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978-1-107-01337-7 - Freedom in a Slave Society: Stories from the Antebellum South

Johanna Nicol Shields

Excerpt

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## I

## Regarding a “Weird Utopia”

A weird Utopia drew me on,  
 To rend the most sublime connection,  
 That ever civil man had known.

“Proem,” Alexander Meek

In 1865, one of the rising South’s best-known poets, Alexander Meek, lamented the mistakes he and his fellow writers had made before the Civil War. In promoting a “weird Utopia” – a slave society that would surpass the United States in freedom’s perfections – they had made an error of monumental proportions. Meek had been an influential politician, which was not unusual among antebellum Alabama’s writers. As a member of his state’s contingent at the 1860 Democratic national convention in Charleston, he had walked out when northern delegates failed to meet southern demands, and this turned out to be a fateful step in the path to secession and war.<sup>1</sup> Unlike many other Confederates, Meek regretted that he had ever advanced utopian notions about his society. Yet, more or less, he had.

“Weird Utopia,” is, at first glance, a jarring image for a South that seems weird enough but hardly utopian. Utopias construct a new reality, and Meek’s particular utopia had a short life, at best, so it has been easily misunderstood. He believed, however, that it had promised a free and progressive society for white citizens, alongside black slavery. This possibility seemed most alluring in the towns of the Southwest, places in Alabama like Tuscaloosa and Mobile, where Meek lived. In recent years, historians have explored the developments that moved American slave society in modern directions, and they have demonstrated that southerners responded thoughtfully to the crosscurrents of tradition and modernity that characterized Europe in the nineteenth century. To date, however, few historians have described the sudden advent of modern life

<sup>1</sup> The phrase appears in a rough draft of a poem that was never published; “Proem,” in A. B. Meek Papers, DUL. The draft is undated but was written between the end of the war and Meek’s death in 1865.

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in the western South; thus this chapter summarizes those features that mattered most to writers like Meek.

It also summarizes the conception of freedom that propelled a weirdly modernizing society toward conflict. Meek and his friends thought liberty a defining condition of everyday existence, and ideas about it appeared everywhere in their writing. As Joseph Baldwin put it in *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi*, the “law of liberty” constantly “refreshes and vivifies and vitalizes thought and gives freedom, range and energy to action.”<sup>2</sup> Clearly, Baldwin did not think that this powerful “law of liberty” merely meant the freedom to own slaves, as some critics asserted. He and his literary compatriots shared with other Americans and Europeans an ancient philosophical tradition in which the very idea of freedom hinged on its apparent opposite, slavery.<sup>3</sup> But they brought distinctly modern ideas about human nature and society to this tradition.

Utterly convinced that their society was the best the world had known, Alabama’s writers shared with other Americans a faith in progress shaped by freedom. In 1860, therefore, they could not believe that Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party were honest when they claimed that ordinary white southerners were made less than free by the existence of slavery. In her vehemently Confederate novel *Macaria*, Augusta Evans had one heroine proclaim: “I am a free-born American, thank God.”<sup>4</sup> And Evans believed her statement described all white southerners. Not all of Alabama’s writers were as militant as Evans or as utopian as Meek, but they shared a vision for the rising South that rested on individual freedom – for one race. Weird or not, that vision had empirical foundations, to which this chapter now turns.

#### THE PROMISE OF A RISING SOUTH

Profound historical changes lay beneath the idea of freedom in the rising South, and they related Alabama’s townspeople to other Americans. First, a booming economy bred tremendous excitement about the future. Second, economic changes spurred the rapid ascent of the middle class. Third, a dramatically expanding print culture gave these writers and other educated people fresh opportunities. Without these changes, which occurred in the forty-year period between statehood and the Civil War, Meek’s “weird Utopia” would never have been conceived.

<sup>2</sup> *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi: A Series of Sketches*, intro. by James Justus (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987, c. 1853), 229.

<sup>3</sup> The ancient lineage was brilliantly explored by Orlando Patterson in *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991) and in other of his works, but it has also been a major theme in the influential works of David Brion Davis, beginning with *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966).

<sup>4</sup> *Macaria, or, Altars of Sacrifice*, ed. with intro. by Drew Gilpin Faust (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992, c. 1864), 200.

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The idea of a rising South grew, first, when economic changes produced a forward-looking mentality in the midst of a slave society. Alabama’s writers spoke for those people who believed that their civilization would share equally in a prosperous American future. Although such hopes lived elsewhere in the South, and in much of the North, they were very strong within the town-dwelling minority in Alabama. The state was the epicenter of the changing Southwest because, there, territorial expansion, massive shifts in the transatlantic economy, and huge demographic movements had radically altered the landscape in a few decades. Informed by science, Augusta Evans imagined sentient beings on other planets in a universe millions of years old, and she expected endless change. To the beneficiaries of a modernizing Alabama, almost anything seemed possible.<sup>5</sup>

The Old Southwest emerged from an extraordinarily rapid appropriation of land. Although the United States acquired much of the trans-Appalachian region at the end of the Revolution, it did not gain the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, and growth was stymied by continuing conflict among Europeans and Native Americans. Then, in 1803, President Thomas Jefferson bought Louisiana, which held New Orleans and a large, undefined area to its west. Soon, aggressive southwesterners seized the central Gulf coast. Following a preemptive invasion by General Andrew Jackson, an 1819 treaty with Spain added East Florida (the present state) and drew the western boundary of the Louisiana Purchase. In its first forty years, the nation had gained an inland empire that extended to the Rocky Mountains. Within it, a Black Belt, named for its fertile soils, crossed from western Georgia through central Alabama into Mississippi. Lured by “Alabama fever,” white settlers poured in. Many brought slaves or bought them from interstate traders. By 1840, there were 590,756 residents of Alabama, 43 percent of them slaves.<sup>6</sup> Most of the writers discussed in this book migrated alone or came with families between the

<sup>5</sup> An illuminating overview of how differently modernization affected various parts of the South is in William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion. Vol. 1, Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), “Part I: A Swing around the Southern Circle.” Daniel S. Dupre emphasizes that conflicting conceptions of growth marked northern Alabama’s early settlers in *Transforming the Cotton Frontier: Madison County, Alabama, 1800–1840* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997). J. Mills Thornton, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977) summarizes modernization in the late antebellum period, with an emphasis on the political consequences. Evans’s comments on life on other planets are in *Macaria*, 179. The best one-volume history of the state is William Warren Rogers et al., *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994). A readable study of the period that emphasizes the optimistic spirit is Daniel Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise: America, 1815–1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> A recent analysis of these developments is Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). Unless otherwise noted, census data here and elsewhere are taken from the wonderfully helpful Historical Census Browser of the University of Virginia Alderman Library at <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu>.

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organization of the Mississippi Territory in 1804 and 1837, when a depression interrupted the flow. The spirit of the boom marked their thought.

The writers of the rising South claimed that its white inhabitants carved it suddenly from a wilderness. But, like Abraham Lincoln's Illinois, which entered the Union at about the same time, Alabama had been home to Native Americans who fiercely resisted white encroachment. During the War of 1812, Jackson broke the back of the powerful Creek confederation at Horseshoe Bend. Sporadic wars and treaties produced the removal of most of the Indians in the 1830s. The last of Alabama's Indian wars, the Creek War of 1836, occurred just four years after the Black Hawk War in which Lincoln participated. Whites claimed that Native Americans could not effectively use land, although farming Indians lived among them. While sometimes regretting the bloody conquest, these authors were mesmerized by the progress of those who reaped its rewards.<sup>7</sup>

Crucially, they expected progress to continue unabated. The forces that created the rising South originated in the most modern sectors of the world, for England's textile industries, and soon American ones as well, created an insatiable demand for cotton. By the 1820s, newly invented steamboats began moving crops. Much of the lower Southwest was drained by big rivers that flowed together across the Black Belt and into Mobile Bay. In northern Alabama, the Tennessee River linked fertile valley soils to the upper South. Local entrepreneurs demanded transportation – first roads, then railroads – but, ironically, navigable rivers and proximity to the Gulf let the Southwest lag behind the Northwest in improvements. Yet scientists mapped abundant coal and iron deposits in north-central Alabama, and famous British geologist Sir Charles Lyell, who visited in 1842, publicized them internationally. By the 1850s, the state planned railroads to join lower Alabama to the Tennessee, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers. With splendid resources, Alabama's prospects fed excitement about change that was unusual in older slave societies.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Jackson's role in the acquisition of the Southwest is told in Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767–1821* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). Although there are numerous histories of the early encounters between white settlers and Native Americans in Alabama, none is as evocative as the account for Lincoln's Sangamon County in the opening chapters of John Mack Faragher's *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). As I show in Chapter 6, Alabama's writers helped establish the historical tradition that focused on white conquests and accomplishments.

<sup>8</sup> The changes in the national economy are detailed in Charles Grier Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), but scholars disagree about how much the Deep South was affected. An account that emphasizes the fundamental economic differences between North and South is John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*, Vol. 1, *Commerce and Compromise, 1820–1850*, and Vol. 2, *The Coming of the Civil War, 1850–1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 and 2007). Despite Alabama's late-nineteenth-century industrialization, little has been written about goals established before the war. More remarkably, there is no comprehensive study of the state's cotton economy, and the only study of slavery is badly outdated; see James Benson Sellers, *Slavery in Alabama*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994, c. 1950). The most up-to-date evidence for the state's interest in economic

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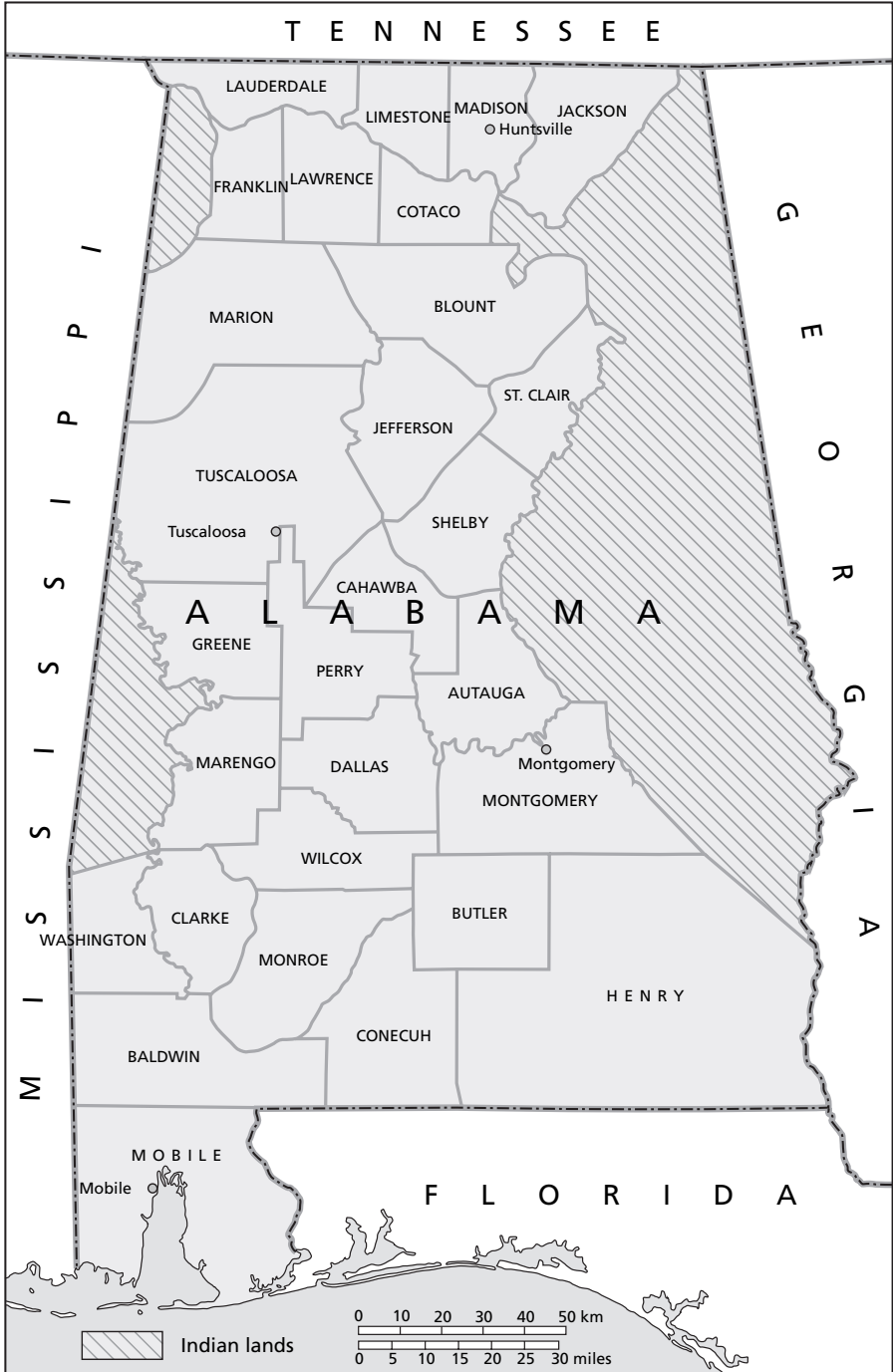


FIGURE 1.1. Alabama in 1820.

The year after statehood in 1819, Alabama had only a few large counties, and much of the eastern half of the state was still in the possession of the Creek Indians. Map by Cox Cartographic, Ltd.

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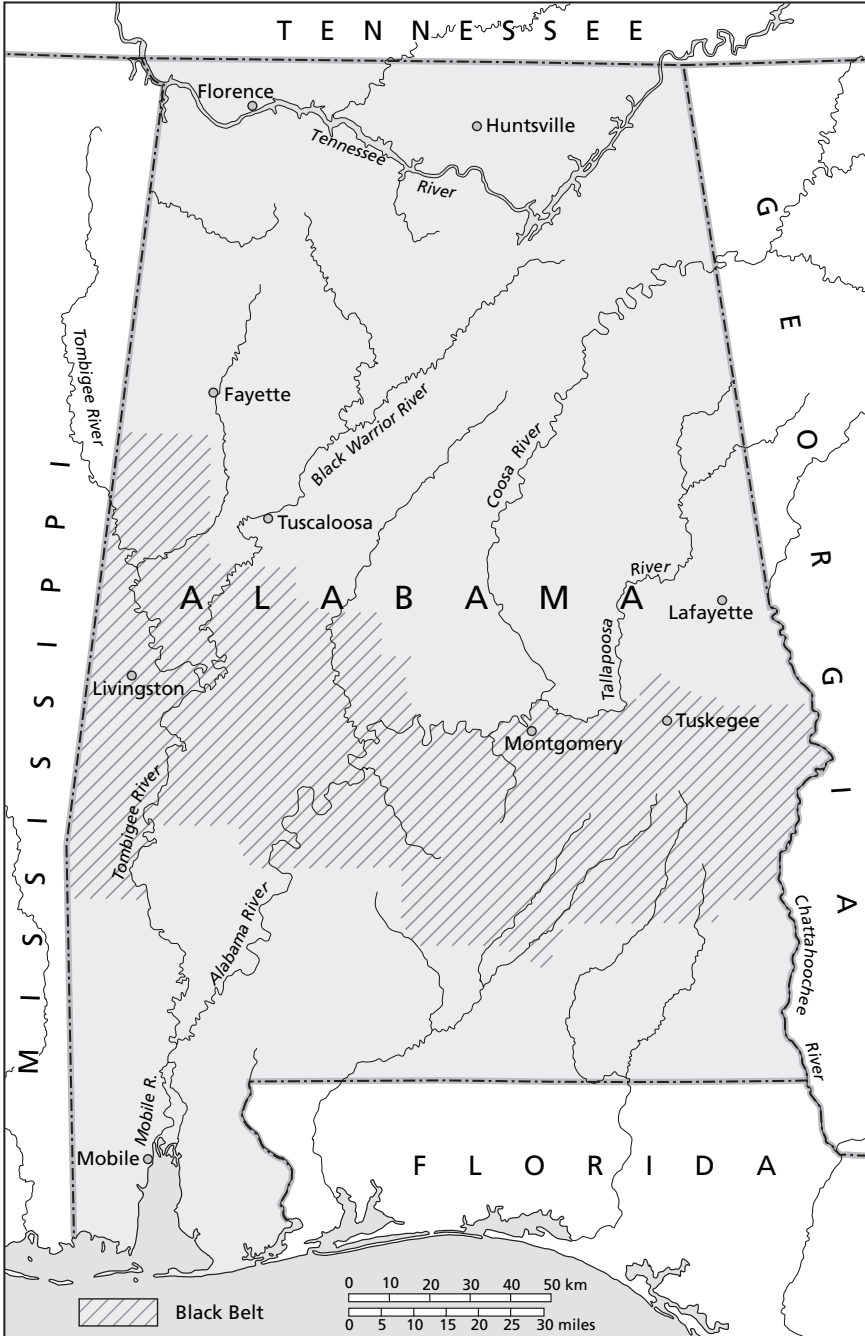


FIGURE 1.2 Antebellum Alabama.

Alabama benefited from major rivers that were navigable from the Gulf of Mexico across the central plantation district of the Black Belt. Although towns were often located along the rivers, writers lived in small towns and cities across the state. Map by Cox Cartographic, Ltd.

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The backbreaking labor that enriched the region's planters affected most writers and other middle-class professionals indirectly. The thousands of slaves in Alabama lived mainly on farms, especially the plantations of the Black Belt. In 1850, when all of the rising South's eight writers but Evans were working adults, Meek, Jeremiah ("Jere") Clemens, and Caroline Hentz owned no slaves; Johnson Hooper owned one, William Smith four, and Baldwin seven. Only Albert Pickett worked dozens in his fields. Hentz, who never owned a slave, rented them. In Baldwin's "The Earthquake Story," which Lincoln often read aloud, the "servant" Jo reflected town slavery. Slaves were assets, but writers used them to secure comfort, not to create new wealth.<sup>9</sup> Pickett aside, writers did not command slaves like planters did.

Alabama's writers shared a commitment to slavery but differed about how to develop the state. This issue divided citizens politically when an international depression after 1837 reduced cotton prices, crippled banks, and slowed commerce. Writers supported the Democrats or the Whigs, national parties that differed about the role of government in the economy. Baldwin was a Whig who, like Lincoln, attended his party's 1848 convention in Philadelphia. In Alabama, small farmers made the Democrats dominant, while town dwellers and commercial farmers supported the Whigs. In general, Whigs advocated government aid for development and Democrats favored *laissez faire*, but these differences became muted over time. Hooper, a Whig, was cautious

development is found in Curtis J. Evans, *The Conquest of Labor: Daniel Pratt and Southern Industrialization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), but Thornton's summary of the "economic miracle of the 1850s" in *Politics and Power* (268–291, quote p. 291) has not been superseded. On Lyell's visit, with a convenient list of his publications about it, see Daniel B. Arden, "Charles Lyell's Observations on Southeastern Geology," in James X. Corgan, ed., *The Geological Sciences in the Antebellum South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 1130–1141. As Thornton notes, the more thorough explorations of geologist Michael Toumey received great attention later (*Politics and Power*, 190), but Lyell gave the issue international recognition. A provocative study of the politics of modernization is Donna M. Castellano, "A Promise Delayed: The Politics of Banking, Railroad, and Mineral Development in Alabama, 1846–1860" (M.A. thesis, University of Alabama in Huntsville, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> The status of slavery in towns is a relatively neglected subject in an otherwise thriving field. On cities, the standard studies are Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) and Claudia Dale Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820–1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976). A suggestive study that compares slavery in different demographic settings is Barbara J. Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth-Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Perhaps the most useful summary of scholarship on slavery is Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2nd. ed., 2003). A creative study about towns just across the border from Alabama is Lisa C. Tolbert, *Constructing Townscapes: Space and Society in Antebellum Tennessee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), which integrates slaves' lives into town society. A discussion of the neglect of town slavery within the context of a fascinating analysis of a small town in Georgia is David E. Paterson, "Slavery, Slaves, and Cash in a Georgia Village, 1825–1865," *JSH* 75 (November 2009): 879–930.



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about tariffs, and Meek, a Democrat, wrote Alabama's first public education law. In towns, both parties had hopes for the rising South.<sup>10</sup>

The second essential condition for a rising South was the ascent of the middle class in southwestern towns. Antebellum census data were notoriously unreliable, and most towns were tallied with counties, but one careful scholar estimates that Alabama's towns grew about twice as fast as rural areas. Subsistence farms existed without towns, but commercial farming required lawyers to make land a commodity, merchants to exchange crops for manufactures, and teachers to provide essential skills. The rough categories of the census reflected these facts, with the percentage of farmers steadily shrinking compared to the learned professions, manufacturers, and merchants. In 1860, about a quarter of the state's free adult males belonged to these nonfarming categories. In that year, the capital at Montgomery had almost ten thousand people (about half enslaved), and it was the largest town besides Mobile, which had not quite thirty thousand residents. Tuscaloosa had fewer than four thousand people. Because writers usually lived in county seats that focused politics, law, education, and trade, they knew that their influence exceeded their numbers.<sup>11</sup>

Alabama's writers also saw that the middle class increasingly relied on consumer goods. Although manufacturing grew slowly, towns like Huntsville and Tuscaloosa contained textile mills by the 1840s, and many more manufactured goods were imported. Newspapers advertised hats and gloves, bolts of fancy and plain textiles, household goods like cooking utensils and rugs, and the ubiquitous patent medicines. Writers understood the culture of consumption. In Johnson Hooper's 1845 fiction, when a backwoodsman visited Tuscaloosa, he marveled at the displays in windows of a drugstore and a booksellers' shop.

<sup>10</sup> The most compelling analysis of antebellum Alabama politics is Thornton, *Politics and Power*, but also indispensable are the relevant essays in Samuel L. Webb and Margaret E. Armbruster, *Alabama Governors: A Political History of the State* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> The careful scholar is Thornton, *Politics and Power*, 292. The only South-wide analysis of the middle classes is Jonathan D. Wells, *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800–1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). There are local histories of varying quality for Alabama towns, but the best scholarly works are four, and each was important in shaping my understanding of how townspeople lived: for Mobile, Harriet E. Amos Doss, *Cotton City: Urban Development in Antebellum Mobile* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985); for Huntsville (and Madison County) Dupre, *Transforming the Cotton Frontier*; for a Black Belt town, the first chapters in G. Ward Hubbs, *Guarding Greensboro: A Confederate Company in the Making of a Southern Community* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003); for Tuscaloosa, John W. Quist, *Restless Visionaries: The Social Roots of Antebellum Reform in Alabama and Michigan* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998). In addition to the work of Lisa Tolbert, two other excellent studies helped me appreciate the pace of changes in southwestern towns: Christopher Morris, *Becoming Southern: The Evolution of a Way of Life, Warren County and Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1770–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), and Edward E. Baptist, *Creating an Old South: Middle Florida's Plantation Frontier before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), which, despite its title, also deals with towns.



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He observed the “koniac” and “rot-gut” at a “grocery” before visiting a tavern with chandeliers, fine wines, and fancy “viands.” Discriminating between country and town, he disparaged liquor made in local stills and chose to drink the imports.<sup>12</sup>

Southwestern towns were like those of Lincoln’s Illinois in the voluntary associations that were the hallmark of the middle class. In the countryside, churches and kin connected scattered people. Where neighbors were close, folks formed all sorts of associations to improve themselves. Local governments were manned by middle-class people, and open meetings promoted railroads and schools. Citizens in Clemens’s town of Huntsville organized the Haydn Society, and Hentz joined a literary club in Florence. Meek was president of a temperance society in Tuscaloosa (even though he was known for imbibing). Hooper was a Mason, which linked him to upwardly mobile men across the nation. Pickett and Meek were founders of Alabama’s first historical society at Tuscaloosa. These writers believed that progress demanded cooperation.<sup>13</sup>

One index to the importance of Alabama’s middle classes was the growing influence of lawyers. Although farmers greatly outnumbered them, lawyers were overrepresented in the legislature. As early as 1840, 12 percent of the state’s legislators were lawyers; and the fatal convention that voted Alabama out of the Union contained 37 percent lawyers. Just as Lincoln represented railroads because they had money, lawyers in Alabama represented planters and townsmen – or almost anyone with cash. Like Lincoln, they rode circuit, but they also served their towns. When Hooper first practiced law in the county seat of Chambers County, he often represented his father-in-law. While living in a Black Belt river port, Baldwin wrote contracts for land and slaves, but *Flush Times* mostly put lawyers in towns.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Johnson Jones Hooper, *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs, Late of the Tallapoosa Volunteers: Together with “Taking the Census” and Other Alabama Sketches*, intro. by Johanna Nicol Shields (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 53, 55. No one has done for the South what Catherine E. Kelly has done for New England, *In The New England Fashion: Reshaping Women’s Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999). In the absence of scholarly studies, I am relying on impressionistic analysis of newspapers, inventories of estates, and family financial records as well as literary sources. An example of southern enthusiasm for one particular consumer good (timepieces) is detailed in the first chapter of Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Place, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). Tolbert, *Constructing Townscapes*, deals with consumption in the Southwest, albeit indirectly, where she links it with women’s domesticity. Influential studies that evaluate the changing culture of the middle classes are Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992), and Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> Here I am indebted to Quist, *Restless Visionaries*, which details both the extent to which associations were typical of one Alabama town and how widespread was the middle class’s participation.

<sup>14</sup> Figures on lawyers from Thornton, *Politics and Power*, 64–66, 426.

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Class affiliation changed as individuals rose or fell. Nonetheless, by the objective standards of income and occupation, all writers except Pickett lived middle-class lives. Subjectively, rich relatives brought status and, occasionally, material advantages. Clemens's father owned a plantation by the time Jere became an adult, and the erratic lawyer moved in and out of his father's town home. Before the Panic of 1837, Evans's father owned a store, a fine home, and slaves, but, grossly overextended, he lost his fortune and worked as a middling merchant until the Civil War. Like Lincoln, some of these writers were upwardly mobile. Orphaned and raised in an artisan's household, Smith acquired property from his legal practice and good marriages, but he never counted himself rich. Perhaps most importantly, the only writer to own a plantation was Pickett, although Clemens inherited a portion of his father's plantation in 1860. They all worried about how people saw them. Pickett's wariness toward powerful families, Evans's sermonizing about the idle rich, and Smith's anxieties about poverty suggest class tensions where status was fragile.<sup>15</sup>

Like other successful Americans, the writers of the rising South displayed their status with servants. Touring Lincoln's pleasant Victorian house in Springfield, I was surprised to see a servant's room at the rear of the second story. Our guide commented that Lincoln saw domestic service as a way for poor people, often immigrants, to improve themselves. Alabamians did not expect

<sup>15</sup> Historians' attempts to evaluate class formation are marked by theoretical and definitional disputes. A recent discussion of some of those is in Gary Kornblith, Seth Rockman, Jennifer Goloboy, Andrew Schocket, and Christopher Clark, "Symposium on Class in the Early Republic," *JER* 25 (Winter 2005): 523–564. For the American middle classes, with comments on theoretical issues, see Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Stuart M. Blumin, "The Hypothesis of Middle-Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: A Critique and Some Proposals," *AHR* 90 (April 1985): 775–809; Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston, *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Maris A. Vinovskis, "Stalking the Elusive Middle Class in Nineteenth-Century America: A Review," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33 (July 1991): 582–587. In addition to Wells, for the southern middle classes see Frank J. Byrne, *Becoming Bourgeois: Merchant Culture in the South, 1820–1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006); Jennifer R. Green, *Military Education and the Emerging Middle Class in the Old South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Tom Downey, *Planting a Capitalist South: Masters, Merchants, and Manufacturers in the Southern Interior, 1790–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006). One of the rare works to consider northern and southern middle classes together is Anne C. Rose, *Victorian America and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), which has shaped my thinking about middle-class ethics.

Class formation cannot be measured by eight writers, but the material, experiential, and intellectual evidence suggests that most of these people belonged to an assertive southwestern middle class. Whatever wealth they lost or gained, regardless of their relatives, and despite their common desire to be seen as superior, it strains credulity to call any of these men and women aristocrats, with the arguable exception of Albert Pickett, who was, at least, a wealthy planter. For an exhaustive depiction of those people whom some might call aristocratic, see William K. Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), although Scarborough