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from Making the “White Man’s Country” White:
Race, Slavery, and State-Building in the Jacksonian
South [1999]

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The coming of racial modernity in the South, which by the 1830s held more than ninety percent of the nation’s African Americans and virtually all its slaves, looms as an especially inviting area of inquiry. Moreover, as scholars have explored “whiteness” as a national phenomena rather than as the source of southern exceptionalism, they have implicitly challenged southern historians to review and perhaps recast their understanding of precisely how the Old South became a white man’s country. In response to these twin challenges, this essay will attempt to explain the triumph of racial modernity in the South of the 1830s by focusing on the political process through which race or “whiteness” became codified, formally and informally, as the defining characteristic of antebellum southern society. Put differently, it will describe how shapers of the Old South’s Jacksonian political tradition ventured to make what U. B. Phillips later called “the white man’s country” white.

A peculiar combination of economic circumstance and political ideology shaped the Jacksonian South’s reconsideration of race and slavery. Contrasting subregional political economies, together with patterns of racial demography associated with these different political economies, ensured that questions relating to slavery and race were framed in different ways in different parts of the South. Central among these many internal variations in the Old South’s political economy lay the growing contrast between the Upper South and the Lower South. Between 1800 and 1830, much of the Lower South swirled into the vortex of an economic transformation that Ira Berlin has aptly labeled the “cotton revolution.” The “cotton revolution” pulled slavery and plantation agriculture from its comparatively limited tidewater and alluvial strongholds and spread them across a vast plain of black and brown loam soils and through lush river valleys that became the Old South’s rich Black Belt. It also promoted staple growing among the region’s yeomen and helped spur the expansion of the cash economy in the red clay upland portions of the Old South. The process of cultivating cotton and complementary foodstuffs required

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south

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steady attention for much of the growing season, making slave labor, with its high ratio of fixed to marginal costs, a highly profitable system. To a large extent, the cotton revolution transformed the Lower South into a true slaveholding region rather than a region characterized by important slaveholding enclaves known for their production of rice, sugar, and sea-island cotton. By doing so, it accelerated the movement of population, both slave and free, from long-settled regions to the frontier of the Old Southwest.

In the Upper South, however, during the same three decades, the once dominant staple, tobacco, whose success had sustained first Chesapeake and later Piedmont demand for slave labor, fell into comparative decline. Alternative cash crops, including grains such as wheat and oats, emerged, but they required substantially less labor than tobacco, except during harvest. With sharp peaks and valleys in the demand for labor, grain cultivation rendered slavery, with its high fixed costs for labor, inefficient and financially unattractive. Thus, although some areas within the Upper South remained heavily dependent on slave labor, the future prospects for the region's slave-labor economy appeared problematic.

By the early 1830s, an ominous antislavery challenge to the slaveholding social order of both the Upper and Lower South appeared from several different quarters. In 1827 the American Colonization Society first requested public funds from Congress; two years later, militant free black David Walker published an appeal for slaves to rebel against their masters; and in 1831, William Lloyd Garrison ushered in a new era of abolition propaganda with *The Liberator*, a publication dedicated to "immediate" emancipation and effusive in its moral chastisement of slaveholders. But no event focused southern attention on slavery and related issues as intensely as did the bloody if ultimately unsuccessful slave uprising led by Nat Turner in August 1831. Turner's rampage across a small swath of Virginia's lower Tidewater spread fear, rumor, and recrimination across the Old Dominion and sent waves of anxiety through the white population in other areas of the South. . . .

The timing and particular conjunction of these events prompted not simply a short-term return of vigilance against slave rebellion, but also serious reconsideration of public policy toward slavery and the region's free black population precisely at the moment when mounting pressure from white egalitarians spurred most southern states to consider sweeping democratic revision of their existing state constitutions, thus giving southern constitution makers a chance to write a new racial order into fundamental law at their early convenience.

The Jacksonian South's political discussion of race and slavery revealed a variety of racial attitudes and ideologies ranging from exclusion and marginalization at one end of the spectrum to complete subordination of African Americans at the other end, with a bewildering array of selectively cobbled together variations on either the exclusion or the subordination themes, or both, lying in between. Full-voiced advocates of exclusion sought either to remove African Americans from southern society altogether, or,

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more realistically, minimize the role of blacks, slave and free, in the civic, social, and economic life of the South, much as had been done in northern society following the postrevolutionary emancipations. To implement their strategy, southern exclusionists advocated pushing free blacks further toward the margins of society and taking some cautious first steps toward putting slavery on the road to ultimate extinction. Thus they favored colonization because it reduced the free black population in the near term and established a working mechanism to facilitate gradual emancipation on a larger scale in the future. In essence, exclusionists wanted to “whiten” their society by reducing the size and diminishing the importance of the region’s African-American population.

In contrast, champions of subordination recognized that the southern staple economy depended so heavily on slave labor that the region could not thrive without it. Subordinationists accepted racially justified slavery as a necessary labor system, and some argued affirmatively that the region’s reliance on slaves for menial labor strengthened the virtues of independence and equality among whites. Viewing slavery as at least essential, arguably beneficial, and, in all likelihood perpetual, subordinationists sought to render white dominance of blacks as complete and thorough as possible.*

But if the ideological poles of the southern Jacksonian debate over race and slavery seemed well-defined, the actual terms and issues of the discussions varied widely across the region. In the Upper South, the debate occasionally focused on the future of slavery itself, and almost without exception, addressed the problematic role free blacks played in a slaveholding society. As a whole, the Upper South remained committed to a conception of slavery as a necessary (but possibly temporary) evil — an evil that could be at odds with the ideals of white independence and equality over the long term. Thus the arguments over race in the Upper South often centered on how the region might “whiten” itself, either through gradual emancipation and colonization of slaves, the colonization of free blacks, a gradual shift to free white labor facilitated by the sale of slaves to the cotton growing areas of the Deep South, or some combination of these approaches. By contrast, in a heuristic “Middle South” of Tennessee and North Carolina, even though few saw slavery as a positive good, sentiment favoring emancipation on any terms nevertheless declined. In these states, the discussion of race centered on whether or not free people of color should have a political voice. In the Middle South, Whiggish

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*My choice of terms requires some clarification. I have used the term “exclusion” to refer to the idea that African Americans, whether slave or free, should be either removed from American society or, failing that, pushed to its social, political, and economic margins. Thus it was an ideology of exclusion and/or marginalization. I have used the term “subordination” to refer to the idea that slaves were simply too numerous and their labor too valuable to the South to consider exclusion a viable option. Thus long-term southern dependence on slave labor must be accepted and measures taken to guarantee white domination and black subordination in a biracial, slaveholding society in which slavery was justified largely on racial grounds. Clearly exclusionists saw marginalization as a way of subordinating blacks who remained in their society, and just as clearly subordinationists wanted to exclude both slaves and free blacks from the realm of political and social equality.

paternalists defended the idea of promoting uplift and respectability among free blacks, while subordinationists championed disfranchisement.

In the Lower South, the case for slavery as a positive good remained in its infancy at the beginning of the Jacksonian era, and some of the peculiar institution's defenders still called it a necessary evil. But the "evils" of slavery were less and less often proclaimed openly, and public policy treated slavery as if it were a permanent institution, or one likely to thrive for as long as white southerners could imagine. Indeed, most Lower South political leaders considered slavery essential to the region's staple economy, which, despite fits and starts in the international market and vulnerability to unpredictable credit crunches, remained the bellwether of the region's prosperity. In the cotton South, the Jacksonian debate over race centered more on the prevention of insurrections, tighter regulation or removal of free blacks, and the desirability of regulating or even eliminating the interstate slave trade. Together, these three subregional debates constituted the larger Jacksonian South's attempt to define "racial modernity" and render it tangible in their political arrangements.

Upper South sentiment in favor of gradual emancipation, though always conditional, retained significant strength throughout the Jacksonian era. In the pensive months following Nat Turner's rebellion in the late summer of 1831, Virginia actively reconsidered its policy toward slavery and the free black population within its borders. Long time advocates of both gradual emancipation and colonization found full voice. Virginian John Marshall, the venerable Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, believed that the "removal of our free colored population" had emerged as a "common object" in postinsurrection Virginia and expressed a fervent hope that the legislature would seize upon "the excitement produced by the late insurrection" to pass sweeping legislation facilitating colonization. . . .

Arguing an exclusionist position, Virginia's critics of slavery generally cited the harm the institution inflicted on white society, whether in retarding individual opportunity for ordinary whites, dragging the whole society down in comparison with the dynamic free labor society further north, or simply exposing whites to the horrors of insurrection and perhaps racial warfare. Virginia exclusionists believed that slavery bred personal arrogance and economic backwardness, and hindered the advancement of whites. During a heated debate over the issue in the Virginia House of Delegates 1831-32 session, Shenandoah Valley representative Samuel McDowell Moore blamed slavery for demoralizing the state's poorer whites, who, he insisted, viewed labor "as a mask of servitude." Another Valley delegate, Charles J. Faulkner, echoed Moore's sentiments, explaining that the "independent yeomanry" west of the Blue Ridge feared losing its vitality to the "slothful and degraded African." Slaveholder and colonization advocate Thomas Marshall carried the curse of blackness argument even further, contending that both slavery and a large free black population "banishes the yeomanry of the country . . . until the whole country will be inundated by one black wave, covering its whole extent, with a few white faces here and there floating on the surface."

As a rule, proslavery Virginians admitted the evils of the institution but argued that, for all its faults, slavery remained essential for maintaining racial control and ensuring the availability of an adequate agricultural labor supply. . . . Amid rumblings from Southside slaveholders about separation from the antislavery western portion of the state, the 1832 Virginia legislature rejected immediate emancipation as “inexpedient” by a vote of 73 to 58, but they endorsed the idea of emancipation at some undetermined future time by a vote of 67 to 60.

After the legislative debate concluded, Thomas R. Dew, a young professor at William and Mary College, denounced “every plan of emancipation and deportation” that the legislature had considered as “utterly impracticable.” Yet Dew predicted that slavery was headed toward “ultimate extinction” through the decline of tobacco as a staple and the steady flow of slaves to the newer cotton states of the Southwest. As slavery waned, Dew envisioned a new type of economic development for Virginia, driven by transportation improvements and the growth of towns, attracting “capitalists and free labourers of the north,” and producing the consequent rise of manufacturing. Dew also believed that, despite their post-Southampton hesitancy, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana would open their borders to additional slave labor and serve as an “absorbent” for Virginia’s “excess” slave population. Focusing on race as the basis of slavery in Virginia, Dew insisted that emancipation without removal was unthinkable since white society could neither absorb nor uplift a free colored population. “[T]he emancipated black carries a mark which no time can erase,” Dew maintained; “he forever wears the indelible symbol of his inferior condition: the Ethiopian can not change his skin, nor the Leopard his spots.” The young Virginia ideologist nimbly advanced a market-driven exclusionist argument for noninterference with slavery, emphasizing racial differences as permanent and insurmountable obstacles to the successful uplift of blacks, whether slave or free.

Countering Dew, American Colonization Society supporter Jesse Burton Harrison, a native Virginian who moved to New Orleans to further his legal career, warned against the continued presence of “a distinct race of people within our bosom . . . soon to be more numerous than ourselves, exposed to every temptation . . . to become our deadliest foe.” Also an exclusionist, Harrison admitted that his concerns about slavery were “founded but little on the miseries of the blacks” but instead “almost exclusively to the injuries slavery inflicts on the whites.” Slavery degraded labor, Harrison contended, and created among whites “a disposition to look on all manual labor as menial and degrading.” Slavery slowed the growth of manufacturing by retarding the “rearing of a large class of skillful mechanics.” Slavery also discouraged immigration. With its slave-based staple economy stagnant, Virginia lagged behind much of the nation in wealth and population growth, and, Harrison insisted, as Virginia grew “blacker” such economic backwardness would only worsen. . . .

In sum, the Jacksonian debate over slavery and race in the Upper South raged between, on the one hand, committed exclusionists who lacked the political muscle they needed to succeed, and on the other, apologetic but

uncompromising subordinationists. Given the Upper South's large slave population, exclusion loomed a daunting task, and even its advocates recognized that it could be accomplished only gradually and with respect for the rights (including financial compensation) of slaveholders. But the putative defenders of slavery in the Upper South, tentative subordinationists if subordinationists at all, accepted many of the basic propositions advanced by the exclusionists. . . . Though heated at times, the Jacksonian era debate over slavery and the status of free blacks yielded little more than a reluctant acceptance of the status quo in the Upper South.

By contrast, few in the Lower South doubted that slavery was anything but the single best passport to wealth and prosperity. Virtually no public figure in the Lower South seriously advocated or favored emancipation of any kind, including gradual and fully compensated emancipation. Even though many slaveholders and Jacksonian politicians in the Lower South still acknowledged that slavery was an evil, proposals for colonization of free blacks and small numbers of slaves voluntarily manumitted by their masters were crafted chiefly to strengthen the institution and better maintain public safety rather than as a modest first step toward a more sweeping emancipation. Ironically, exclusion as an ideology of racial control enjoyed currency in the Lower South during the Jacksonian era but as an approach to the "problem" of the region's substantial Native-American population. . . . A large majority of whites in the Lower South showed a singular determination to guarantee that their "white man's country" was not red, even when tribes like the Cherokees appeared to be strong supporters of slavery. . . .

[The] prolonged controversy over the slave trade revealed the fundamental contradictions and concerns of the cotton South during the Jacksonian era. Even as many Lower South whites yearned for enough slaves to bring cotton riches to themselves and their fellow citizens, they also fretted over the drain of capital to the Upper South and, more importantly, over the potential dangers of a large black population. As a result, they pondered ways to modulate their region's ever-volatile racial demographics. Within the emerging subordinationist consensus in the Lower South remained very substantial room for maneuver and internal disagreement; only external challenge inspired unified denunciation.

If the debate in the Upper South indicated that the momentum given the exclusion argument by the circumstances of the early 1830s could not overcome the power of entrenched proslavery interests, the experience of the Lower South suggested that even where subordination reigned, hegemonic issues related to slavery and race still held significant divisive potential, a potential that both Jacksonian era parties in the region feared and manipulated over the next two decades. But in the Middle South, exclusionists and subordinationists of varying stripes debated an issue central to defining the relationship of race and citizenship: the question of free black suffrage.

A vigorous debate erupted over free black voting at the Tennessee constitutional convention of 1834. Tennessee's original 1796 constitution granted the suffrage to all "freemen" who met minimal freehold or residency requirements, and thus permitted a rather small number of free blacks who

were freeholders or long time residents of a particular county to vote. In 1834, however, egalitarian reformers who pushed hard for the extension of suffrage to all whites also complained bitterly about the state's practice of allowing propertied free black men, otherwise considered "outside the social compact," to vote. Contending that white Tennesseans "reprobate and abhor" black voting, western delegate G. W. L. Marr declared that the "political fabric of Tennessee denied citizenship to all people of color, slave or free," and argued that the "supposed claim" of free blacks "to exercise the great right of free suffrage" should be "prohibited." Marr insisted that the United States Constitution's phrase "We, the People" meant "we the free white people of the United States and the free white people only." . . . Ultimately . . . the convention disfranchised all free blacks, including freeholders, by a vote of 33 to 23.

The question of voting rights for free blacks proved even more contentious when debated at North Carolina's constitutional convention of 1835. The use of the term "freeman" in the suffrage clause of North Carolina's constitution of 1776 opened the door to voting rights for free blacks who met the constitution's freehold or taxpaying requirements. Eligible free blacks voted regularly and with comparatively little controversy in most locales during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. When the convention met in Raleigh in June 1835, however, James Bryan of Carteret County led a charge for the disfranchisement of free blacks, baldly declaring that the United States was "a nation of white people — its offices, honors, dignities, and privileges, are alone open to, and to be enjoyed by, the white people." Nathaniel Macon, the venerable former speaker of the United States House, agreed, insisting that free blacks were "no part of the then political family" in 1776 and that free black suffrage in North Carolina rested on a flawed interpretation of the state's old constitution. Treading carefully around the state's racial sensibilities, defenders of free black suffrage argued that respectable free blacks served as a valuable buffer between whites and slaves. . . . Presenting a consistent Whig ideology for protecting property and promoting uplift, jurist William Gaston, the most respected figure at the convention other than Macon, offered an eloquent defense of free black suffrage. "Let them know they are a part of the body politic," Gaston pleaded, "and they will feel an attachment to the form of government and have a fixed interest in the prosperity of the community, and will exercise an important influence over the slaves." Judge Joseph Daniel of Halifax, an eastern district with the largest free black population in the state, proposed raising the property and taxpaying requirement for free-black voting to a freehold of \$250. Such a substantial property requirement would allow "all colored men of good character and industrious habits" to vote and thus "conciliate the most respectable portion of the colored population" by giving them "a standing distinct from the slave population." . . . Prominent Whig planter John Morehead also warned that disfranchising free blacks might "close the door entirely against this unfortunate class of our population," and hence encourage them to "light up the torch of commotion among our slaves."

Leading a spirited attack on the "respectability" argument advanced by Daniel, Gaston, and Morehead, eastern delegate Jesse Wilson opposed any compromise based on property-holding or character in favor of a sweeping disfranchisement of all free blacks. "Color is a barrier which ought not to be broken between the classes," Wilson argued. "If you make it your business to elevate the condition of the blacks," he contended, "in the same proportion . . . you degrade that of poorer whites." Piedmont delegate Hugh McQueen concurred, arguing that "white portion of the population of this country constitutes the proper depository of political power" and complaining that "the exercise of the right of suffrage by free blacks was repugnant to public feeling in the State."

After vigorous debate, the North Carolina convention approved a constitutional provision depriving all free persons of color by the relatively narrow margin of 67-62. A strong sectional component appeared in the voting. Seventeen of the twenty-five counties whose delegates voted against disfranchisement lay in the Piedmont and mountain regions, while nineteen of the twenty-six counties whose delegates voted entirely in favor of disfranchisement lay in the heavily slaveholding East. There was also a crude relationship between party alignment and convention votes on the black disfranchisement. The heavily Whig Piedmont and mountain regions tended to oppose disfranchisement and the generally Democratic East tended to favor it. With the constitutional decisions of Tennessee and North Carolina in 1834 and 1835, the last vestiges of political rights for people of color disappeared from all parts of the future Confederacy. The southern body politic had become an exclusively white preserve. . . .

In sum, racial modernism in the Jacksonian South wore several faces, all of them forbidding to blacks and supportive of white supremacy in some form. In nearly all of its southern guises, however, racial modernism viewed race as biologically determined and looked no further than skin color for the determination of racial categories. Except for paternalists increasingly on the defensive, character, reputation, and property made less difference than skin color in the public life of the Old South. Some diehard conservatives, like Virginia's William Colquhoun, openly scoffed at the supposed triumph of such *herrenvolk* egalitarianism, ridiculing the notion that the "mere animal man, because he happens to wear a white skin" was entitled to full and exclusive privileges of citizenship. But across the Jacksonian South as a whole, such occasional conservative laments proved no match for the racial *esprit* and entitlement expressed and claimed in a young Mississippian's enthusiastic declaration upon coming of age that he was "free, white, and twenty-one."

Thus in the Jacksonian South, as in the rest of Jacksonian America, the reconsideration of race produced an accommodation that enshrined whiteness as the standard measure of citizenship and racial entitlement. Proof of personal independence and public virtue deemed essential to republican citizenship no longer rested in the ownership of productive property, but instead hinged simply on "whiteness." To be sure, shared racism hardly united the Jacksonian South any more than it united the Jacksonian North. In the Upper South, belief in the permanent racial inferiority of

nonwhites created a strong and continuing preference for racial exclusion, for a “whiter” society, one less dependent on slavery and characterized by a dwindling black population. Whites in the Lower South generally accepted slavery as an institution essential to the region’s continued prosperity and agreed that the thorough subordination of blacks best served their society’s interests. But even the cotton South’s apparent consensus left considerable room for disagreement among whites over the status of free blacks, the regulation of the domestic slave trade, and the preferred racial balance of the population.

Yet despite these on-going disagreements, the Old South’s contested decisions to emphasize whiteness at the expense of wealth, property, and character, choices most explicitly debated in the Middle South, revealed an important aspect of the great accommodation that held planter and plain folk in delicate political equipoise throughout the late antebellum era. However scornful of such claims in private, the slaveholding elite had to accept white equality, the spirit of *herrenvolk* democracy, in the public realm to ensure white solidarity in the coming stand against antislavery. Reluctant egalitarians to be sure, perhaps even hypocritical ones, the slaveholding elite of the Old South accepted the public creed of white equality as the price of broad support for slavery. At the same time, common whites found in the privileges of whiteness a social entitlement and a source of leverage they could employ with great effect in political debate. Lacking wealth but boasting numbers, white egalitarians used the ideological imperative of whiteness to wrest meaningful political concessions, if not outright control, from wealthy elites at key moments. Put another way, common whites in the Jacksonian South defined their whiteness as “property,” as evidence of the requisite independence and virtue, and thus forged a southern *herrenvolk* republicanism, much in the same way that artisans and journeymen defined their skill as a sort of surrogate property and used it to forge artisanal republicanism in the urban North during the same era. In turn, by accepting, even tacitly, the legitimacy of slavery and the material inequalities it sustained, white egalitarians left the wealth and economic power of the planter elite secure.

Thus the triumph of whiteness allocated valuable privileges, including voting and legal equality, solely on the basis of skin color, or at least on cultural perceptions and definitions of skin color, leaving race rather than class the key social divide in the public realm. And that sense of white racial entitlement has proven tenacious indeed, surviving not only the collapse of slavery in the 1860s, but also (albeit in altered and sometimes disguised form) the dismantling of segregation a century later. By linking “whiteness” so closely to the prerogatives and rights of citizenship and political participation, the Jacksonian construction of racial modernity defined not merely the South but the entire American nation-state as a “white man’s country.” Thus racial modernity shaped a powerful national self-definition which would grudgingly sacrifice its gender dimension well before the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century mounted a successful challenge to the claims for “whiteness” that lay at its very core.