'flash apparel,' and abandoned the awkward 'shuffling country gait' for the 'swaggering strides of their more wealthy associates.'<sup>xxxviii</sup> But, these students literally had to learn anew how to walk.

The essential point is not just that local gentlefolk spent significant amounts of time somewhere else, but that their measure of who they were and where they stood was gauged against "the better sort" nationwide. This elite group called middle Georgia home, but middle Georgia did not comprise the entirety their social or cultural universe. The basic ritual practices that defined and maintained the boundaries of polite society were everywhere similar, if not identical. Myriad were the rules of etiquette that governed the drawing room, the ballroom, and the art of polite conversation, and their intricacies bewildered the uninitiated. Maria Bryan and Sarah Hillhouse knew them by heart.

Were the aspirations to respectability so clearly manifested in the personal papers of the highly literate and decidedly cultured local elite shared by their less affluent neighbors? Did the diffusion of new standards of taste, deportment, cleanliness, and consumption blur, complicate, or sharpen social difference? The next phase of my dissertation-in-progress seeks to test the hypothesis that these were the cultural expressions of the socioeconomic extremes of Hancock County, but that a broad middle ground existed. I will do so by undertaking a statistical analysis that will link individual socioeconomic status (derived from tax and census records) to individual cultural practices (derived from probate inventories of household goods, grand jury and church discipline records, school rolls, and store ledgers.)

Travel refined, but refinement also traveled. The wealthy took ample advantage of fashionable alternatives to local stores; they had access both to cosmopolitan market centers in the U.S. and abroad and to cotton factors (essentially merchant middlemen who sold cotton on the international market and imported goods for planters on credit). Yet for those who did not command the time and resources for extensive travel, an astounding range of goods were locally available. Hancock County shopkeepers often advertised the "latest New York and Philadelphia fashions."<sup>xxxix</sup> In 1825 alone, Audas and Rogers, one among at least a dozen stores operating in Hancock County that year, sold 41 pairs of gloves: five pairs were kid, eight silk, two beaver, and one pair designated only "fine." The same year, consumers in Hancock County bought at Audas and Rogers, 335 pairs of shoes. Thirteen pairs of these shoes were identified as "coarse," twenty-two as "fine," forty-three were of imported Moroccan leather, and twenty-four were French men's and women's "Prunelle" pumps.<sup>xl</sup> Augusta furniture makers sold cheap alternatives to luxury goods: veneer furniture, Windsor chairs, and Britannia silver plate.<sup>xli</sup>

By the early 1830s, Hancock County sustained three private preparatory schools. Mt. Zion Academy, its most prestigious, had been in operation since 1812 and offered classes at three levels: Languages and Sciences; English Grammar, Arithmetic, and Geography; and Spelling, Reading, and Writing.<sup>xlii</sup> The academies at Mt. Zion and

Powellton were small; each accommodated no more than forty or fifty students, ranging in age from four to nineteen. The female model school at Sparta was much larger, comprising three buildings and accommodating over one hundred students. All of these institutions enjoyed sufficient prestige to draw boarders from out-of-state.<sup>xliii</sup> One Georgia guidebook suggested that families had been known to locate in Hancock County in order "to afford their children the advantages proffered" by living in proximity to Powellton Academy.<sup>xliiv</sup> Similarly, a resident of Mt. Zion, presumably a master potter, offered to employ a journeyman potter in exchange for "reasonable wages," room and board, and accommodations for up to "two small children who may wish to attend the Academy."<sup>xlv</sup> Unfortunately, it is not clear what, if any, criteria for admission were in place at any of these schools. The 1835 school roll for Powellton Academy included forty-five students, five of whom were designated as "poor children." The poor children included two girls and three boys from two families; their education was underwritten by the state.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Many in the community considered it essential that young ladies become skilled in an array of "drawing room" arts: ornamental needlework, drawing and painting, voice lessons or the guitar, piano-forte, or harp, and perhaps, for conversational purposes, "a general acquaintance with the subjects of common and polite literature."<sup>xlvii</sup> Two young ladies from Florida who attended the Sparta Female Academy received a string of letters from their parents insisting upon the importance of learning to write an elegant hand and of receiving formal instruction in dance and music. These were, their father wrote, "important accomplishments, & [I] request you to omit neither."<sup>xlviii</sup> Local academies for girls could be quite rigorous academically, but also doubled as finishing schools; the curricula not only included both "the useful and ornamental branches of Female Education," but also promised that girls' "morals and manners" would receive "unremitted attention."<sup>xlix</sup> A visitor to the Sparta Female Model School in 1837, remarked that the school owned twelve pianos, a room "filled with organs," and "a drawing room which contained a Harp, Organ, piano, Bass viol[in]" and other instruments.<sup>1</sup> Learning the airs and overtures appropriate to the drawing room did not preclude these young ladies from also mastering astronomy, public speaking, or "every abstruse problem in Euclid," although their female visitor did complain that reciting "the mysteries of Aries, Aquarias, Sagittarris, [etc.]" seemed "like blowing bubbles into the air through a hollow reed, & likely to be about as useful to them."<sup>ii</sup>

Those farmers who relied on family labor for field labor and home manufactures faced serious constraints on schooling. Because the academic terms required students to be in attendance during the busiest times of the agricultural cycle, only the most determined yeoman farmer could spare either the expense or the loss of his children's labor an academy education entailed. Boarding students could incur costs of \$100 a year, and even some local families chose to board their children near school rather than at home. To the cost of tuition must be added the cost of books, pens, ink, paper, and appropriate school clothes. Alternatives to formal academies existed. Although no direct evidence for the practice exists for Hancock County, it was relatively common for neighboring farmers and small slaveholders to pool sufficient funds to hire a private on-site schoolmaster to teach their children at least the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic. The quality of such education varied with the instructor and there is broad

but largely anecdotal evidence to suggest that the teachers in these "old field schools" were often only semi-literate themselves.<sup>lii</sup>

The elite guarded closely the boundaries of polite society and the prerogatives of class. As one Marietta doctor suggested, his wife was aghast if a "regular country clodhopper" even looked "as if he wished" to enter her parlor and "examine the goods," much less take tea.<sup>liii</sup> When Maria Bryan's cousin Goode introduced his bride, a sixteen year old from (by Maria's reckoning) a "very poor family," the couple arrived at the Bryan home in very fine clothing and the most splendid new equipage of carriage and horses that Maria had ever seen. Although Maria admitted the girl was "very pretty," she felt "incapable of admiring her appearance." At first, cousin Goode's bride had rejected his advances because neither she nor her mother could believe that he truly meant to marry a woman as poor as she. Maria reported that young Mrs. Goode had said "that several times when he first courted her she insulted him, and flung him out of the room, for she suspected his designs were not honourable. . . ."<sup>liv</sup> When another cousin, also, incidentally a Goode, brought his new wife to meet the family, Maria "imagined her some low creature who had *taken* him in" and was "provoked at being impelled into a relationship with any and everybody. When she was getting out of the gig, Sophy whispered, 'Sister, you must call her cousin,' and I, in a very improper spirit, had said, 'I'll sooner cut my tongue out. . . .'"<sup>lv</sup> Another family met with dismay the news of their son's engagement to a local girl of no social standing; friends and family openly ridiculed the bridegroom who responded with "a dignified but resentful silence. . . ." Many of the young man's circle expressed reluctance to attend the ceremony and one cousin refused to do so on the grounds that she had been raised in "too much s[ty]le to attend a rustic wedding." "Even our Methodist Cousin B— turned up her nose at the proposed alliance with a 'family that nobody ever heard of before,'" a family member wrote. At the reception, one friend of the groom congratulated herself for making "an effort at conversation among the beaux—the rustic beaux!" Because the young men made for awkward company, she left early, but worried about the other girls because, she said, "I disliked leaving them in rude company without my protection."<sup>lvi</sup>

The diaries and correspondence of the local elite rarely venture beyond the bounds of their own class, making it difficult to envision the lives of those outside their exclusive circle. There is scant but compelling evidence to suggest that some among the middling sort aspired toward gentility. A visitor to Sparta in the 1830s was shocked to meet four or five "very neat young gentlemen workmen" who were putting the finishing touches on the Sayre home. She remarked upon "the gentility of their appearance" and said, had she not known better, she would have taken them for "young gentlemen about town."<sup>lvii</sup> Likewise, the Mechanics Society of Augusta in the early 1800s threw a formal ball, to which they invited a number of area worthies. Frances Casey, a young Virginian visiting the Bird family in Hancock County, was among the invited guests. Although Frances rarely missed a party (she actually prayed—to no avail—that she might make it through Lent without succumbing to an invitation), she attended this one only for fear "of being called proud." Afterward she regretted having "condescended" to attend, having spent "a miserable evening" in the company of Augusta's mechanics.<sup>lviii</sup> One can only imagine what Augusta's mechanics thought of Frances Casey, but in all likelihood, they defined rudeness and respectability on wholly different terms than she.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup>Thomas Jefferson suggested the distinction between northern and southern elites in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. By the antebellum era, it had become a cliché. Among the innumerable contemporaries who voiced this idea in print are Frederick Law Olmsted, *Journey in the Back Country* (1860) and *A Journey in the Slave States* (1856); Bishop Whipple in *Bishop Whipple's Southern Diary, 1843-1844*, Lester B. Shippee, ed.; and James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (1857). Observers differed over whether these extremes were to be attributed to the existence of slavery, the climate, or descent from "cavalier stock." William R. Taylor's *Cavalier and Yankee* traces the intellectual history of the dichotomy between vigorous, materialistic northerners and leisurely, aristocratic southerners and concludes that the distinctions have been more ideal than real.

<sup>ii</sup> Byrd's *History of the Dividing Line* was written in the early 1700s, but remained unpublished until 1841. Southernists took a sledgehammer to the white columns of the cavalier myth long ago. On the "cavalier myth," in general see: Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982 [1949]); Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords, eds., *Myth and Southern History: The Old South* (1989); Grace Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (1998); Jack Temple Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination* (1978); William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American Character* (1961).

<sup>iii</sup> Antebellum travelers to the South almost invariably commented on the profound social and cultural distance between "po' white" southerners and the planter elite. Abolitionists were sometimes willing to concede that slavery afforded a refined and cultured lifestyle to the privileged few, but used the gulf between planter gentility and poor white degradation to demonstrate that slavery harmed the mass of southern whites as much as it benefited the elite. The argument held that slavery degraded all labor, depriving white artisans and farmers of both jobs and dignity; furthermore, the institution allowed wealthy planters to monopolize both political power and the vast majority of prime agricultural land, shoving their white social inferiors literally to the margins of society in the piney woods, sandhills, and mountains to scratch out a meager subsistence. To these poor whites were attributed an array of vulgar traits including indolence, ignorance, intemperance, and violence. For example, see Frederick Law Olmsted's *Journey in the Back Country* (1860); George M. Weston's *The Poor Whites of the South* (1856); and J. E. Cairnes's *The Slave Power: Its Character, Career and Probable Designs* (1862).

<sup>iv</sup>The degree to which the antebellum South embraced capitalism and bourgeois values has been the subject of protracted debate. The most forceful arguments in favor of an aristocratic southern worldview profoundly antithetical to bourgeois capitalism are those of Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. See Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* ([Middletown, Conn.] Scranton, Pa.: Wesleyan University Press; Distributed by Harper & Row, 1988). And Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South*, 2nd ed., 1st Wesleyan ed., *Wesleyan Paperback* (Middletown, Conn.:

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Wesleyan University Press, 1989).; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Antebellum Southern Households: A New Perspective on a Familiar Question," *Review* VII, no. 2 (1983). 1983) And Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South, Gender & American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). James Oakes' *The Ruling Race* argues that for the parvenu planters and planter aspirants of the southern interior, the aristocratic worldview was more rhetorical than real.

No consensus has yet emerged as to the degree to which the values of the yeomanry paralleled those of the planter elite. There has been a recent proliferation of scholarship on non-slaveholding whites in the Old South. The research on the antebellum yeomanry is particularly rich and revealing. Building upon the work of Fox-Genovese and Genovese, Stephanie McCurry's *Masters of Small Worlds* suggests that, although yeomen were aware of the inequalities slavery wrought, they accepted planter hegemony as the price paid for maintaining mastery of their own household dependents, including women, children, and often, slaves. (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).. Lacy Ford disagrees, arguing that the yeomanry exercised extraordinary political power; they did not follow planters into the Civil War, Ford maintains, but led them there. See Lacy. There has also been extensive research on the degree of yeoman participation in the market. In general, these studies focus on household production rather than consumption. The general consensus is that small slaveholders and non-slaveholders limited their dependence on the market by practicing "safety-first" agriculture. That is, they ensured that subsistence needs were met before growing commercial crops. See Hahn, *Roots of Southern Populism* (1983) and "The 'Unmaking' of the Southern Yeomanry: The Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1860-1890," in Stephen Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (1985); Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (1978); Morton Rothstein, "The Ante-bellum South as a Dual Economy: A Tentative Hypothesis," *Agricultural History* 41 (1967): 373-83. Louis Ferleger, "Self-Sufficiency and Rural Life on Southern Farms," *Agricultural History* 58,3 (July 1984): 314-29; David Freeman Weiman, "Petty Commodity Production in the Cotton South: Upcountry Farmers in the Georgia Cotton Economy, 1840-1880," Ph.D. Dissertation: Stanford University, 1984.

Research on the culture of poor whites is less conclusive. Historians have had some difficulty even arriving at a definition of the term. Some, like Jack Temple Kirby and Grady McWhiney, argue that the term refers to a cultural rather than economic grouping. McWhiney argues that "white trash" were descendants of immigrants from the Celtic fringe, who perpetuated a discrete culture within the South. His conclusions have been widely critiqued, both because he relies far too heavily on the stereotypes perpetuated by travelers to the South and because he ignores the overlaps between Celtic, Anglo, and African American folk cultures. (Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic*

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*Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988).). Less stereotypical studies of antebellum poor whites that focus on the economic constraints they faced include Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (1994) and Wayne Flint, *Poor but Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites* (1989).

<sup>v</sup>Until very recently, historians held that mass commercial consumption first emerged in England during the late eighteenth century as the bourgeoisie, undergirded by new commercial wealth and factory mass production, sought to emulate the conspicuous luxury associated with landed elites and court culture. From there, it was believed, emulative spending and the ideology of consumption diffused slowly and steadily down the social hierarchy; not until the 1880s did an American professional-managerial class capable of challenging the puritanical strains of republicanism manage to haul consumer culture across the Atlantic and impose its own tyranny of taste, selling America on spending. Recent scholarship suggests the advent of western consumer culture is to be found in early modern continental Europe rather than eighteenth-century England. The initial emergence of consumer culture in America has been backdated as well, from the late-nineteenth century to the late-eighteenth. In addition, scholars have begun to question the extent to which the transition from a producer-oriented political economy to a consumer-oriented one undermined the autonomy and well-being of the masses, stressing instead its liberating and democratizing effects, especially among women, who played a central role in steering demand for consumer goods. While there is some merit to the argument that consumers have been something more than passive dupes, I would suggest that the benefits of the transition have been overdrawn.

On the historiography of consumption, see Paul Glennie, "Consumption within Historical Studies," in Daniel Miller, ed., *Acknowledging Consumption* (1995); J. Agnew, "Coming Up for Air: Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, edited by John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: 1993). For proponents of the former model, see George Orwell, "Boys' Weeklies," in *A Collection of Essays* (New York: 1981) and *Coming Up for Air* (1948); Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (1988); Simon J. Bronner, ed., *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920* (1989); Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending* (1985); T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (1994) and *No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture* (1981); Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (1982); Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn-of-the-Century* (1996); Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (1983). For works stressing agency and liberation, see Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (1973); Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940*. (1985); Brewer and Porter, *Consumption and the World of Goods*. (1993); William R. Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925." *Journal of American History* 71 (September 1984): 319-42; *ibid.*, *Land of Desire* (1993).

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On the central role played by female consumers in generating demand for industrial goods in England, see Neil McKendrick, "Home Demand and Economic Growth: A New View of the Role of Women and Children in the Industrial Revolution," in Neil McKendrick, ed. *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society in Honour of J. H. Plumb* (Cambridge, 1974): 152-210; Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, eds. *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (1996); Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660-1800* (1991); *ibid.*, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800*.

<sup>vi</sup> Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 397.

<sup>vii</sup> By 1780, 12,000 settlers had already occupied the piedmont region of the Georgia backcountry. Robert D. Mitchell, "'the Southern Backcountry: A Geographical House Divided,'" in *The Southern Colonial Backcountry: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Frontier Communities*, ed. David Colin Crass and et al. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998)., 21; Georgia Historical Commission Marker 070-10, Powellton, Georgia.

<sup>viii</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery, Southern Biography Series* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

<sup>ix</sup> That is, they owned over twenty slaves.

<sup>x</sup> Figures for landless and slaveless households might be somewhat inflated because militia age boys of 16 and older (probably still living in their fathers' households) were subject to a poll tax, and were therefore listed separately as taxpayers.

<sup>xi</sup> Hancock County Tax Returns, 1794.

<sup>xii</sup> U. S. Census, Hancock County, 1810.

<sup>xiii</sup> "Hancock County Population," compiled from U. S. Census, in Forrest Shivers, *The Land Between: A History of Hancock County, Georgia to 1940* (Spartanburg, S.C.: Reprint Co. Publishers, 1990), 321.

<sup>xiv</sup> Shivers, *The Land Between: A History of Hancock County, Georgia to 1940*, 73; Kent Anderson Leslie, *Woman of Color, Daughter of Privilege: Amanda America Dickson, 1849-1893* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 22.

<sup>xv</sup> James C. Bonner, "Profile of a Late Ante-Bellum Community," *American Historical Review*, July 1944; Leslie, *Woman of Color, Daughter of Privilege: Amanda America Dickson, 1849-1893*.

<sup>xvi</sup> Dubose, *The Life and Times of William Lowndes Yancey* (1942)., 30; Shivers, *The Land Between: A History of Hancock County, Georgia to 1940*, 87.

<sup>xvii</sup> Marion Alexander Boggs, *The Alexander Letters, 1787-1900* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 16-17.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 121.

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>xx</sup> *Farmers Gazette*, "Communication," 16 August 1806, 2; "Method of washing white silk patent lace," 30 May 1807, 3; "Notice," 14 March 1807, 4.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Farmers Gazette*, "John Lucas, & Co.," 6 December 1806, 1.

<sup>xxii</sup> "Anonymous Diary [Frances Casey]," in *Bird Family Papers* (Athens, GA: Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia), np.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Farmers Gazette*, "Municipal Regulations," 31 January 1807, 3.

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- <sup>xxiv</sup> "Hancock County, Superior Court Minute Book, 1794-1805," (Atlanta, GA: Georgia Department of Archives and History).
- <sup>xxv</sup> Horeb Baptist Church Minutes.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> For example, Maria Bryan asked her sister Julia, in Augusta, to buy for her a bonnet like those "very much worn at the North." Maria Bryan to Julian Ann Bryan Cumming, 5 April 1830, Carol K. Rothrock Bleser, ed., *Tokens of Affection: The Letters of a Planter's Daughter in the Old South, Southern Voices from the Past* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Hattie Alexander wrote sister Cliff Alexander a long report of the latest fashions in Savannah. Hattie Alexander to Clifford Alexander (1849), Boggs, *The Alexander Letters, 1787-1900*, 133-135.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Mrs. David Hillhouse to David Hillhouse (1818) Boggs, *The Alexander Letters, 1787-1900*, 50-51.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Maria Bryan to Julia Ann Bryan Cumming, 5 April 1830, Bleser, ed., *Tokens of Affection: The Letters of a Planter's Daughter in the Old South*.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Mary Levin Koch, "A History of the Arts in Augusta, Macon, and Columbus, Georgia" (Masters Thesis, University of Georgia, 1983), 54; Edward J. Cashin, *The Story of Augusta* (Augusta, GA: Richmond County Board of Education, 1980), 86.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Mary Elizabeth Moragne Davis, *The Neglected Thread; a Journal from the Calhoun Community, 1836-1842* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1951), 57.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Bleser, ed., *Tokens of Affection: The Letters of a Planter's Daughter in the Old South.*, xxv.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Maria Bryan to Julia Ann Bryan Cumming, 3 June 1828, Bleser, ed., *Tokens of Affection: The Letters of a Planter's Daughter in the Old South*, 79. One male student was so incensed to learn that a female had corrected his writing that he refused to participate in the end-of-term public orations, said all women were fools, tore the speech into a thousand pieces, and said he wouldn't recite it "for a negro."
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> George Foster Pierce, "The Georgia Female College--Its Origin, Plan, and Prospects," *Southern Ladies Book*, 1840; Christie Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South* (New York ; London: New York University Press, 1994).
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Bleser, ed., *Tokens of Affection: The Letters of a Planter's Daughter in the Old South*, 242-43; 289; 320; 327.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Maria Bryan Harford to Julia Ann Bryan Cumming, 17 January 1832, *Ibid.*, 133-34.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Mrs. David Hillhouse to David Hillhouse (1818) Boggs, *The Alexander Letters, 1787-1900*, 50-51.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New-York: H. B. Price, 1860), 45.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> *Missionary*, 2 February 1821, 4; Davis, *The Neglected Thread; a Journal from the Calhoun Community, 1836-1842*, 149.
- <sup>xl</sup> "Audas and Rogers Store Ledger," (Atlanta, GA: Georgia Department of Archives and History, 1825-1826).
- <sup>xli</sup> Koch, "A History of the Arts in Augusta, Macon, and Columbus, Georgia".
- <sup>xlii</sup> *Hancock Advertiser*, "Advertisement, Mount Zion Academy," 8 May 1827, 3.

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- <sup>xliii</sup> *HANCOCK ADVERTISER*, "Boarding House," 15 May 1827, 4; *HANCOCK ADVERTISER*, "A Card," 15 May 1827, 4. According to one memoir, the female academy in Washington, Wilkes County, Georgia drew boarders from Alabama, North Carolina, and all over Georgia. "Old Days in Wilkes County," oral memoir of Mary Clifford Hull (b.1840), circa 1910, Boggs, *The Alexander Letters, 1787-1900*, 122.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Adiel Sherwood, *A Gazetteer of the State of Georgia, 3rd Edition* (Washington City: P. Force, 1837), 215-216.
- <sup>xlv</sup> *HANCOCK ADVERTISER*, "A Potter Wanted," 13 February 1827, 4.
- <sup>xlvi</sup> *They Were Here*, Vol. 8, 3-4 (1976), 2348-2349.
- <sup>xlvii</sup> *Missionary*, "Editorial," 2 February 1824, 2; *Hancock Advertiser*, "Mount Zion Academy," 29 December 1826, 3; Broadside: "Sparta Female Model School," "William Eliza Rhodes Terrell Papers," (Durham, NC: Manuscript Department, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University).
- <sup>xlviii</sup> Robert Parish to Julia and Lydia Parish, 8 April 1837 "Parish Family Papers," in *Southern Historical Collection* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Library).
- <sup>xlix</sup> *Missionary*, "Sparta Academy," 14 July 1823, 3; *Missionary*, "Editorial," 2 February 1824, 2; Broadside: "Sparta Female Model School," "William Eliza Rhodes Terrell Papers."
- <sup>l</sup> The school was founded in 1832 (according to the WPA, Georgia, 492) and in 1837 had 121 pupils and five teachers. Davis, *The Neglected Thread; a Journal from the Calhoun Community, 1836-1842.*, 148-149.
- <sup>li</sup> Sherwood, *A Gazetteer of the State of Georgia, 3rd Edition.*, 235-36; Davis, *The Neglected Thread; a Journal from the Calhoun Community, 1836-1842*, 148.
- <sup>lii</sup> Daniel Fenning, *The Universal Spelling Book, Sixth Edition* (Baltimore: Warner and Hanna, 1812)., 2.
- <sup>liii</sup> Alva Connell to [Eli Baxter?] (24 February 1855) "Springs Family Papers," in *Southern Historical Collection* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Library).
- <sup>liv</sup> Maria Bryan to Julia Ann Bryan Cumming, 3 April 1829, Bleser, ed., *Tokens of Affection: The Letters of a Planter's Daughter in the Old South*.
- <sup>lv</sup> Maria Bryan to Julia Ann Bryan Cumming, 5 May 1828, Bleser, ed., *Tokens of Affection: The Letters of a Planter's Daughter in the Old South*, 72-73.
- <sup>lvi</sup> Davis, *The Neglected Thread; a Journal from the Calhoun Community, 1836-1842*, 152-154. Willington SC 1839, 40 miles upstream from Augusta.
- <sup>lvii</sup> Davis, *The Neglected Thread; a Journal from the Calhoun Community, 1836-1842*, 145.
- <sup>lviii</sup> "Anonymous Diary [Frances Casey]," np.

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