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Perceptions and Identity:
Poverty in 19th century Rockingham County

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JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The historical analysis of poverty has lain silent for nearly two decades, with only recent authors, such as Nancy Isenberg and Kerri Leigh Merritt, broaching the topic. While several others have taken a deep dive into understanding the causes and effects of contemporary poverty, it seems to me a great deal has yet to be written on the identity of those impoverished and their active endeavors to define themselves in economic circumstances largely beyond their control. Until we truly explore the complexity of economic dearth and its relation to collective identity, we cannot fully understand the topic of “poverty.”

In this way, poverty is a very complex topic, as it cannot ever truly be reduced to a discussion of those immediately affected by want and its causes. It requires one to understand perceptions of the impoverished, how these perceptions informed the identity of the poor, and how the poor interacted with members outside and within their immediate social group. In reality, poverty is a messy subject, but one that deserves attention. Thus, through this analysis of poverty in antebellum Rockingham County, I hope to illustrate the many indivisible connections of race, class, and gender in the construction of perceptions and responses to poverty.

Introduction

My maternal grandparents came from meager backgrounds. My grandfather, the youngest of eleven children, only finished school through the sixth grade. As one of only two boys in an overwhelming female household, he was required to work at an early age to increase his family's chance of survival. His father passed away after the birth of the eleventh child, leaving my grandfather's mother, Trula, alone and dependent on her grit, tenacity, and the labor of her children. My grandfather never enjoyed a "rag to riches" moment. He continued his life with relatively little means, working as a car mechanic, a skill he would say just came naturally. My grandmother, also one of many siblings, endured the same upbringing. With both of her parents routinely absent, my grandmother spent a great deal of her time alone, until she found an older boy from whom she sought love and attention. At fourteen, she became pregnant, and as a result, her father forced her out of her childhood home. My grandfather and grandmother would not meet until they were both nineteen, but when they did, my grandfather recalls, "it was love at first sight." They built a life together, their love producing two children, and continued to work their way out of poverty. At the age of thirty, my grandmother attended a local community college, where she received a nursing degree, and with it, the education and skill to alleviate their poverty.

During my formative years, they tried very hard to mask their poverty-ridden past. My grandmother religiously purchased name brand foods, refused to shop at Walmart and Target, and made sure that my brother and I had any new toy or gadget our hearts desired. Once I remember asking for an item of clothing from Walmart. I do not recall what precisely it was, but the response from my grandmother stuck with me into adulthood. "We don't buy our clothes at Walmart. Wouldn't you be embarrassed?" She invoked we, a collective term, to designate our family. Our family doesn't shop at Walmart. But the "we" also represented a broader community. We, as in, we middle class well to do people do not shop at Walmart. That would be beneath us.

My grandfather was not the type of man to care whether his t-shirts and blue jeans came from Walmart, or Goodwill for that matter. The majority of the time, he was covered in motor oil and grease, so nice clothing never really made sense. He was certainly less concerned with exhibiting his rise to the middle class through material items. However, he too defined himself against the impoverished and made sure the world knew he was no longer a poor man, albeit in a different manner.

When I was small, he had a friend by the name of Sherman. Sherman was a kind, caring African American man. Sherman was a doctor by profession and a husband, and father, by nature. My grandfather made a point to explain to me at a relatively young age how Sherman was a good black man, not like the rest who were typically poor, stupid, and violent. He had a particular term for these "bad" black men. He exalted Sherman as an aberration, and most notably praised him for his wealth. My grandfather had no patience for poor lazy black men when, in reality, he had very recently shared similar circumstances.

My grandparents were kind people, caring, and so full of love, but they were also products of their environments, fears, and social pressures. They may have been good people, who loved their grandchildren, but they also harbored unfounded and frankly ignorant, racial and class

prejudice. This prejudice is far more perplexing because of the fact they had once shared similar experiences and economic precarity, with the same people they sought to define themselves against.

I recount this story of my grandparents, as it captures the complexity of poverty and the inextricable links of race, class, and gender in constructing perceptions of, and responses to poverty, and the self-identification of the impoverished. In order to discuss one, the other three must follow. As I delved further and further into research on poverty in antebellum Rockingham County, I found the same to be true. Poverty has always been a very complex topic, as it cannot ever truly be reduced to a discussion of those immediately affected by want. It requires one to understand perceptions of the impoverished, how these perceptions informed the identity of the poor, and how the poor interacted with members outside and within their immediate social group. In reality, poverty is a messy subject, but one that deserves attention. Thus, through this analysis of poverty in antebellum Rockingham County, I hope to illustrate the many indivisible connections of race, class, and gender in the construction of perceptions and responses to poverty.

I confine myself to the antebellum period (ca. 1830-1860) because of sources. These are the years for which I have the greatest pool of primary sources. These years offer a larger body of evidence (census records, Overseers of the Poor meeting minutes, poorhouse resident lists, newspaper ads, personal property tax books), allowing me to paint a more complete sketch of poverty in Rockingham County.

Before analysis can take place, poverty and “the poor” must be defined. The terms poverty and poor are used in this analysis to define those individuals listed on US census Records as having little or no real estate or personal property value, but who may have occupied homes and held unskilled and semi-skilled occupations. They are to be distinguished from the yeomen farmer, who held less real estate and personal property than the elite class, but still owned enough to be considered economically independent, as well as “vagrants” who were poor individuals that wandered from town to town looking for shelter and food. No dollar amount can genuinely define poverty, as is still true today. While an individual may have owned \$150 in real estate, their family of nine or ten would have had a considerably difficult time making ends meet on the wages afforded to their laboring father. Thus, I do not define poverty in terms of a specific income, but through a combination of factors such as head of household occupation, family size, and real estate and personal property value. All of this information is taken from the US Federal Census for 1850 and 1860.

Historiography

Thus far, the study of poverty in the Antebellum South has received a relatively small amount of discussion. The 1971 publication of David Rothman’s work, *The Discovery of the Asylum*, kicked off the exploration of the destitute in the antebellum North. However, his work left much unexplored in terms of the development of poverty in the South. Several decades later, Charles C Bolton broached the topic with his aptly named *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South*.

In *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South*, Bolton illustrates how poverty in the South, as in the nation at large, was often approached in a partisan manner that obscured more than it revealed.¹ When speaking of poverty, many Southern politicians denied its existence in the Southern states, making it seem to be a problem virtually restricted to the North. According to their arguments, the entire white race living in the South benefitted from the institution of slavery. The enslaved population provided a “mud-sill,” on which the white race could build a civilization of progress and refinement.² Thus, the enslaved performed the menial duties and drudgery of life, ensuring whites would not have to. Poverty simply could not exist for the white race. Additionally, they argued that the North held their own class of slaves with the only difference being theirs were “white, of your own race; you are brothers of one blood. They are your equals in natural endowment of intellect, and they feel galled by their degradation.”³ “White slavery” in the North provided further justification for slavery and this so-called economic security of all whites in the South. If there were members of the white race living in destitute conditions, they had gotten there through their own degrading behavior and choices. The behaviors most commonly cited involved interaction with the enslaved or free African Americans, intemperance, or sexual immorality, thus defining poverty as an individual character flaw.⁴

However, as Bolton illustrates, this was simply not the case. Most of the population of the South lived as either yeoman farmers, or more commonly, landless laborers and tenants. In an economy heavily reliant on slave labor and production, an agricultural system that moved increasingly towards commercialization, and with a credit system that battered the most destitute whites, a permanent class of landless whites, with little economic power existed. With their work opportunities fleeting, many landless whites performed a wide variety of jobs, working short periods for various employers, in various places.⁵ Slavery did not enable the entire white population to benefit, but rather, created a permanent class of poor and purposeless white men and women.

Throughout his work, Bolton describes the circumstances of these poor landless whites and how the new economic system of the South worked to render their labor superfluous. According to Bolton, “The existence of black slavery played a major role in perpetuating white poverty by limiting the development of industrial wage jobs and curbing the need for white farm labor.” Additionally, when white farm labor was available, it was deemed unattractive and unbeneficial to white workers.⁶ The availability of hired slave labor restricted poor white laborers to the wage determined profitable by slaveholders and wealthy farmers, leaving no opportunity to negotiate for higher pay. When they did procure employment, they were often paid in kind rather than in cash, rendering their economic existence stagnant.⁷

¹ Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 5.

² James Henry Hammond, “The Mudsill Theory” Speech to the US Senate, March 4, 1858.

³ James Henry Hammond, “The Mudsill Theory” Speech to the US Senate, March 4, 1858.

⁴ Bolton, p. 121.

⁵ Bolton, p. 26-33.

⁶ Bolton, p. 14-15.

⁷ Bolton, p. 17.

Furthermore, selling agricultural surplus to distant markets became more and more profitable for affluent farmers and planters. With greater wealth to fund the transportation of their goods, these men had access to a market where their harvest brought greater returns. However, poor landless farmers who grew crops on rented land had little excess to sell and no way of funding the transportation of their goods. The commercialization of agriculture also fueled a rise in the value of land, making the possibility of becoming a landholder more inaccessible to these poor landless whites, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty.⁸ Oppressive interest rates depleted any possibility for attaining land, in addition to creditor determined restrictions. Through his analysis, Bolton sheds light on a portion of the population once denied existence in political propaganda and illustrates the many ways the institution of slavery and its proponents actively created undesirable circumstances for poor laboring whites.

Wayne Durrill also contributes to the conversation of poor whites in the antebellum South with his article, "Routine of Seasons." In this article, Durrill discusses four distinct labor regimes in the antebellum plantation community. White laborers constitute one group, and Durrill explains how seasons provided an opportunity to "renew certain customary agreements among planters, slaves, farmers, and laborers and thus contain the conflict produced by extreme inequalities characteristics of plantation society."⁹ While his analysis is restricted to social structures present on a plantation in North Carolina, it seems much of what he discusses can be applied to the South more generally.

Once again, the silence of poor whites in the historical study of the antebellum South is pointed out by Durrill who explains, "in focusing solely on the relation between planters and slaves, that is a racial division, these studies obscure the fact that plantation labor systems included a large number of white yeoman farmers, wage laborers, renters, sharecroppers, and artisans."¹⁰ While their work may have been undervalued these various individuals existed as part of the Southern labor system and had complex social relations amongst one another, but also, between themselves and the landed farmers, slaveholders and the enslaved.¹¹

According to Durrill, seasons dictated much of these social interactions. For example, in winter, white laborers performed whatever work they could find, as planters and farmers rarely required extra help between Christmas and the Spring. During this period, poor laborers often grew further indebted to the wealthier farmer/planter, as they were given payment in kind for jobs to be completed in the future.¹² And thus, any dispute between the two groups would be held in check through the system of debt peonage.¹³ In essence, the poor white laborers who may have held grievances for the affluent classes were forced to put their qualms aside, as they could not bite the hand that fed them.

⁸ Bolton, p. 25-40.

⁹ Wayne K. Durrill, "Routine of Seasons: Labour Regimes and Social Ritual in an Antebellum Plantation Community," in *Slavery and Abolition*, vol 16, no. 2, (1995): p. 163.

¹⁰ Durrill, p. 164

¹¹ Durrill, p. 166-167.

¹² Durrill pg 171-173.

¹³ Durrill, pg. 173.

For several years this area of historical study lay dormant. Much of the discussions around poverty and welfare peaked around the 1990s with reforms to the welfare system under the Clinton Administration. However, even then, the discussion focused on the development of social welfare and public relief in the North-Eastern states. It is largely agreed upon that the North and South developed in very different ways and at incredibly different rates, thus the development of perceptions of poverty, and responses to it, are bound to be different. So, while June Axinn and Mark Stern in *Social Welfare: A History of the American Response to Need*, and Mark Katz with his *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* propelled the discussion of poverty in America forward, they silence a large majority of the population. In recognition of this dearth, Nancy Isenberg and Kerri Leigh Merritt have recently taken up the torch and provided further nuance to the lives of poor whites in the antebellum South.

In 2016, Nancy Isenberg published *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*. While her title suggests a plunging analysis of the formation of class in America, her book primarily focuses on the development of white poverty in the Southern states. She lays the foundations of class division and perceptions of poverty in England and the English poor laws. Colonists used these laws as the basis to craft their policy towards poverty, which defined the poor as morally inferior beings, but also as part of the elite's Christian duty to aid. However, with the Independence of the new nation, new perceptions of poverty developed focused on the potential for production. As the founders, such as Thomas Jefferson, saw it, America provided unqualified opportunities, unlike England, making the possibility of poverty unreconcilable with the notions of American prosperity. Thus, those who were poor, and could not produce for themselves were seen as another race entirely, or a race of trash.¹⁴ Isenberg analyzes perceptions of poverty through individuals such as Thomas Jefferson, Davy Crockett, and Andrew Johnson and plays particularly close attention to the Southern backwoods and frontiers.

Nonetheless, Isenberg's contributions to the field were monumental and received a great deal of attention from the popular press. However, her analysis falls short as there is little discussion of race and class, and when she does raise the topic, her choices in primary sources are questionable. Isenberg relies on many Northern newspapers and Northern writers/politicians to paint a picture of poverty and the impoverished in the South, which likened the plight of poor whites to that of the enslaved. While she acknowledges early on the biases these sources contain, she almost entirely dismisses that bias by so heavily employing them in her arguments. She, too, emphasized the similarities between poor whites and the enslaved without considering to what extent poor whites identified themselves as such. While *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* stimulated a subject long overshadowed by the social relations of planters and the enslaved of the antebellum South, Isenberg left much to consider, as the connections with race and class cannot be severed.

Most recently, Keri Leigh Merritt added to the scholarship on poor whites in the antebellum South with her 2018 publication of *Masterless Men*. While Merritt echoes much of the work produced by Isenberg and Bolton, she diverges considerably in her argument of a hostile slaveholding class who sought to deliberately police and control the actions of poor whites

¹⁴ Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2016), p. 17-104.

through restrictions of their speech, access to information, education, and even their beliefs.¹⁵ Additionally, in Merritt's telling, the laboring class of the South had no aspirations of becoming a landed planter or wealthy farmer, as they recognized how nearly impossible economic progress was in this slaveholding society. Thus, these men and women held no strong feelings of goodwill for the institution of slavery and certainly did not support it. At times, it would seem they actively fought against the institution of slavery and its unequal power dynamics. Seeing the threat they faced, the elite class controlled poor whites through coercion and violence.¹⁶

Merritt does not attempt to hide the influence of Marxism in her telling of poverty in the antebellum South. Following in the footsteps of authors such as Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth-Fox Genovese, social class and economic constraints play critical roles in the lives of those they write about. Merritt essentially argues that because of restrictions in their social class, poor whites held greater connection with free and enslaved *blacks* than with *white* planters and farmers. Not only did they share material want, but they too were an oppressed class under the thumb of the wealthy elite. Additionally, she argues that enslaved African Americans and poor whites never united against their shared oppressors because of the systematic and advanced mechanisms of control enforced, producing a crippling fear in both the poor whites and enslaved.

While Merritt's analysis is enticing, she suffers from the same issue many Marxist labor historians suffer from. In her telling of poor whites' experience in the antebellum South, she reduces race to class by arguing that racial prejudice is born of (or destroyed by) class consciousness and that poor white laborers of the antebellum South would have had greater sympathy for the plight of the enslaved as they share a mutual class oppressor. Instead, race and class must be understood together, as they are inextricably linked. This is one way I hope to contribute to the current literature of poverty and the laboring class of the antebellum South. With an analysis of how the two coexist and overlap in the experiences and activities of the poor in Rockingham County, I hope to show that while the white poor may have at times identified with the enslaved population, they also contributed in the meaning of whiteness by defining themselves against the enslaved and free black population. As the title suggests, history is often messy and, at times, contradictory, but nonetheless important. This is undoubtedly the case for poverty and perceptions of poverty (by both the wealth and impoverished) in the antebellum community of Rockingham County.

In order to accurately write such a narrative, an understanding of labor history, specifically concerning the cross-sections of race and class, is necessary.

Ira Berlin has authored many excellent works on which to build a foundation. In his *Many Thousands Gone*, Berlin offers an understanding of how slavery ultimately solidified notions of race and racial superiority, yet, its larger purpose had always been to emphasize class distinctions, rather than racial, thus illustrating the way race and class in modern America were simultaneously born.¹⁷ Slavery began as an answer to the issue of labor. Europeans arriving in America required individuals to perform the hard and deadly tasks they themselves did not wish

¹⁵ Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 2-37.

¹⁶ Merritt, p. 25.

¹⁷ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, (Cambridge, MD: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 5.

to do. In its earliest days on the American continent, slavery was largely based on the industry of the bodies performing the work. Many of the individuals performing these tasks were Native Americans, indentured servants (both white and black), and African Slaves brought into the colonies by Portuguese slavers.¹⁸ However, as more and more Europeans became unwilling to perform such work and the Native American population dwindled due to newly introduced diseases, African slavery offered a labor force to continue the pursuit of wealth and prosperity of those living in the colonies.¹⁹

As time went on, slavery became increasingly tied to the color of one's skin. Slave codes solidified, and the latitude enslaved persons previously enjoyed was significantly reduced. Instead, the enslaved were required to defer to their enslavers at all times, and the freedoms they once enjoyed—the ability to travel, to meet and gather, to read, to hold property—were also severely circumscribed. The boundaries between slavery and freedom that had once been quite permeable were now "impenetrable barriers"²⁰ The hardening distinctions of the enslaved helped to define the superiority and political power of the enslavers, while also justifying their market in human bodies. Then through the ideologies of freedom and notions of independence espoused during the American Revolution, justifications for *black* slavery were even further entrenched. As patriots called for the release of British tyranny and the independence of man, they needed to rationalize the bondage of the enslaved Africans they held. To do so, they focused on the "natural inferiority" of the black race along with a myriad of other racist notions to insist that black slavery was not only natural but a benefit to those trapped in its snare.²¹ Thus, while slavery had been born to create class, it ultimately bred racism and understanding this is absolutely crucial to understanding the links between race and class, especially in slave societies and societies with slaves.²²

In his article co-authored with Herbert Gutman, "Natives and Immigrants, Free Men and Slave," Berlin provides a portrait of antebellum class formation in the urban South. While Gutman and Berlin focus on the ways foreign settlers helped shape social relations in the urban South, their

¹⁸ While indentured servitude may not be considered slavery in the context of 19th century chattel slavery, it did resemble more historic forms of slavery, such as the enslavement of Helots by the Spartans, and the enslavement of individuals under the Roman Empire. Slavery had not been based on the race of the individual, but on dynamics of power and subjugation. For this reason, I include indentured servants in this list.

¹⁹ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, pp. 15-92.

²⁰ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, pp. 9-10.

²¹ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, pp. 10-14.

²² Ira Berlin defines slave societies and societies with slaves in his work, *Many Thousands Gone*. According to Berlin, "what distinguished societies with slaves, from that of slave societies, was the fact that slaves were marginal to the central productive process; slavery was just one form of labor among many. This created the likely possibility for slave owners to treat their slaves with extreme callousness and cruelty because this was the way they treated all of the subordinates, whether indentured servants, debtors, prisoners of war, pawns peasants, or simply poor folks." (Berlin, pg. 8) While I do not agree that the marginality of the enslaved in a "society with slaves" produced harsher conditions than many of the enslaved met in "slave societies" (Edward Baptist in his book, *The Half Has Never Been Told* has proven the brutal reality of many slaves in slave societies) I do think it is worth highlighting that within a "society with slaves", enslaved labor is but one form of laborer, coexisting with indentured apprenticeship, day laborers, artisans, etc.

analysis offers another example of the inextricable links of class and racial tensions in Southern society.²³

Berlin and Gutman analyze six different cities throughout the South from 1850-1860 including, Richmond, Charleston, Mobile, Nashville, Lynchburg, and Baton Rouge. In all but two of these cities immigrants dominated the free male working population and formed a large majority of the entire male working population, free and slave.²⁴ However, each city is composed of an amalgam of labor regimes, white, black, native, Northern born, foreign-born, free, and enslaved. Through legal status, nativity, and race, each group played a carefully defined role within the workforce.²⁵ Workers toiled at different skill levels and practiced different trades based, not solely on their economic stature, but based on their race and nativity. For example, slave hiring became increasingly popular in regions of the upper South as the cash crop moved from tobacco to cotton, and the fertility of the land depleted. However, slave hiring did not increase artisan employment of slaves in most cities.²⁶ Such jobs were reserved for native-born whites, typically Southern-born, but in some cases Northern born. When free African American men did contribute to the artisan class, they were generally relegated to trades identified with servile or distasteful labor.²⁷ These included the profession of barber, cook, butcher, and house servant. Immigrants dominated fields of employment in manual labor, not associated with farm work, most often railroad laborer. In such an analysis, the complexity of class formation and identity in different economies and societies is quite apparent, yet a Marxist interpretation like Merritt's almost entirely flattens such complexity.

The scholar whom this work is most indebted to is David Roediger and his classic, *Wages of Whiteness*. Roediger is direct in his criticism of the new labor history and their Marxist interpretation of labor as primarily a problem of class. He explains the purpose of his book as to "clarify the specific ways in which the belief in racial superiority formed the consciousness of working men."²⁸ He does not focus on the material benefit of whiteness but instead examines the agency of working men in constructing the meaning of whiteness. According to Roediger, "this white group of laborers, while they received low wages, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage."²⁹ Lines were drawn, and distinctions were made to ensure poor whites, while not materially superior, felt racial superiority to African Americans. While he focuses primarily on the Irish immigrant population of the urban North, much of what he writes can be seen in the formation of class and racial identity outside of this geographic area. As this study will show, notions of republican citizenship, independence and maleness helped to define poor *white* laborer against enslaved *black* labor, despite practically identical interests and material existence.

²³ Gutman and Berlin, "Natives and Immigrants, Free Men and Slaves," *The American Historical Review*, vol 88, no. 5, (1983): p. 5.

²⁴ Berlin and Gutman, "Natives and Immigrants, Free and Slave," p. 5.

²⁵ Berlin and Gutman, p. 6.

²⁶ Berlin and Gutman, p. 8.

²⁷ Berlin and Gutman, p. 14.

²⁸ David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (New York, NY: Verso, 1991), p. 13.

²⁹ Roediger, p. 12. Roediger is quoting from W.E.B DuBois here, and he acknowledges how his work is very much indebted to DuBois' *Black Reconstruction*.

Finally, I hope to broaden the conversation by including an analysis of gender, in addition to race and class, in the formation of identity in antebellum Rockingham County. There are countless women recorded in the sources, and to ignore them would be irresponsible. Historians Mimi Abramovitz and Jeanne Boydston largely informed this analysis of poor women and their roles in the labor force.

In her 1988 publication *Social Welfare Policy From Colonial Times to the Present*, Abramovitz offered one of the first analyses of gender and its role in US welfare history. In her work, Abramovitz exposes “how myths and stereotypes built into welfare state rules and regulations define women as “deserving or “undeserving” of aid depending on their race, class, gender, and marital status.”³⁰ She argues that a shift occurred with the industrial revolution, and women went from having an economically productive role to merely duties of consuming and maintaining in the confines of the household.³¹ Women who strayed outside the bounds of femininity and the socially prescribed "domestic sphere" were unrewarded and often punished by the welfare system. Yet, poor women were often required to work, as their families depended on the supplemental income they generated. Because of their constant visibility and their association with masculinity, these women faced social stigma, economic insecurity, and penalties such as mandatory work requirements, child removal, and government supervision of their parenting, sexual, and social life.³²

Boydston provides further clarification on the development of the ideologies of private and public spheres in antebellum America with the 1990 publication of *Home and Work*. According to Boydston, the "two separate spheres" argument for 19th century American women requires closer examination. White anxieties of middle and laboring classes indeed produced such an ideology in the face of industrialization and the realignment of the family hierarchy, however, the lived experience of women tells a much different story. Through her analysis, Boydston illustrates how women continued to maintain a very active position laboring for their family's both inside and outside the home during the 19th century. While their work may have gone without wage, it was nevertheless crucial.³³ Middle-class members shared in the ideal of separate spheres and embraced the withdrawal of mothers, wives, and daughters from public life and labor of any kind. Women became consumers, rather than producers, and as such, they existed in a paradise removed from the ills of the outside world. According to such thinking, the home and private sphere acted as this "paradise." However, their embrace of this ideology obscures the incessant labor women completed within the home. Rather than occupying separate spheres and different experiences, women became the sole manager and keeper of family life, both outside and within the home.³⁴ Furthermore, while middle-class women themselves did not live in the idealized sphere of domesticity, society continued to measure the virtues of a woman by the visibility of her labor. Women of the laboring poor and working classes lived their lives almost

³⁰ Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1988), p. 2.

³¹ Abramovitz, p. 3-4.

³² Abramovitz, p. 3.

³³ Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 98-99.

³⁴ Boydston, p. 104

as much in and on the streets, as in their homes, making it impossible for them to uphold the new 19th-century ideology.³⁵

While Boydston restricts her analysis to women in urban centers of the 19th century, her argument lends excellent context to understanding the plight of poor and laboring women in antebellum Rockingham County. Many of these women undertook forms of nontraditional labor outside of their homes to ensure the survival of their families. Their visibility and “masculine labor” set them apart from the middle-class women, yet they maintained the same role of “woman as the keeper of the home.” As Wilma Dunaway explains in her article “The Disremembered of the Antebellum South,” “poor women were required to move between *multiple roles* that included household subsistence work, activities to generate market commodities *and* semi waged labor arrangement.”³⁶

This work is incredibly indebted to the many authors and scholars who have come before and breached the topics of race, class, and gender in Antebellum America. Without their works, the present analysis would not be possible. My goal is to contribute to the extant body of research by illustrating the complexity of poverty.

Origins

Contrary to popular belief, social welfare and care for the poor, disabled, elderly, and ill, existed as an essential thread to the fabric of American society well before the development of formal social security in the 1930s. Its origins can be traced to 16th century English “Poor Laws,” which established care for the poor and destitute as a social obligation to be remedied by the local parish through the *almshouse*/poorhouse (alms meaning “charity,” i.e., the “charity house”) or through outdoor relief.³⁷ Outdoor relief is defined as any aid that did not require the individual in need to leave his or her home. In this case, payment would be made to suppliers in town or other citizens who would then provide for the person(s) in need.³⁸ Outdoor relief was the preferred source of assistance for those in need. However, there was also the option to be “bound out.” Binding out meant that an individual would be sent to live with another member in town, where they would perform various tasks or learn a skilled trade in exchange for shelter and food.³⁹ Each locality differed in their methods, but a combination of all three could usually be found, and oversight of the poor fell to designated officials known as the “overseers of the poor.” In order to provide relief, the “parish levy” would be collected on all free white males over the age of sixteen and free white females (usually widows) who were considered “head of household.”⁴⁰

³⁵ Boydston, p. 100.

³⁶ Wilma Dunaway, “The Disremembered of the Antebellum South,” *Critical Sociology*, vol 21, no. 3, (1995): p. 92.

³⁷ David Wagner, *The Poorhouse: America’s Forgotten Institution*, (Cambridge, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005) p. 40.

³⁸ Wagner, p. 7.

³⁹ Michael Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America*, (New York, NY: BasicBooks, 1996), p. 14.

⁴⁰ http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/va20_coltax.htm

Early American social welfare drew heavily on these English traditions since English immigrants constituted a large portion of settlers to the New World. The historical record shows that throughout colonial towns, there are abundant references to almshouses, poorhouses, the “overseers of the poor,” and “outdoor relief.” As June Axinn and Mark Stern explain in their work, *Social Welfare: A History of the American Response to Need*, “the colonist were small bands of individuals joined together in enterprises whose success depended upon the contribution and well-being of each other.” This dependency created a situation where private affairs became matters of the community, and the social obligation of English Poor Laws lent itself well to colonial society.⁴¹ However, social welfare practice did not change with the independence of the nation. Even with the establishment of a federal government in 1789, poor relief remained an individual state issue, rather than a federal one. Concern for the rights of each state and the role of the government dictated the municipal nature of poor relief, as well as the original community-based structure of poor relief.

Though, what did change was the administrative organization. Like in England, before the Revolution local parishes or Churches had been the primary overseers of social welfare. Now, the duties of administering social welfare and determining its necessity case by case fell to elected county officials, typically of the landed gentry.⁴² The same rules applied, wherein each locality one could find a mixture of indoor/outdoor relief and boarding out. It is unclear who qualified for each type of aid and the measures of qualification used. Generally, if an individual or family found themselves in a position where they required some aid, but not complete support, outdoor relief was granted. If an individual had no way to provide for him or herself but was in relatively good health, they would likely qualify to be bound out.⁴³ However, this explanation still leaves much unknown. Not everyone who applied for relief received help, and even if they did, there was no system in place to ensure equal treatment. A case-by-case basis determined poor relief with little rationale.

It is essential to note the perception of social welfare during this period. According to Michael Katz, a prominent cultural historian, poverty was not unusual among the American working class in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Working-class people were often poor at some point in their lives. This fluctuating poverty was a result of irregular, seasonal, dangerous, and unhealthy work on the farm, in tanneries, mills, or artisanal shops.⁴⁴ Thus, within the confines of local communities there was less distinction between ordinary working people who had fallen on hard times and those who were consistently in need of aid. Periods of dependency were a regular part of American life, especially in rural towns with less access to commercial centers and even trade. As Katz explains, the working-class experience did not exist on a continuum; no clear line separated the “respectable poor” from the “pauper.”

⁴¹ June Axinn and Mark Stern, *Social Welfare: A History of the American Response to Need*, (Boston, MA: Allan & Bacon, 2001).

⁴² James Leiby, *A History of Social Welfare and Social in the United States*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 40.

⁴³ Leiby, p. 41.

⁴⁴ Michael B. Katz, “Poorhouses and the Origins of the Public Old Age Home,” in *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly. Health and Society*, vol. 62, no. 1. (Winter, 1984): p. 112.

However, there is a caveat to this normalcy of poverty. Such a perception was community-based, meaning that the individual in need of relief had to come from within the community (defined by their county or parish) in order to receive aid. Destitute strangers were not included in this consensus, and worry about their intrusions lead to protective legislation to maintain order.⁴⁵ For example, in 1803, Benjamin Mefford came to the Overseers of the Poor of Rockingham County, Virginia, to be reimbursed for the expenses he incurred while caring for an Elizabeth Baushaneg, who was a resident of nearby Augusta County. The overseers paid Mefford the sum of \$39.58 and then contacted Augusta County to ensure they would be reimbursed.⁴⁶ Considered in terms of the local economy, this ensured the community would not be taxed for individuals who migrated from town to town in search of relief.

During the Early Republic, many changes swept across the Nation. Industrialization, coupled with the Market and Transportation Revolutions created opportunities for increased wages, social mobility, and further access to land. Manufacturing companies spread throughout the Northeast, creating a boon in production; railroads, canals, and turnpikes connected rural towns to commercial cities; and the standard of living soared, and, maybe most importantly, industrial capitalism came to define nearly all aspects of society.⁴⁷ It is during this context that the definition of work started to take shape. Consequently, a more visible distinction developed between the unskilled laborer and the individual managing that labor. As the two groups grew further and further apart, the modern American "middle-class" was born. Middle-class men and women moved into separate neighborhoods and defined themselves against the "unruly" and "immoral" laborers. The perception of the lower class slowly started to shift, from those who had simply fallen on hard times, to lazy individuals plagued by poverty, illness, and intemperance due to their unwillingness to work. Thus, the lower class became a malignant "condition" to be eradicated from society.

It is important to note the disparities between the North and South in this development. Both regions exploited labor in their new industrial capitalist economies. However, they diverge in what that exploitation looked like, and to whom it was directed. The North developed large-scale industrial complexes, with horrific working conditions and crushingly low wages. Women, children, and immigrants bore the burden of occupying this sector of the economy. Not surprisingly, many middle-class and elite Northerners associated factory jobs and poverty as fundamental characteristics of these groups. The South, on the other hand, maintained a system of labor reliant on enslaved labor. This system created a tension between the types of jobs available to working-class whites, and the number, especially in places heavily dependent on slavery, however, African Americans maintained the lowest rung on the social ladder.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ David Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic*, (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p. 156.

⁴⁶ Overseers of the Poor, *Records of Meetings of Overseers of the Poor 1787-1862*, housed at the Rockingham County Circuit Court, Book 1, p. 33.

⁴⁷ Jill Lepore, *The Truths: A History of the United States*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2018), p. 195.

⁴⁸ For more on this subject see Keri leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*; Charles C Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi*; Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of class in America*.

Poor whites were met with disdain, but primarily when they associated with enslaved and free African Americans. In the eyes of many Southern elites, these poor whites degraded themselves (and the entire white race) by associating with African Americans.⁴⁹ This notion of white superiority afforded even the most impoverished whites a modicum of power in slave societies. While wanting materially, poor whites received a "psychological wage." Unlike enslaved African Americans, poor whites retained their freedom and rights of citizenship, albeit in truncated form.⁵⁰ Furthermore, if they wished to escape from their masters, bosses, or economic oppression, poor whites had a far better chance of escaping these metaphorical chains as their whiteness afforded the fundamental rights to move about the country without restriction and speculation. There are, of course, extreme cases, where poor whites faced conditions similar to those suffered by the enslaved population. The hollow ache of hunger, the fear of losing loved ones, auctioned off to help fund survival, but these are *extreme cases*. This is not said to belittle those instances, but to emphasize the convergence of race and class in slave societies (and societies with slaves), and to illustrate how race cannot simply be reduced to class.⁵¹

Poverty in Antebellum Rockingham County

Like the rest of the nation, Rockingham County underwent a great deal of change during the early 19th century, and these changes seem to have informed perceptions of poverty held by both the wealthy/middle class, and the poor themselves.

By 1840, the region was well on its way to fully participating in the industrial capitalist economy emerging from the products and labor of both North and South. While the area lacked large industrial complexes like those found in urban centers of the North, Rockingham County certainly moved from a wholly merchant capitalist economy and society towards an industrial capitalist one. As Jeanne Boydston explains in, *Home and Work*, industrialization and modernization existed in social, cultural, and economic manifestations. It was not merely a process of changes in the mode of production but, "born in American homes—in the material aspirations, in the poor soil of farms, in family fertility patterns, and in the decision to purchase goods rather than produce them."⁵² With Boydston's expansive definition of industrialization in mind, Rockingham County was certainly participating in this new social, cultural, and economic system. The newspaper ads filling the back of the *Rockingham Register* provide one source of evidence:

“Boots, Shoes, and Hats,” “The Hespian Harp: A new and beautiful collection of music; containing upwards of 700 choice pieces,” “STILL THEY COME! The subscriber has just received another supply of those superior cooking stoves, which have given such general satisfaction.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Isenberg, pg. 135-143.

⁵⁰ Bolton, pp. 113-138.

⁵¹ David Roediger, pp. 95-112.

⁵² Boydston, pg. 100.

⁵³ “Boots, Shoes, and Hats: For sale by Wood and Danner” *Rockingham Register*, October 12, 1849; “The Hespian Harp,” *Rockingham Register*, October 12, 1849; “STILL THEY COME!” *Rockingham Register*, October 12, 1849.

Each of these ads provides evidence to commodities purchased outside of the home, as well as more wealth and leisure time to spend on such items.

Additionally, as the local economy moved increasingly in the direction of greater commercialization and modern capitalist systems of production, opportunities for poor whites grew smaller and smaller. Because farmers moved towards producing for a national (and later in the Antebellum period, global) market, agriculture was no longer a means to produce for individual subsistence. While this type of agriculture certainly did not disappear, landed yeoman and wealthy planters moved to producing for surplus and the transportation of their excess goods.⁵⁴ The economic viability of agriculture caused land prices to soar nationally, and thus poor whites everywhere had far fewer chances of gaining real estate property after the 1820s.⁵⁵

Left with little opportunity for economic mobility, poor men generally worked as "laborers," which encompassed a wide variety of work. A laborer may work for a yeoman farmer, tending to the duties which required arduous labor, or he might work for a wealthy merchant, clearing the grounds after a long hard winter. While these types of jobs were generally available, they provided little in terms of stability and security. Because of their precarious situation, many poor white families lived with one another, forming economically defined kinship networks, through which they could pool income and resources to better the chance of survival. These constructed kinship networks exist in multitudes throughout the 1850 and 1860 census for Rockingham County.⁵⁶ If they did not live with other families in similar situations, many of the laboring poor lived close to (or at times on) the land of wealthy or middle-class community members. Take John Rader and George Swecker as examples. Both men worked as laborers according to the 1850 census, with relatively large families and no real estate value. They lived sandwiched between wealthy farmers-one being Reuben Sipe, with \$4000 in real estate value, and the other being John Good, with \$8000 in real estate value-in hopes of procuring any employment opportunities the two men may have.⁵⁷

Ultimately, poor white laborers and their families were required to rely on others for survival. Whether through economically defined kinship networks or their employers, these men and women had little other choice. Not surprisingly, their dependency was less than ideal, especially in an age when notions of independence and citizenship informed the way many individuals considered themselves members of the new republic and their worth to the nation.⁵⁸ A common topic of discussion, dependency became a buzz word for all social reformers, local officials, and even the individual laborer. All tried to understand how poverty could exist in a world with such

⁵⁴ Charles Bolton, pg. 16-20; the evidence for increased commercialization of agriculture in Rockingham County is quite pervasive. Newspaper ads provide a great deal of evidence, as they illustrate the types of farming equipment desired and used by farmers increasing production, as well as speak of the transport of goods. Additionally, attempts to establish a railroad in the county took place as early as 1830, illustrating the local concern for national transportation and access to outside markets.

⁵⁵ Bolton, pp. 11-41.

⁵⁶ United States Government, 1850, *US Federal Census: Schedule I*, Rockingham County, VA. Pp. 8-9, 11, 14 (household # 82 and 84), 17 (household # 104, 105, and 107), and page 22 (household #123). United States Government, 1860, *US Federal Census: Schedule I*, Rockingham County, VA. pp. 21 (household # 147), p. 23 (household # 170), p. 45 (household #316 and # 331), and p. 47 (household # 341)

⁵⁷ 1850, US Federal Census, p. 24.

⁵⁸ Roediger, pg. 43-60.

opportunity and accessibility.⁵⁹ Laborers and wage earners determined the vast inequalities and dependency could be attributed to 19th-century capitalism, while the wealthy and middle classes decided the poor had only themselves to blame, as complacency and a gullible nature were their key characteristics.⁶⁰

Once again, Rockingham County did not differ from the rest of the nation in these social and cultural developments. While it is hard to find concrete evidence from poor white laborers, one can interpret the many petit larceny cases heard in the local circuit court from 1840-1860 as echoes of their voices breaching through the historical silence. From a sample of twelve court cases between 1850-1860 in Rockingham County, it is clear that these men and women acted in defiance and resistance to the oppressive, lopsided system of capitalism. All but one of these court cases included poor laboring men stealing goods such as flour, horses, or meat, from wealthier yeoman farmers or planters within the community.

Take, for example, the case of Joshua Gilmer and William Gilmer, who faced charges for breaking into the meat house of Jacob Byrd in 1852. According to the court minute books, they carried away a number of foods and were ultimately found guilty. The court ordered both William and Joshua to serve three years and six months in the penitentiary for their crime.⁶¹ At face value, this information provides little in terms of understanding the laboring men and women of antebellum Rockingham County and how they perceived their poverty, but further investigation produces greater insight. According to the 1850 census, Joshua and William were both poor laborers, with no measurable real estate value or personal property value. Joshua worked as a well digger while trying to support his family. William, the younger of the two, is simply listed as a "laborer." The man from whom they stole, Jacob Byrd, was a wealthy farmer with \$3000 of real estate value listed on the census.⁶² The same situation is found time and time again in the records of the Rockingham County court. Joseph and Samuel Baker charged with larceny against Breneman and Hall, two wealthy and prominent members of the community, who owned a prosperous dry goods store.⁶³ James Grubb, whose single mother was left to raise him and his three other siblings, stole a horse from Christian Myers, presumably another well to do individual.⁶⁴

These actions represent attempts by poor white laborers to resist the inequalities and dependency inherent in 19th-century capitalism. Poor men stole goods from wealthy and middle-class members of the community, as they felt the wealthy and middle class had stolen from them. Just as the enslaved resisted their bondage through feigning sickness, breaking tools, and refusing to work, poor white laborers found a way to buck their system of oppression. Larceny cases are but one example. There are several other ways poor whites chose to resist, one of which being the production and distribution of ardent spirits without the necessary license.

⁵⁹ Yates report, *New York Senate Journal*, 1824, 95-108. Reprinted in New York State Board of Charities, *Annual Report for 1900*, (Albany 1901).

⁶⁰ Roediger, pg. 43; David Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic*, (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p. 165.

⁶¹ Rockingham County Common Law Order Book No. 2, p. 586.

⁶² US Federal Census 1850, p. 67 and p. 107.

⁶³ US Federal Census 1850, p. 165, p. 410, and p. 160.

⁶⁴ US Federal Census 1850, p. 282.

Throughout the 1850s, a multitude of individuals found themselves in the circuit court on an indictment for retailing and producing ardent spirits. While it was not possible to cross-reference every person in every case, those that were, help to illustrate the opposition of poor white laborers in Rockingham County.

Elizabeth Rudy, an unmarried female, living with the laboring poor Puls family, is one such person.⁶⁵ Indicted in 1852, Elizabeth was ultimately found guilty and required to pay a fine for her illicit behavior.⁶⁶ As an unmarried woman in 19th century American, Elizabeth had very few occupation opportunities, and the fact that she failed to fulfill her role as a wife and mother added additional stigma to her already precarious social position. In order to survive and avoid public dependency, it is likely she lived with the Puls family in hopes of pooling their labor and income. While there is no occupation listed for Elizabeth, she likely worked as a domestic laborer, whether it be as a washwoman, cook, or seamstress.⁶⁷ However, her below-average wage was not enough, and it is likely she turned the production and retailing of alcohol as a means of support herself. The illegal business was dangerous but profitable and could keep her from the poorhouse. There was more to her choice, though. By participating in this illicit business, Elizabeth produced a commodity that she herself could then sell, allowing her to participate in (albeit minimally) and manipulate the capitalist system that contributed to her poverty. Once again, as Ms. Rudy illustrates, the actions and voices of the laboring poor can breach the historical silence and provide a better understanding of how the ideology of republicanism manifested in Rockingham County.

As for the wealthy and well to do of Rockingham, their perception of dependency and poverty seems to be more complicated. New notions of republicanism and independence undoubtedly informed their understanding of the poor. In ads for "journeymen," or traveling laborers, the most common characteristics subscribers sought in those who applied were "men of sober and industrious habits" or "good workmen of reliable habits."⁶⁸ As one ad proclaimed, "all others need not apply." These ads suggest the distinction was necessary, and that the subscriber thought such laborers typically exhibited the opposite behavior (intemperate, immoderate, and unreliable). However, there is also evidence for continued care and concern of poor whites. For example, in 1818, the Overseers ordered the building of four new brick cabins at the current location of the poorhouse. They ordered the installation of "fireplaces and chimneys to warm the apartments," as well as windows and patios, and anything else "necessary for the comfort of the poor."⁶⁹ Later, in 1821 charges were brought against John Eaton, the current steward of the poorhouse, in regards to his treatment and care for the poor. The Overseers assigned a committee to investigate the charges. While the committee found no signs of misconduct, the Overseers established two new superintendents to work under John Eaton for the protection of the poor.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ US Federal Census 1850, p. 160

⁶⁶ Rockingham County Circuit Court Minute Book, No. 26, p. 99.

⁶⁷ Dunaway, p. 91-94.

⁶⁸ "Journeyman Cabinet Makers Wanted," *Rockingham Register*, February 20th, 1841; "Journeyman Sadler Wanted," *Rockingham Register*, May 4th, 1844.

⁶⁹ Overseers of the Poor, *Records of Meetings of Overseers of the Poor 1787-1862*, house at the Rockingham County Circuit Court, Book 1, p. 58.

⁷⁰ Overseers of the Poor, *Records of Meetings of Overseers of the Poor 1787-1862*, house at the Rockingham County Circuit Court, Book 1, p. 67.

Furthermore, the education of the poor received a great deal of attention. In 1817 the General Assembly of Virginia established a law requiring each county to establish schools for poor children, and in 1821, it was determined funding would come from the Literacy Fund, a fund established in 1818 for the development of educational institutions such as the University of Virginia.⁷¹ While the compliance of each county varied considerably, Rockingham County actively participated in the education of poor children during the Antebellum period. According to various extant school records, poor children consistently received tuition for their education at one of the eighty common schools in operation across the county from 1835-1840. For the year 1835, Commissioner's reports state seven to eight hundred children were entitled to the benefit, with 632 receiving education at different periods over the year.⁷² Each year school attendance rose, as did the overall number of poor children in the area. While the actual number of children who benefited from such schools is impossible to determine, it would seem that the county did push for access to education. However, it is important to note the difficulty poor children faced in attending such schools, even with tuition paid for. Not only would they have had to travel to the school, but their labor was often necessary for their family's survival. Thus, many poor children would not have been afforded the opportunity, even with financial aid.

Finally, relief in kind remained a pervasive system of public aid throughout the 1830s and 1860s in Rockingham County. By the 1820s, most Northern communities had discarded such outdoor relief and community-based relief arrangements in favor of the institutions of Poorhouses.⁷³ Their decision to do so rested in the notion that continual relief in the form of payments and relief in kind would produce a class of lazy and entitled poor. Thus, the poorhouse served as an institution of reform, surveillance, and only after these, poverty relief. However, as the minutes of the Overseers of the Poor illustrate, both men and women continued to receive either food, clothing, or money from wealthy individuals in the community. These instances suggest that while the middle class and elite of Rockingham County did associate poverty with corrupt personalities, they also perceived the poor as fallen community members.

Gender and Poverty

Notions of dependency were far more complex for women of the 19th century, especially poor women. As discussed previously, the ideology of separate spheres and the gender contradictions of the 19th century generally restricted women's role to the home and education of the family.

⁷¹ VA General Assembly, *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia*, Chapter LI, Article 1, (1817) p. 71; VA General Assembly, Chapter XIX, Article 12, (1818) p. 17; VA General Assembly, Chapter 13, Article 3, (1821), p. 14-15. Digital copies of all *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia* can be found at <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008885427>

⁷² Rockingham County Board of School Commissioners Records, 1835-1840, box 1. Rockingham County Circuit Court Archives.

⁷³ For more on this subject see Monique Bourque's "Populating the Poorhouse: A Reassessment of Poor Relief in the Antebellum Delaware Valley," in *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, pp. 235-267; David Wagner, *The Poorhouse: America's Forgotten Institution*, Rowan & Littlefield Publishers: Maryland, 2005, chpt 1; Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009.

Additionally, production and commerce became exclusively masculine attributes.⁷⁴ Women were to be kept away from the ills of industrialized society and to do so, she required a "separate sphere." Women were inherently dependent creatures according to this new logic, and their primary tasks were to create a relaxing home for the weary bread-winner, to oversee the consumption of market-produced goods and services, and to spend more time rearing children.⁷⁵

As mentioned previously, the separate sphere ideology was little more than that, an *ideal*. Middle-class women continued to labor and produce for their families. The difference was that the majority of their production and labor occurred behind the walls of their home. Such ideals not only defined what it meant to be a good wife and mother, but also a good female citizen in the new republic. The local newspaper, the Rockingham Register, provides evidence of how Rockingham County mirrored such cultural developments. An ad which appears in the October 1849 paper reads,

"EDUCATION: Mrs. Leroy P Dangerfield proposes opening near the warm springs, Bath County VA, a school for the education of young ladies. All the usual English branches will be taught, together with French and music on the guitar. Particular attention will be given to the domestic instruction of young ladies..."⁷⁶

Poor women, however, could never live up to this ideal, as their poverty required them to occupy a significant role in the so-called "public sphere." Their economic position demanded their labor, even if they had a spouse who also worked. In the industrialized North, women typically found work in factories and textile mills. In Rockingham County, they found jobs as washerwomen, cooks, seamstresses, and domestic servants.⁷⁷ Their inability to adhere to new gender ideals challenged developing concepts of social order and hierarchy, and thus, middle and wealthy classes viewed poor women as lesser.

To combat this threat to social hierarchy nationally, women's labor was devastatingly undervalued and vastly underpaid. In doing so, the patriarchal society entrenched women's economic dependence and feminized poverty.⁷⁸ It was difficult for married women and their families to survive on the menial incomes afforded by the modern capitalist society, and nearly impossible for single women. And so, many of these women turned to public welfare to help

⁷⁴ Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002) pg. 5.

⁷⁵ Directly quoted from Mimi Abramowitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2018) pg. 82.

⁷⁶ "Education," *Rockingham Register*, October 12, 1849.

⁷⁷ Evidence for women's occupations in antebellum Rockingham County can be found in numerous places. The 1850 and 1860 census is incredibly helpful. For examples see pg. 19 (household #140 and 141), p. 23 (household # 170), p. 26 (household # 186) in the 1860 census. Additionally, the local newspaper is another source of information of the occupations held by poor women. Newspaper ads such as the following, "GIRL WANTED: A white girl is wanted to do the cooking, washing, and c. in a small family-liberal wages will be given." *Rockingham Register* Nov. 9, 1833.

⁷⁸ Seth Rothman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2009), p. 174-200; Dorsey, p. 63.

supplement their income. Thus, by the middle of the 19th century, recipients of public aid were overwhelmingly female.⁷⁹

Public aid in Rockingham County seems to have been somewhat more complicated. Public welfare in the form of small payments or relief in kind was distributed amongst both men and women in Rockingham County reasonably equally. As late as 1857, records indicate that men constituted 50% of those who received such aid in Rockingham County.⁸⁰ However, an overwhelming majority of women make-up the inhabitants of the local poorhouse.⁸¹ There are several male inhabitants, but those who resided at the poorhouse were either blind, "feeble-minded," or the children of female inhabitants. This pattern of male inhabitants would suggest that for Rockingham County, complete dependency was only acceptable for women and those who absolutely could not care for themselves. Furthermore, the type of women who populate the poorhouse reveals an additional layer of bias. For both 1850 and 1860, the majority of the women living at the poorhouse are single mothers.⁸² It is not out of the realm of possibility that these women were required to live in the poorhouse because they challenged new ideals of women's morality and sexuality through their "illicit sexual relationships."⁸³ The women who received relief in kind or in the form of small payments are typically older (above the age of 65), widowed, or unmarried young women without children. These women did not directly challenge the new social hierarchy, thus making them more deserving of aid outside of the poorhouse.⁸⁴

Definitive perceptions of poor women held by the elite and middle class may be hard to determine. However, for the impoverished themselves, these women acted as essential agents of accumulation and survival. According to Wilma Dunaway, "quite often, it was the wife who generated the only sources of cash in poorer households. The poorest households could not survive without pooling their labor."⁸⁵ So, while poor laboring women may have been socially stigmatized, within their family's, they held a position of power and notoriety. A poem titled "Description of a good wife" from the local newspaper exhibits the importance poor women held in their families:

"She hadn't no ear for music. Sam, but she had a capital eye for dirt, and for poor folks, that's much better. No one never seen as much dirt in my house as a fly could brush of with his wings. Boston gals may boast of their spinnels and their gytars and their [illegible] and their ear for music, but give me the gal, I say, that has an eye for dirt."⁸⁶

⁷⁹ Priscilla Fergu Clement, "Nineteenth-Century Welfare Policy, Programs and Poor Women: Philadelphia as a case study," *Feminist Studies* vol. 18, no. 1, (1992): p. 3.

⁸⁰ Rockingham County Overseers of the Poor, *Overseers of the Poor 1787-1865*, (Rockingham County Circuit Court, 1809) pg. 300.

⁸¹ 1850 US Federal Census, Schedule I, household 1545. 1860 Federal Census, Schedule I, 1544.

⁸² 1850 Federal Census, p. 264.

⁸³ Isenberg, p. 141

⁸⁴ *Overseer of the Poor Rockingham County 1787-1861*, Book I, Rockingham County Circuit Court Archive.

⁸⁵ Dunaway, p. 96.

⁸⁶ "Description of a Good Wife," *Rockingham Register*, January 16, 1841.

Additionally, it is necessary to explore the question of how poor women perceived themselves within society. These women were required to move between multiple roles, attending to the household, the children, activities directed at generating market commodities, and semi waged labor.⁸⁷ Yet, their incessant work and commitment to their family enabled poor women a higher degree of fluidity, flexibility and power within their own homes and social interactions when compared to middle and upper class women. They maintained a crucial role in the survival of their families. While middle and upper class women certainly contributed to the overall functioning of the household and family, poor women took on roles to ensure their husband and children wouldn't starve. While production marked her as degenerative in the greater society, it also elevated her position within the intimate relationship of the home. The poor mother and wife thus occupied a greater position in her immediate social group and would have understood herself as not a poor dependent or transgressive figure, but as a producing and instrumental body. In this way, poor women held onto a psychological wage, if nothing else.

Intersections of Racial Prejudice and Class Consciousness

It is necessary to provide context of slavery in antebellum Rockingham County to fully understand the intersections between race and class in the region. While the area was not a slave society, it was most certainly a society with slaves. What distinguished societies with slaves, from that of slave societies, was the fact that the enslaved were marginal to the central productive process; slavery was just one form of labor among many.⁸⁸ This is certainly true for Rockingham County. While records reveal the presence of prominent enslavers in the area, the majority of inhabitants were either landed yeoman farmers or the laboring poor. According to the 1860 census, only 1.2% of the 20,000 local inhabitants were slaveholders, and most of these individuals held only one slave. Those who did not own slaves far outnumbered those who did, and even the wealthiest families relied on labor from not only the enslaved, but indentured servants, apprentices, and poor white laborers.⁸⁹ Additionally, the region differed in its production of wheat as its staple crop, rather than tobacco or cotton. The farmers of Rockingham County may have required some additional help in cultivating their product, but not to the extent required by planters of tobacco and cotton, thus requiring less slave labor.⁹⁰ Hired slaves were an additional source of labor for many planters and farmers of Rockingham County. Frequently, ads were placed in the Rockingham Register to publicize available slaves for hire from surrounding counties. However, just because Rockingham County was a society with slaves, rather than a slave society, does not mean the enslaved were treated with any great leniency or care. Historian Ira Berlin has argued that such societies created “the likely possibility for slaveowners to treat their slaves with extreme callousness and cruelty because this was the way they treated all of the subordinates whether indentured servants, debtors, prisoners of war, pawns peasants, or simply poor folks.”⁹¹ Additionally, the enslaved in such a society were less of an economic necessity

⁸⁷ Dunaway, p. 92.

⁸⁸ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, p. 8.

⁸⁹ Social Explorer Dataset(SE), Census 1860, Digitally transcribed by Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Edited, verified by Michael Haines. Compiled, edited, and verified by Social Explorer.

⁹⁰ United States Government, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census*, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864).

⁹¹ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, p. 8.

and investment, meaning their lives held less monetary value. While it is unclear how the enslaved of Rockingham County were treated, it is undoubtedly clear racial prejudice informed the actions of both the wealthy and poor of Rockingham county and even the institutions of welfare and relief.

As a general rule, it would seem that African Americans were denied any source of public outdoor relief in Rockingham County. In the entirety of the overseers of the poor records, African Americans only appear fifteen times. Of those fifteen, only three are referenced as receiving aid in the form of outdoor relief. This would suggest that over the course of nearly 100 years, only three people of color received such public assistance. Additionally, according to the 1850 census, African Americans constituted 20% of the poorhouse inhabitants. However, they made up only 13.8% of the total population of Rockingham County. This would suggest that a majority of the impoverished African American community were required to seek aid via the poorhouse, while poor whites were granted relief in various other forms. In 1860, African Americans only made up only 5% of poorhouse inhabitants, yet this should not be viewed as a sign of greater access to outdoor relief.⁹² Rather, the decline in their residence at the poorhouse can be more likely attributed to outright denial of all sources of public welfare, as racial tensions solidified on the eve of Civil War. However, this racial prejudice did not exist solely in the institutions of poverty relief, but in the identification of the impoverished themselves.

In *Black Reconstruction*, WEB Du Bois explains, “While the white group of laborers received a low wage, they were compensated in part by a sort of public psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white.”⁹³ While DuBois describes the life of poor whites during reconstruction, this same argument for public and psychological wages can be applied to parts of the antebellum South, and specifically to Rockingham County. Distinctions were made, and lines were drawn to ensure poor whites, while not materially superior to slaves, felt racial superiority. This was not only the work of the wealthy and middle classes, but an active endeavor taken on by the laboring and poor themselves.

In *Wages of Whiteness*, David Roediger further explains Dubois's original claim. He states, “the pleasure of whiteness could function as a wage for white workers. That is, status and privileges conferred by race could be used to make up for alienating and exploitative class relationships. Poor whites could, and often did, define and accept their class positions by fashioning identities as ‘not slaves’ and ‘not blacks’.”⁹⁴

Education acted as one type of psychological and public wage conferred upon the poor whites of Rockingham county. As discussed previously, the education of the poor remained a critical concern for the county of Rockingham County. Laws passed early on ensured poor white

⁹² According data compiled from the 1850 census, African Americans only made up 13.8% of the total population for Rockingham County. In 1860, the number had decreased slightly to 12.5%. (Social Explorer Dataset (SE), Census 1860, Digitally transcribed by Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Edited, verified by Michael Haines. Compiled, edited and verified by Social Explorer.)

⁹³ WEB DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*, p. 700-701.

⁹⁴ Roediger, pg. 13.

children were allowed to attend a school and educated in reading, writing, and basic arithmetic.⁹⁵ By 1840, the area boasted eighty-four common schools, which taught 979 children over the year.⁹⁶ While the amount of education these children received is questionable-as their economic status and family dependency left little time for school attendance-the opportunity and right to education acted as a marker of their racial superiority and rightful citizenship within the community. African Americans, both free and enslaved, were not afforded the same right. While no formal law barred the education of African Americans in the state or county until 1830, it is apparent they were refused any type of education as early as the 1805.⁹⁷ Indentures of apprenticeship were formal contracts binding a young boy or girl to an individual until they reached the appropriate age (twenty-one for boys and eighteen for girls). In these contracts, masters were legally required to teach, or have their apprentice taught, reading, writing, and for male apprentices, arithmetic. Both poor white and African American children were bound out to wealthy members of the community to learn a skill or trade; however, only white children were to be educated during their terms.⁹⁸ In several of the contracts from the early 1800s, the line stipulating education for indentured African American children is crossed out, while later, it is wholly left out. Education for African American children was actively restricted by the Rockingham County community while ensuring the opposite for poor whites. In this way, education acted as a psychological and public wage for poor whites, setting them apart and enabling them to fashion their identity as 'not a slave' and 'not black'.

Specific trades and occupations were also restricted to African Americans, retaining labor of higher skill level for white laborers and further entrenching the so-called "inferior race" in poverty. As Ira Berlin and Herbert Gutman explain in their article, "Natives and Immigrants, Free men and Slave," free African American men were generally confined to trades that whites associated with slave labor.⁹⁹ These occupations were almost always servile in nature and often considered "dirty" or "distasteful." In Rockingham County, positions such as barber, cook, domestic servant, and farmhand were typically held for free African Americans, while poor whites filled positions as general laborers and semi-skilled tradesmen.¹⁰⁰ The majority of free African American men who occupied positions such as cooper, shoemaker, or blacksmith are those who came of age in the period right after American Independence.¹⁰¹ It is widely accepted

⁹⁵ VA General Assembly, 1817, p. 12 and p. 71.

⁹⁶ Rockingham County Board of School Commissioners Records, 1835-1840, box 1. Rockingham County Circuit Court Archives.

⁹⁷ VA General Assembly 1830, Chapter XXXIX, Article 1-8, p. 107-108.

⁹⁸ "Indenture of Apprenticeship: Caty Baggs to George Shaver, 1805," Rockingham County Circuit Court Archive, Overseers of the Poor Collection, Indentures of Apprentice Series, Box 1; "Indenture of Apprenticeship: Presley to Adam Rader, 1809," Rockingham County Circuit Court Archive, Overseers of the Poor Collection, Indentures of Apprentice Series, Box 1; "Indenture of Apprenticeship: Maggy Rhinehart to Chrisly Bear, 1808," Rockingham County Circuit Court Archive, Overseers of the Poor Collection, Indentures of Apprentice Series, Box 1

⁹⁹ Berlin and Gutman, "Native and Immigrant, Free Men and Slave," p. 14.

¹⁰⁰ Examples of the servile occupations reserved for African American men and women can be found in 1850 Federal Census Schedule 1, p. 4. Morgan Holman-waiter, p. 17 John Triplett laborer, John Jones cake baker, 1850 Federal Census Schedule 3, pg. 5 Elizabeth Bozzel cake baker; 1860 Federal Census Schedule 1, p. 16 Susan Moore-washerwoman, p. 20 George Manser-house servant, Whitfield Shangler-house servant, Nancy Smith-house servant, p. 23 Lucy Gibson-washerwoman, Benjamin Holmes-farm laborer, Albert Bradford-farm laborer.

¹⁰¹ Property Tax Books for North West District and southeast District, 1845, Box VI, Rockingham County Circuit Court Archive.

by historians of the Early Republic that notions of independence, liberty, and freedom espoused during the American Revolution did result in the loosening of some restrictions placed on African Americans. Thus, the few African American semi-skilled artisans found in the records of Rockingham County are primarily products of such, and the employment of artisan African Americans certainly did not increase after the early 1800s.

Indentures of apprenticeship contracts provide further evidence of the restricting of trades and occupations in Rockingham County. Overwhelmingly, poor white children were apprenticed to learn trades such as blacksmith, cooper, tanner, carpenter, etc.¹⁰² While these were semi-skilled trades, they afforded a greater opportunity for economic independence and carried with them an air of superiority. Additionally, such trades required masters to provide tools and clothing at the end of the apprentice's term, in addition to freedom dues, which again carried greater promise in procuring economic success. On the other hand, African American and mixed-race children were almost always apprenticed out as "farmers" or domestic servants. Once again, not only were the occupations deemed servile and disgraceful, but the chance of economic independence was far less. While learning the trade of a farmer may at first seem like a promising occupation, it in all reality was likely a mechanism of using and abusing African American labor without the formal entitlement of slavery. As historian Charles Bolton explains in *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South*, the price of land continued to increase throughout the first half of the 1800s, especially in the South, as the commercialization of agriculture became more and more popular.¹⁰³ Because of this, land became increasingly difficult to attain, leaving poor whites and free African Americans little opportunity to purchase real estate. Most of the time, they could only rent land, working as tenant farmers. Thus, those African Americans who apprenticed as farmers may have been given to skills to produce, but because they had little to no access to owning land, these individuals were ultimately left to produce for someone else. They were left dependent in a society that increasingly valued independence.

Finally, the intersections of racial prejudice and perceptions of poverty in Antebellum Rockingham County are made evident in the restrictions of freedom and policing enforced on African Americans. In 1819, the Virginia General Assembly passed a law requiring overseers of the poor for each county to evaluate the condition of all free African Americans every three months. If it appeared they could not maintain subsistence for themselves; they were to be apprenticed out or removed from the locality.¹⁰⁴ No guidelines were provided for what constituted "subsistence," and such decisions were ultimately left up to the individual and their prejudices or impartiality. Rockingham County Court minute books record instances of overseers of the poor calling forth African American men and women to show cause for why their children should not be bound out. For those that could be tracked down, the majority of these cases resulted in the child(ren) removed and contracted out to a wealthy individual within the community.¹⁰⁵ While poor whites certainly had their children bound out (the sheer number of

¹⁰² Rockingham County Indentures of Apprenticeship, Overseers of the Poor records, Boxes 2-7, Rockingham County Circuit Court Archive.

¹⁰³ Bolton, p. 15.

¹⁰⁴ VA General Assembly, 1819, Chapter XXVI, Article I, p. 22-26.

¹⁰⁵ Rockingham County Circuit Court Minute Book No. 5 1802-1806, p. 112 dated Wednesday, June 22nd, 1803; p. 204 dated Tuesday, March 20th, 1804; p. 210 dated June 23rd, 1803; Rockingham County Circuit Court Minute Book No. 20 1839-1840 p. 241 dated October 19, 1840;

indentures of white children speaks to this), and some were likely bound out against the will of their parents. However, this same policing is not apparent for white families. No law was ever passed by the General Assembly, stipulating the same for poor whites. Furthermore, poor white parents may have more willingly apprenticed their children, as they knew under apprenticeship they would be afforded the basic necessities of life (food, clothing, lodging, education) and would have the opportunity to learn a skilled trade. Such speculation provides an answer as to why poor white children were bound out with such frequency while illustrating once again the “psychological” and “public wages” afforded to whites.

This precariousness of freedom, constant policing, and occupation restriction helped to further separate poor whites and blacks, and enforced notions of racial superiority, even those these two groups had greater commonality and interests than many poor whites and their middle-class counterparts. The laboring poor of 19th century Rockingham County could grasp whiteness as a means of responding to their fears of increased dependency and define themselves as independent, free men, when society may have dictated otherwise. Thus, poor whites did not merely receive or resist such racist ideas but embraced them, and at times, murderously acted upon them.¹⁰⁶ Evidence for this creation of poor white identity is slim, but several clues help to inform this hypothesis.

As mentioned previously, poor laborers often pooled their income and households together in order to secure a greater chance of survival. However, poor whites and poor African Americans rarely resided with one another. Of course, there are exceptions, but typically these exceptions consist of interracial couples and their families, rather than wholly white families and wholly black families living with one another. This separation suggests that even in their private lives, poor whites could not bring themselves to recognize the shared precarity between themselves and poor blacks and, rather, chose to distance themselves. Additionally, while it was not uncommon for free African American men to fill positions as laborers, poor whites seldom took on occupations such as a cook, barber, or domestic servant. This suggests that while free African Americans may have worked their way into occupations typically occupied by whites, poor whites actively resisted filling positions they deemed beneath them.¹⁰⁷ Finally, the frequency with which poor whites acted hostilely towards free and enslaved African Americans can be interpreted as manifestations of their resentment and fears. Moses Henton provides a suitable example.

On November 17th, 1852, Henton was brought to court on a *capias*. He had refused (or simply had not been able) to pay the fines from a case brought against him earlier in the year. According to court minute books, Henton had previously been charged and found guilty of selling a free person of color into slavery, and because of this, he was required to pay a fine of \$30. Henton was, by all definitions, a poor white and even recognized as such by the local community. The

¹⁰⁶ Roediger p. 10-12.

¹⁰⁷ 1850 and 1860 Federal Census, Schedules I and III provide information on the occupations of residents of Rockingham County. After going through each census, it is clear that poor white males in Rockingham County did not occupy positions associated with African Americans. Poor white women, on the other hand, did not maintain the same reservations when taking on occupations. Presumably, this is because women’s occupation opportunities were already circumscribed to a limited pool of potential jobs, and thus they could not be as selective. Both the 1850 and 1860 US Federal Census for Rockingham County are available at the Rockingham County Circuit Court Archive.

fine was eventually dismissed “on consideration of the distressed condition of the family of the defendant.” The court does not list the name of the individual sold into slavery, but presumably, they were of little economic standing. Rather than recognizing their similarities, Henton chose to exploit the of benefits of being a white man.¹⁰⁸

While the details of this case alone, do not prove that poor whites actively worked to define themselves against African Americans, both free and enslaved, it does suggest this poor white regarded himself, and his interests, as inherently white and racially superior. When considered in a greater context and with preceding evidence, it is not improbable such definition was an active endeavor taken on by the laboring and poor themselves of Rockingham County, more generally.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis attempts to make sense of the inner-workings of race, class, and gender in regard to poverty in the antebellum community of Rockingham County. When considering perceptions and collective identities, definitive claims are nearly impossible without direct confirmation from the groups themselves, and even then, one must consider whether or not this confirmation is to be taken at face value. Thus, I do not claim absolute authority in my analysis, and there are undoubtedly aberrations to the general pattern. However, more importantly, this examination sheds light on the complexity of historical subjects and how history often exists on a greyscale. Perceptions of poverty in Rockingham County do not overtly lean to one side or the other. There is evidence for middle class and wealthy individuals caring for the poor, as they would any member of their community, but there are also instances that suggest destitute individuals were viewed and treated with disdain and contempt. Yet, this difference in treatment often fell on distinctions of gender and race. Poor white men and women received relief in kind more frequently, and presumably, with greater ease than poor African American men and women. They also received greater access to education and economically stable occupations. These differences enabled poor whites to identify themselves as members of the white community and regard their interests as inherently white when in all reality, they often shared very similar economic situations with the free and enslaved African American population. Poor women, as a group of their own, seem to have been treated with greater scrutiny than poor white men. Because of new anxieties produced by the industrialization and modernization of society, women were expected to occupy minimal space in the “public sphere.” However, because of their poverty, poor women could not live up to such ideals. While these women challenged emerging social hierarchies, they seem to have been less of a concern for Rockingham County, which turned attention to poor women who also defied racial bias. Such constructions highlight the complicated entanglements of race, class, and gender in perceptions of the impoverished, how these perceptions informed their identities, and how the poor interacted with members outside and within their social group. They force us to consider at a greater depth the active endeavors of poor whites in antebellum communities and allow a more significant understanding of the messy reality of history.

¹⁰⁸ Rockingham County Circuit Court Minute Book No. 26, dated Wednesday, November 17th, 1852 p. 203.

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