

### Poor White Political Identity During Reconstruction (and Beyond)

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## Feature Essay

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**Edwards, Gary** *Poor White Political Identity During Reconstruction (and Beyond)*.

The 2016 Presidential election had many unexpected consequences and another that could be added to the list is renewed interest in a comparative historical perspective on the politics of poor white Americans. While this is not an essay about why many rural impoverished whites supported Donald Trump, it does begin with the reinforcing premise that the past always informs the present while the present often determines the questions we ask about the past. Recent and timely books by J.D. Vance and Nancy Isenberg, *Hillbilly Elegy* and *White Trash*, have respectively inspired more public introspection on the role of this class in our society. With that in mind, the political identity of contemporary poor white Americans has garnered greater attention. Thus placing this socio-economic group in the fullest historical context would seem to be a more relevant intellectual exercise than ever before.

Poor whites have long been the most difficult social class to study in Southern history. In the antebellum era they comprised a substantial percentage of the population but still left remarkably little evidence. During Reconstruction it could be argued that they were rendered even more mysterious as they were momentarily eclipsed by the new marginalized class of freedmen. Consequently the great political struggle in the postbellum era was the contest between Southern elites and recently emboldened political constituencies that impeded the return to an antebellum status quo. There is still much to learn about poor whites during Reconstruction but much of what we currently know is based on either plausibility or extrapolation from our knowledge of other groups. Situating poor whites within the narrative of broader political struggle is largely an intuitive endeavor. In light of this, poor white political identity may best be understood in an interpretative paradigm rooted in contingency. Specifically, their political expression was bound up in the contingent variables of their precarious survival much as it had been during the antebellum era.

Any discussion of poor white political identity in the nineteenth-century must first define them as a class and then offer some theory as to how such a marginalized group expressed their politics. As to definition, poor whites were the 20 to 30 percent of landless inhabitants from the antebellum era whose numbers increased during the postbellum economic collapse. But beyond the obvious variable of landlessness, it would be useful to invoke the binary framework employed by David Brown which divides this impoverished class between “vagabonds” and “aspirational yeomen.” These terms provide a self-evident meaning between truly marginal, sometimes criminal, poor whites and those who attempted to use the socio-economic system as it existed. Vagabonds generally lived on the fringe of formal political expression and often had not voted due to either crime or extensive mobility which left them unable to establish residency and vote with any consistency. Antebellum voter participation was generally above 70 percent and even higher for local contests although the unengaged segment of the electorate was most likely the poorest. Poor whites who aspired to join the yeomanry, however, were more likely to have aligned with the antebellum Whigs and later the Constitutional Unionists during secession. During the war itself, numerous studies have concluded that poor whites were no more than tepid southern nationalists as political identity devolved into those who either supported or opposed the Confederacy. It is also important to remember that the post-war period created some newly “poor” out of the antebellum yeomanry as farm tenancy spread across the region. It is likely that many of this group would have been old-style Jacksonian Democrats whose growing percentage within the ranks of impoverished make it even more difficult to categorize the political identity of poor whites overall. Consequently, the immediate postbellum political order offered no obvious ally for members of a burgeoning non-elite class destined to grow larger still but lacking in uniform political identifiers.<sup>1</sup>

If there was a uniform characteristic it was that poor white political identity was always tethered to race. This had been the case in the slave South before the Civil War and this remained essentially true after. Indeed, racial solidarity could be argued as the definitive thread that tied the antebellum and postbellum political identity of poor whites together. In the antebellum period politicians rallied southerners with impassioned diatribes on white liberty over black enslavement, during the postbellum period these condensed into the pithy slogan of a “white man’s government” but the ultimate goals always seemed the same. However, the hierarchy of race was never as rigid for poor whites as it was for

elites and this always represented a political wild card which presented new possibilities during Reconstruction and beyond. In the Old South poor whites often encountered slaves and free blacks in a clandestine social terrain of secret exchanges at the expense of the planter class. Such exchanges were rooted in a tacit understanding that planters controlled slaves and poor whites either directly or indirectly. However, these encounters were a double-edged blade of cooperation and contempt in which entrenched racism always gave poor whites the upper hand. The postbellum world offered the potential that poor whites and poor blacks might continue their contingent cooperation in new ways based on the evolving political status of the freedmen. However, elites could usually trump this racial wild card by pandering to poor white racism whenever expedient. Sufficient evidence of this can be found in the expressed views of antebellum poor whites such as those famously interviewed by Frederick Law Olmstead who reported in the 1850s that poor whites in the non-plantation regions were remarkably open to the idea of a policy of black emancipation if it was coupled with black expulsion. This forever placed poor whites at odds with planters as to the ultimate destiny of a black laboring class in a post-slave south. Yet it gave elites an angle from which to argue for poor whites to support racial solidarity as a bulwark against societal instability. Anecdotal evidence supports this idea as some studies have found that landless whites comprised about one-third of those convicted of racialized terrorism, roughly equal to the percentage of poor whites in the general population, during the height of federal prosecution of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, the best method for uncovering the inner motivations for such an underrepresented group may be through the creative interpretation of a cross section of the few poor whites who actually left significant documentation behind. One such evocative example from my own research could serve as a case in point—William Tapley Mays was a poor white hog driver and aspiring carpenter from Dyer County, Tennessee. A Constitutional Unionist in 1860, Mays was unprovoked by the existence of a Republican administration before or after the Civil War. Indeed by the late antebellum era he was already empathetic toward enslaved individuals, even tacitly acknowledging their personhood while nominally open to the notion of emancipation. But when his cousins and neighbors joined the secessionists he followed as a matter of contingent personal loyalty rather than ideology. He was a long-suffering but disgruntled Confederate who switched sides after his capture in 1865. Becoming a “galvanized Yankee” he served with distinction in Utah and returned to Dyer

County in 1866 where he slept with a gun by his bed for several years. But for the most part he lived a public existence among his kin and antebellum acquaintances although by the twentieth-century he had moved 50 miles east to a staunchly Unionist and now Republican area. Mays was remarkably pliable in his politics as he seemed willing to have accepted an independent Confederate nation even if it had comprised a sizeable free population of black landowners. Alongside them would have been an enlarged class of new yeomen, comprised of veterans such as himself, also endowed with lands presumably taken from the public domain. Mays was essentially comfortable with either the old Whig vision of squatter sovereignty or the new political platform of free soil abolitionism as long as it meant economic opportunity. However, this was completely antithetical to the Confederate vision of 1861 but also impossible in the Reconstruction South. Thus many poor whites probably passed through the long post-war era in a manner similar to Mays—willing to embrace dramatic changes within the antebellum hierarchies of race and class but unable to affect them in a tangible way.<sup>3</sup>

At the conclusion of Reconstruction the political identity of poor whites could be described as either dormant or perhaps in stasis, still awaiting the release of its fullest kinetic energy as the so-called Redeemers reshaped the New South. These included new laws which ended year-round hunting and economic changes spurred by the expansion of the southern railroad network. Consequently, poor whites lost their ability to earn even a meager subsistence through taking game and driving hogs. By the end of the nineteenth-century additional laws closed the open-range and effectively extinguished the last remnants of antebellum squatter culture. Poor whites either escaped to the West or resigned themselves to the lifestyle of farm tenants or company mill and mine workers. However, if we imagine the longest interpretive view of Reconstruction as a protracted post-war era, it is possible to comprehend the intermittent discharge of poor whites' political kinetic energy across the largest swath of time.

Ultimately, poor whites like William Mays and others remained ready to support interventionist Federal economic policies like the antebellum American System of the Whigs, postbellum land redistribution of the Radical Republicans, and eventually the reformist demands of bi-racial populism that sporadically appeared well into the twentieth-century. This culminated in one of the greatest political expressions ever formulated by impoverished whites, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, an extensive group of black and white sharecroppers who

were the ironic victims of the well-intentioned but misguided Federal attempt to help poor farmers via the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Arguably World War II and a prosperous post-war suburbanism offered rural poor whites a distraction through an idealized economic goal that at least appeared possible. But they were again rallied by elites with a renewed cry of a “white man’s government” albeit this time in reaction to the deconstruction of Jim Crow. Thus proving that poor whites could still be a political wild card but also diverted away from new identities by old slogans that compelled racial solidarity. Since that time an intermittently sputtering economy since the post-Vietnam era has arguably marginalized contemporary poor whites as much as any other group which brings us back to Vance and Isenberg. Thus the contemporary political identity of poor whites may evoke a consistent theme across 175 years. That is that their politics have long been dominated by the contingency of a precarious existence combined with the unusual choices of creating allies or enemies from the racial minorities within their midst. Running through it all is an undercurrent that is antithetical to elite southern conservatism as impoverished whites have often supported expansive federal power if it addressed the contingent politics of the moment.

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<sup>1</sup> David Brown, “A Vagabond’s Tale: Poor Whites, Herrenvolk Democracy, and the Value of Whiteness in the Late Antebellum South,” *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 79, no. 4 (November, 2013), 799-840.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Fitzgerald, *Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South*, (Ivan R. Dee: Chicago, 2007), 69.

<sup>3</sup> Gary T. Edwards, “Contingent Confederates: A Case Study in the Latent Unionism of a Poor White Soldier,” paper presented at the 82nd Southern Historical Association, St. Pete Beach, Florida, November 4, 2016