

CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS: LESSON 3: HANDOUT 1**“THE RICH MAN’S WAR AND THE POOR MAN’S FIGHT”: SOUTHERN POOR WHITES’ PERSPECTIVES ON THE CIVIL WAR¹**

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The Confederacy seceded and went to war to protect slavery. In these southern states, slave-ownership was fairly widespread. Thirty-one percent of families in the Confederacy owned slaves, and in some states the percentage was much higher. In Mississippi, for example, 49 percent of families owned slaves.² In order to fight the Civil War, however, Confederate leaders needed the support of both slaveholders and non-slaveholders.

During the Civil War, both the Union and the Confederacy spent a lot of time thinking about these non-slaveholding southerners. The wealthy planter class often looked down upon poor Whites, many of whom were uneducated and did not own land or slaves. Some poor Whites traded, gambled and drank with slaves, and planters feared that these men would take the side of enslaved people and form abolition societies. During the war, planters worried that these poor Whites might side with the Union and destroy the Confederacy from within.³

Union leaders, meanwhile, placed a lot of hope in these poor southerners. They viewed the southern Whites as two classes: the aristocratic plantation owners and the poor. They blamed the plantation owners for starting the war, and they believed that planters oppressed and ruled over the poor Whites. Union leaders hoped that poor southerners would side with the Union and help defeat the Confederacy.⁴

Union leaders adopted policies to win over these poor southern Whites. They raised money for poor Whites and distributed rations to thousands of men, women and children. They tried to organize poor Whites against the planter class to further dissolve the planters’ power. They also established schools to help lift poor southerners out of poverty and reform the South’s “backward social system.”

Some poor Whites did remain loyal to the Union. About 100,000 men from Confederate states served in the Union army, and others worked as spies and scouts for the

¹ Adapted from Stephen V. Ash. “Poor Whites in the Occupied South, 1861-1865,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 57, no. 1 (February 1991), 39-62.

² “Ratio of Slaveholders to Families, (1860), Nineteenth Century Documents Projects, Furman University, <http://history.furman.edu/~benson/docs/shfam60.htm>.

³ For a compelling analysis of the ways Confederate and Union leaders viewed the small number of white Unionists in the Deep South, see Clayton Butler, “True Blue: White Unionists in the Deep South during the Civil War and Reconstruction, 1860-1880,” PhD Dissertation, University of Virginia, 2020.

⁴ Elizabeth R. Varon, *Armies of Deliverance: A New History of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Union army.⁵ They destroyed Confederate property—blowing up bridges, tearing apart railroads and burning down barns and supply depots. Other poor Whites wanted to stay out of the war altogether. They deserted from the Confederate army or hid in the mountains to avoid the draft. These individuals resented plantation owners for having so much power and money, and they viewed the Civil War as “the rich man’s war and the poor man’s fight.” In other words, they believed that poor men were fighting on the front lines of the war while planters remained safely at home. As one southerner explained

I got tired of fighting for a lot of old Rich Planters...Here I was fighting to save their negroes and property and them remaining at home, living in all the luxuries of life, and if a poor soldier went to get anything from them they would charge him.⁶

The overwhelming majority of poor Whites, however, supported slavery and remained loyal to the Confederacy. By one estimate, 93 percent of military-age men in Virginia either served in the Confederate army or worked in a war-related job.⁷ Poor Whites believed that Black people were inferior to White people, and they believed that slavery provided safety and stability to their society. As one historian argued, “Non-slaveholding whites believed in the necessity of slavery because they lived in a bi-racial society, which they assumed would explode in race war without slavery.” In 1860, South Carolina preacher James C. Furman warned that, if slavery ended,

Then every negro in South Carolina, and in every other Southern State, will be his own master; nay, more than that, will be the equal of every one of you. If you are tame enough to submit, Abolition[ist] preachers will be at hand to consummate the marriage of your daughters to black husbands!⁸

Racist arguments like this persuaded many poor Whites to support secession and side with the Confederacy. Between 750,000 and 850,000 men fought for the Confederacy, and at least 260,000 Confederate soldiers died in the war.⁹ Their support for the Confederacy only grew stronger as Union armies marched into the South. Many poor Whites held onto this prejudice even if it meant that they suffered as a result. In 1864, for example, a New England missionary started a school in Jacksonville, Florida, that was open to White and Black students. Twenty-nine White students and seventeen Black students enrolled.

⁵ Richard Nelson Current, *Lincoln’s Loyalists: Union Soldiers from the Confederacy* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992).

⁶ Stephen V. Ash, *When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 183.

⁷ William Blair, *Virginia’s Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861-1865* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 125.

⁸ James C. Furman et al., “Letter to the Citizens of the Greenville District,” *The Southern Enterprise*, 22 November 1860, Nineteenth Century Documents Project, <http://history.furman.edu/~benenson/docs/scgese112260.htm>.

⁹ Gary W. Gallagher, *The Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism, and Military Strategy Could Not Stave Off Defeat* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), 28.

White parents began withdrawing their students from the school almost immediately. They would rather their children not receive an education at all than have them attend school with Black children.¹⁰ The end of the Civil War brought an end to slavery, but many poor White southerners still held onto the belief that they were superior to Black people. Some believe that if they had joined forces with Black freedmen, they may have been able to secure better education, better living conditions and better jobs.

¹⁰ Gerald Schwarts, "An Integrated Free School in Civil War Florida," *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Oct. 1982), 155-161.