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BECOMING BOURGEOIS:
MERCHANT CULTURE IN THE ANTEBELLUM
AND CONFEDERATE SOUTH

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

The Ohio State University
2000

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines merchant families in the antebellum and Confederate South. Specifically it focuses upon what historians have come to call the "middling sort," that group falling between the mass of yeoman farmers and the planter class that dominated the political economy of the antebellum South. In addition to investigating the experiences of urban merchants, village storekeepers, and small-scale factors, this study is the first to examine the roles these merchants and their families played within the political economy and southern society at large. Through interpreting diaries, letters, newspapers, R.G. Dun & Company credit reports, and other sources, the dissertation reveals the peculiar strains of modern liberal capitalist and conservative thought that imbued the culture of southern merchants. Fundamentally these merchant families embraced the South but were not of the South. Exploring the values men and women in merchant families espoused not only offers new insight into southern history but helps deepen our understanding of the mutable ties between regional identity and the marketplace that prevailed in nineteenth-century America.

These merchant families embraced the South but were not of the South. At a time when most southerners rarely traveled far from their homes, merchants annually sallied forth on buying junkets to northern cities. While the majority of men and women enjoyed only limited formal instruction, merchant families often achieved a level of education rivaled by only the planter class. Most important, the southern merchant community
promoted the kind of aggressive business practices that proponents of the "New South" would later claim as their own. They traded, haggled, and invested their wealth in a South where a planter elite created an agrarian society seemingly hostile to industry and urbanization. Antebellum merchants functioned well within this slaveholding system but did not rely upon the "peculiar institution" for its success. The commercial classes maintained close ties with the North while embracing the religious and racial mores of the slave South. The outbreak of the Civil War temporarily altered relations within merchant homes and strengthened the business ideology that would serve these commercial families once hostilities ended. Merchants at once served in the Confederate army and viewed the conflict as a business opportunity. In the end, their antebellum commercial habits and the hardships of war offered merchant families excellent preparation for the world of the "New South."
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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scholarship inspires me, her wit amuses me, her kindness humbles me, her intellect leaves me in awe, and her love makes me happy to be alive. I would have dedicated this work to her but she deserves better.
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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1862 Jorantha Semmes wrote a letter expressing her war weariness to her husband Benedict Semmes, a Confederate officer. Responsible for the care of their five children in Federally-occupied Memphis, Tennessee, Semmes told her husband, "I am tired of this separation." His absence had left her bereft of "all gaiety of heart." Caring for the children helped occupy Jorantha's mind during the day but she missed her "better half" at night when "it is so lonely."¹ Jorantha Semmes increasingly questioned the romantic militarism of the Civil War. Others, we know, shared this sentiment. Historians have noted that the trials of war eroded the patriotism of many southern women. Semmes's anxiety over the fate of her family and the Confederate cause seems to conform to this pattern.²

What distinguishes Semmes's writing from that of other educated southern women is its commercial tone. The couple's letters reflected the concerns of their shared occupation, the mercantile trade. Benedict Semmes established his Memphis store shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War. His absence during the conflict forced Jorantha to assume responsibility for the store's operation, and their correspondence reveals her business skills. In June 1862, Jorantha Semmes wrote her husband that under Yankee occupation the boatloads of provisions that arrived daily in the Mississippi River port

¹Jorantha Semmes to Benedict Semmes, June 21, 1862, Benedict Joseph Semmes Papers, Southern Historical Collection (SHC), Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina.
sold "like lightning for specie." The money she made selling what stock remained from the store, combined with the rent she collected from boarders, led her to inquire whether he might need five hundred dollars sent to him. By 1864, Benedict openly acknowledged her acumen in financial matters when he asked her about collecting some debts, "I would like to have your own views, for you sometimes see things clearer than I." This commercial discourse is not a historical aberration, rather, it is the result of a southern merchant culture that experienced profound change during the Civil War. The war at once destroyed the southern merchant's financial world and opened new business opportunities in what would one day be termed a New South.

The ideology of antebellum and Confederate merchants contained a series of unresolved contradictions. These merchants embraced the South but were not of the South. They traded, haggled, and invested their wealth in a slaveholding South where a planter elite created an agrarian society seemingly hostile to industry and urbanization. At a time when most southerners rarely traveled outside their surrounding environs, merchants annually sallied forth on buying junkets that took them to Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York City. While most southern whites remained unlettered, merchant families frequently achieved a level of education rivaled by only the planter elite. These and other cultural differences created a gulf between merchant families and their southern neighbors that both sides recognized. The unique culture of the southern merchant family helps explain Jorantha Semmes's ability to operate her husband's store during the Civil War. The skills merchants needed in order to succeed in the South also left them open to attack.

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1Jorantha Semmes to Benedict Semmes, June 13, 1862; Benedict Semmes to Jorantha Semmes, July 17, 1864, Semmes Papers, (SHC).
Criticized as "cunning fellows" who differed little from Yankee shopkeepers, southern merchants frequently found themselves defending their trade. Remarkably upon their sharp trading practices and undeserved social prominence, critics frequently charged merchants with gross opportunism. Characterizing his antebellum business career, Atlanta merchant Sydney Root offered the southern merchant's typical defense to such accusations when he declared. "I never loved money for its own sake." The Janus-faced southern merchant, at once the shrewd entrepreneur and obsequious apologist, appears to be a common representation found throughout antebellum southern culture; it even appears within the personal correspondence of the merchant community itself. Despite the convention of the storekeeper as a "southern Yankee," these merchants' deeply held Christian sensibility joined with their support for slavery to make them distinctly southern.

This dissertation investigates the culture of this segment of southern antebellum and Confederate society. It focuses upon what historians have come to call the "middling sort," that group falling between the mass of yeoman farmers and the planter class that dominated the political economy of the antebellum South. This study explores the experiences of urban merchants, village storekeepers, and small-scale factors, as well as the roles these merchants and their families played within the southern political economy.

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5D.R. Hundley, Social Relations in Our Southern States (New York: Henry B. Price Publisher, 1860), 101-2; Sidney Root, "Memorandum Of My Life, 1893," Special Collections, Atlanta History Center (AHC). Surprisingly little has been written on the public image of merchants in nineteenth-century American culture, particularly in the South; see William Leach, Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 116-17, 122-30. My research suggests that southern newspapers frequently depicted merchants as greedy and unprincipled, see Carolina Watchman (Salisbury, NC) 10 Nov. 1832; Edenton Sentinel and Albemarle Intelligencer (Edenton, NC) 1 May 1841; Daily Chronicle & Sentinel (Augusta, GA) 19 Oct. 1852; Daily Journal (Wilmingtom, NC) 19 Sept. 1854, 9 Oct. 1854; Greenville Mountaineer (Greenville, SC) 29 Nov. 1855. During the Civil War many newspapers attacked merchants for speculating in foodstuffs and war material. This popular discontent over merchant speculation figured prominently in southern food riots during the war. Two good descriptions of such riots can be found in James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 617-619; and Emory M. Thomas, The Confederate Nation: 1861-1865 (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), 201-206.
In addition, the dissertation will attempt to comprehend the peculiar strains of modernist and conservative thought that imbued the culture of southern merchants.

Informed by such cultural historians as T.J. Jackson Lears, Simon Schama, William Leach, Margaret R. Hunt and Richard Wightman Fox, I emphasize social views and behavior as well as institutions and economic structures. Diaries, letters, newspapers, credit reports and other sources are interpreted as a record of social experience and as a document of beliefs. Through this process, I have attempted to recover critical elements of the Weltanschauung merchants and their families shared. The first half of the dissertation compares the tenets of their ideology and material well-being with popular representations of merchant culture that were conspicuous in nineteenth-century southern society. Depictions of merchants within newspapers and essays will be juxtaposed with the more personal images revealed in their writing. As the title of this dissertation suggests, I argue that merchants living in the antebellum South were still only "becoming" bourgeois. These merchants defended the slave South and rejected many of the reformist currents found in the Protestant tradition of the ascending northern middle class. The political and economic changes wrought by the Civil War fundamentally altered the position of merchant families within southern society. The collapse of the slave order allowed them to embrace a free labor, market-oriented Anglo-American bourgeois ideology. The second half of the dissertation explores the impact of the Civil War upon merchants and how their changing ideals influenced life in the Confederacy.

The merchant class have occupied an important, though often disruptive, economic and cultural position in the South. Certainly the work of several regional novelists testify to a prevailing uneasiness with the rise of liberal capitalist values in a

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pastoral South. Creative writers have depicted the merchant and his store as malevolent agents within the social order, most famously in William Faulkner’s novel *The Hamlet* (1931). After the Civil War, the merchant Flem Snopes moves to a small village in Faulkner’s fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, where he obtains a clerking position in the local store. Business cunning and a dangerous reputation as a barn burner enables Snopes to overwhelm the old order’s feeble opposition to his rule. The stranger’s mastery over the community is complete when the asexual Snopes marries the voluptuous Eula Varner, daughter of the richest man in town. Faulkner’s story is one of the modernist impulse, represented by the merchant Snopes, destroying the traditions of a southern community. A similar theme is found in T.S. Stribling’s novel, *The Store* (1938). Here the lure of the wealth and prestige available through the retail trade causes the moral destruction of Colonel Miliades Vaiden, a hero of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Vaiden, symbolizing the Confederate South, loses the respect of his community with the dishonorable means he employs acquiring a country store. Faulkner and Stribling both associate merchants with values hostile to the legacy of the antebellum and Confederate South.

Despite the tremendous growth of interest in the antebellum and Confederate South, we still know relatively little about the role merchants played in either period. While they neither manufactured weapons nor grew produce, merchants served as financial linchpins in keeping the southern economy viable during peace and war. Yet most southern historians have overlooked their critical role in the Old South, a silence that is especially surprising when one considers the southern merchant’s prominence in

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contemporary accounts from the period. Instead scholars have concentrated on merchants in the postwar South.⁸

Several historians have examined the social and economic position of the merchant in the post-bellum South. Lacy Ford, Paul Escott, and Allen Tullos have described the often ambivalent economic role of the southern merchant following the collapse of the Confederacy. The increasing economic importance of the southern merchant as a furnishing agent, due largely to the advent of the crop lien system, explains much of this interest. Historians have also identified the store as an agent promoting significant cultural change in the nineteenth century. This judgment is mirrored in the popular culture as well.⁹

The gap in the historiography can be attributed, in part, to the political economy of the antebellum South. The small planter elite ideologically and economically dominated the Old South and marginalized the merchant's role. Like most regional elites, planters designed the financial structure of the South to serve their own interests. The system they imposed on their region inhibited the growth and power of southern entrepreneurs. Despite playing a critical role within world capitalism, the planter class infused their society with an agrarian ethos antagonistic to urbanization and free labor. The drive for self-sufficiency on their plantations and the dependence of poorer whites upon this plantation economy effectively limited the penetration of the national consumer market. The plantation economy also barred most slaves as buyers of consumer goods. Indeed, full market integration would not be completed in the South until well after the Civil War. Antebellum planters also gained political power disproportionate to their numbers.


and came to embody the social ideal within the South. Historians Eugene Genovese, David Brion Davis, Peter Kolchin and others describe the social, legal, and economic boundaries American slavery created. Merchants needed considerable skill in order to succeed in such a society.\(^7\)

The southern merchant community nevertheless promoted the kind of aggressive business practices both before and during the Civil War that proponents of the "New South" would later claim as their own. In communities of the antebellum and Confederate South, merchants managed to adopt the competitive business philosophy of the North with few fundamental changes. The skills [salesmanship, economy, etc.] needed to succeed in an increasingly complex regional economy profoundly shaped the culture of the southern merchant class. A combination of modern business capitalism with more traditional social custom manifested itself in the merchant family. The culture of the

southern shopkeepers and their families reveals this tenuous fusion of organic social relations with free market enterprise. The Civil War severely tested the ability of merchant families to maintain their position within the South.

This dissertation seeks to make three contributions to the field of nineteenth-century American history. First, it begins to uncover the important economic role of the merchant class within the antebellum and Confederate South. Second, it adds to our understanding of the dynamics within the southern family. Few historical examinations have attempted to describe the unique character of the southern merchant family. Third, this study delineates how merchants and their families reconciled the occasionally contradictory impulses of a modern capitalist ethic with the conservative religious and social traditions of a fading agrarian South.

Historiography

This dissertation both rests upon and attempts to place its subject within a large and ever increasing historical literature on the South. Only a few monographs have explored the world of storekeepers, factors, and commission merchants in any depth. Lewis E. Atherton's study, The Southern Country Store, 1800-1860 (1949), remains the best study of the antebellum southern merchant. Influenced by the work of Frank Owsley, Atherton views southern society as essentially rural and middle class. He concludes that yeoman farmers behaved economically like their planter neighbors. Only a larger scale of operation separated the planter and farmer. Thus the planter depended upon his cotton factor to meet his needs while the mass of southern society utilized the country store as their economic agent. Atherton describes how southern merchants bartered merchandise for farm crops and then disposed of the latter in meeting their own wholesale bills. He touches upon the social profile and material culture of the southern storekeeper but his primary focus is the merchant's "middleman" role within the region's political economy. The analysis is grounded in the manuscript and business records then available to
historians in the 1940s. Despite the virtues of Atherton's study of antebellum merchants, the book is somewhat dated. Issues that historians have come to regard as crucial elements of southern society [such as gender and race relations] are absent from this early monograph. Atherton's examination also concludes before the outbreak of the Civil War—a critical period for southern merchants.\textsuperscript{11}

Thomas D. Clark's monograph \textit{Pills, Petticoats, and Pillows: The Southern Country Store} (1944), focuses on the rise of the southern store during the post-bellum period. The antebellum and Confederate merchant receives only cursory analysis. Contrary to Atherton's conclusions, Clark's study discounts the economic role of the antebellum merchant. He maintains that before the state legislative assistance they received after the Civil War [lien laws, etc.], southern storekeepers remained of "minor significance." Clark utilizes the same types of sources Atherton later incorporated within his work. His description of the position of the country store within the southern political economy, particularly between 1890-1920, is useful. Clark's analysis of merchant culture and the impact of the Civil War is more superficial and, like Atherton, does not address more recent historical questions.\textsuperscript{12}

In comparison to the scholarship on southern merchants, the historiography on the political economy of the antebellum South is quite extensive. Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's study \textit{Fruits of Merchant Capital} (1983) examines the antebellum South within an expanding western capitalist economy. Within the Marxian


framework of their analysis, they maintain that the South developed a distinctive "hybrid" economy where a prebourgeois society, dominated by a slaveholding planter class, found itself closely linked to a modernizing capitalistic world. Larger merchants funneled vital capital into the South but remained dependent upon external allies, planters or the state, for their economic survival. Southern society rested upon the foundation of the master-slave relationship rather than the commercial nexus that governed ties within the industrializing North. This thesis has been most forcefully stated, albeit in a narrower historical context, in Eugene D. Genovese's two earlier works The Political Economy of Slavery (1965) and The World the Slaveholders Made (1969).\(^{13}\)

Harold D. Woodman's study of the southern political economy, King Cotton & His Retainers (1968), focuses more directly upon merchants' commercial activities. He details the critical "middleman" role southern antebellum merchants played. According to Woodman, the large cotton factors and southern banks, backed by northern or English capital, provided the necessary finances for the survival of the antebellum cotton economy. His analysis encompasses both the antebellum and post-bellum South. Woodman's work highlights the unique position southern factors and bankers held but ultimately accepts Genovese's conclusions on the economic restrictions slavery imposed within the Old South.\(^{14}\)

Economist Gavin Wright asserts that property rights in human beings, rather than land, shaped the southern economy. Unlike Genovese and Woodman, Wright argues in The Political Economy of the Cotton South (1978) that the lack of industrial development


within the South represented the comparative advantage agriculture held over manufacturing within the region. According to this view, an intense worldwide cotton demand between 1820 and 1860 spurred southern economic prosperity. Yet Wright sides with Genovese and Woodman in underscoring the inherent weaknesses of the slave system. The northern economy modernized while the incentives toward owning slave property in the South reduced investments in transportation and restricted the labor market. Thus the requirements of the slave system limited the entrepreneurial dynamism of the merchant class.¹⁵

A number of historians question the description of the antebellum South as noncapitalist and the planter class as "prebourgeois." The most extreme case for capitalist slaveholders is presented by Robert William Fogel and Stanley Engerman in *Time on the Cross* (1974). Fogel and Engerman maintain that the planter class embraced rational market principles and successfully developed a flexible capitalist order in the antebellum South. James Oakes' studies *The Ruling Race* (1982) and *Slavery and Freedom* (1990) also breaks with Genovese's conclusions by emphasizing the capitalist mentality of southern slaveholders. Oakes suggests that in an antebellum South characterized by fluid class divisions a substantial number of non-slaveholders could realistically hope to participate in the slave economy. He concludes that the rise of market commercialism and liberal democratic thought overwhelmed slaveholder paternalism well before the Civil War. Laurence Shore supports this interpretation in his own analysis, *Southern Capitalists* (1986) while Frederick F. Siegal asserts the significance of southern capitalist activities and rhetoric in *The Roots of Southern Distinctiveness* (1987). Bruce Levine's examination *Half Slave and Half Free* (1992) as well as Joan E.

Cashin's monograph *A Family Venture* (1991) find the planter class to be less economically or socially monolithic than either side in this debate. Although such recent work as Marc Egnal's comparative study *Divergent Paths* (1996) supports Genovese's views on the antebellum South, his critics have seemingly carried the historiographical day.\(^1\)

Many examinations of the antebellum economy concentrate upon regions within the South. Peter A. Coclanis describes the economic and environmental transformation of the South Carolina Low Country in *Shadow of a Dream* (1989). His study suggests that the region entered a period of relative economic decline well before the reign of "King Cotton" in the South. Richard Waterhouse finds colonial South Carolina merchant and planter interests increasingly "congruent" before the Revolution in *A New World Gentry* (1989) while Rachel N. Klein's treatise *Unification of a Slave State* (1990) describes the economic origins of the planter class within South Carolina. More recently, Wilma A. Dunaway's work *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700-1860* (1996) applies world systems analysis in her investigation of the political economy of the Appalachian South. She finds a long-term decline in the number of Appalachian subsistence farmers well before the outbreak of the Civil War.\(^2\)

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The past twenty-five years have witnessed a tremendous increase in the number of historical studies written about the nineteenth-century southern communities. Writing histories "from the bottom up," these works address wider economic, gender, and racial questions by analyzing the experiences of these communities. Steven Hahn maintains that the roots of late nineteenth-century Populism in Georgia rested with the particular ideology of the state's antebellum upcountry farmers. His study The Roots of Southern Populism (1983) delineates the anti-commercial, republican ideology of these upcountry farmers as the foundation for later political unrest within Georgia. Stephanie McCurry accepts and builds upon this thesis in Masters of Small Worlds (1995). Her work underscores the significance of class and gender by arguing that the conservative republican values yeoman farmers and planters shared in the South Carolina Low Country rested upon the maintenance of hegemony over female and slave dependents in their households. J. William Harris' monograph Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society (1985) suggests that the common economic experience of landownership and participation in the commercial cotton market tended to breakdown class divisions in Augusta, Georgia. A profound contempt for African Americans united both rich and poor whites as well. Other valuable studies of antebellum southern communities including Orville Vernon Burton, In My Father's House Are Many Mansions (1985), Robert C. Kenzer, Kinship and Neighborhood in a Southern Community (1987), and Bill Cecil-Publishing, Inc., 1989); Rachel N. Klein, Unification of a Slave State: The Rise of the Planter Class in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1860-1808 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Wilma A. Dunaway, The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700-1860, Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 5-12. Dunaway's study challenges those historians who have maintained the South maintained a "moral economy" largely unscathed by market relations before the war, see Steven Hahn, The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1880 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Stephanie McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). The intellectual origins of this debate can be found in earlier articles on households in early American society, see Michael Merrill, "Cash Is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States," Radical History Review, no. 4 (Winter 1977), pp. 42-71; James Henretta, "Families and Farms: Mentalite in Preindustrial America," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d. series, vol. 35, no. 1 (January 1978), pp. 3-32.
Fronsman, Common Whites (1992) also explore the crosscurrents of race, gender, and class. Orville Vernon Burton employs census and manuscript sources in his analysis of nineteenth-century Edgefield, South Carolina. His careful study, In My Father's House Are Many Mansions, examines race and class relations in a single southern community. While building upon the work of numerous historians, Burton specifically links his contribution to the historiography when he concludes "Edgefield's population resembled the self-sufficient yeomen that Frank L. Owsley called the plain folk of the South." The study astutely combines many of the conclusions found within the disparate work of Eugene Genovese, Frank Owsley, and Bertram Wyatt-Brown. Burton makes only passing references to Edgefield's merchant population.18

Robert Kenzer's insightful analysis of Orange County, North Carolina, Kinship and Neighborhood in a Southern Community, reveals the important communal role the general store served in the antebellum and Confederate South. Neighbors gathered at the store to purchase sugar, coffee, and gunpowder and to chat with their kin and friends. According to Kenzer, geography, social function, and credit availability led Orange Country farmers to patronize the local store. In a South held fast by neighborhoods, only the church rivaled the store as a community focal point. Like Burton, Kenzer emphasizes those elements that produced social cohesion in southern communities despite the larger hegemony of the planter class. Bill Cecil-Fronsman's study, Common Whites, investigates the culture of small farmers in antebellum North Carolina. He acknowledges the significant role country stores played as harbingers of the market economy in rural communities. This study of "common whites" suggests that many of the affluent merchants in North Carolina belonged to the ranks of the planter class. More recent studies, including Christopher Morris' monograph Becoming Southern (1995) and

18Hahn, The Roots of Southern Populism; McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds; Harris, Plain Folk and Gentry, 5-35; Burton, In My Father's House, 57, 7-10.

Historians have also begun to explore the impact of the Civil War upon southern communities. Stephen V. Ash's study *When the Yankees Came* (1995) describes how southerners often perceived the war differently depending upon where they lived and their contact with Federal forces. Wayne K. Durrill outlines the profound changes within a single community in *War of Another Kind* (1990). The active role of African Americans during the Civil War have been the subject of several monographs including, Clarence L. Mohr, *On the Threshold of Freedom* (1988) and Barbara Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground* (1985). Civil War historians have frequently overlooked the atrocities committed behind the front lines of war. Philip S. Paludan reveals the social alienation wrought by the Civil War in *Victims: A True History of the Civil War* (1981). These and other studies are essential additions to such larger syntheses as James M. McPherson's opus *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988). Although both these antebellum and Civil War works rarely explore southern merchants and their families in any depth, they frequently place them within a larger, community-wide racial and economic framework. Unfortunately, many of these accomplished studies tend to conflate wealthy merchants with their planter neighbors. Both groups share certain characteristics but my work suggests that merchants and planters frequently held different values and objectives.

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Many southern historians have examined gender relations within the nineteenth-century family. In his influential study of antebellum culture *Southern Honor* (1982), Bertram Wyatt-Brown asserts that the Old South developed a cogent and distinctive ideology built upon notions of honor. This world view rested upon slavery, paternalism, and patriarchy. Wyatt-Brown's conclusions concerning the fraternal, anti-commercial values of the antebellum South occasionally support those espoused by Eugene Genovese. The critical difference between the two lay in their intellectual influences, for Genovese employs a Marxian analysis whereas Wyatt-Brown relies upon techniques found in cultural anthropology. The work of both historians, particularly Wyatt-Brown, view the political and legal subjugation of women as primary components of the Old South. Wyatt-Brown's influence can be seen in numerous works. Catherine Clinton and Ted Ownby, among others, conclude that beyond patriarchy a severe code of southern masculinity led to dueling, lynching, and other forms of personal violence. Steven Stowe continued to broaden the study of the southern planter family in *Intimacy and Power in the Old South* (1987). Stowe examines such rituals as dueling, courtship practices, and letter writing in an effort to reveal "the consciousness of the planter class." Like Wyatt-Brown, he finds a South that celebrated hierarchy, the extended family, and excessively formal relations between men and women. Stowe takes exception to Wyatt-Brown's depiction of the more sordid aspects of planter culture. The planter class Stowe describes is composed of cultivated gentlemen.21

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Houses: Gender and the Civil War, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) have proven instrumental in explaining the impact of the Civil War upon the household.

Historians who describe female culture from the perspective of the plantation mistress also confront the question of southern patriarchy. Anne Firor Scott's book, *The Southern Lady* (1970), initiated the study of southern women as historical agents. Focusing on prosperous and literate women, Scott argues that the region's women made significant political and social gains throughout the nineteenth century. These advances, however, were limited during the antebellum period. A woman could demonstrate her administrative skills in the household but ultimately worked under the authority of male kin. Scott's work proved instrumental in destroying the stereotypes surrounding the southern "belle" but she did not argue for the existence of a distinct woman's culture in the South.

Important works on female culture within the northern middle class, particularly Barbara Welter's 1966 article, "The Cult of True Womanhood," and Nancy Cott's monograph *The Bonds of Womanhood* (1977), influenced the study of southern women after *The Southern Lady*. Suzanne Lebsock's 1984 book, *The Free Women of Petersburg*, maintains that a distinct woman's culture existed in the South during the nineteenth century. By adhering to a particular behavior based upon attending to the needs of others, what Lebsock labels "personalism," white women in Petersburg, Virginia, created their own culture. These women emancipated their slaves at a higher rate than men and, like their northern sisters, formed charitable organizations to aid the needy. Other historians have challenged Lebsock's claims for a southern female culture among affluent white women. More recently, Joan E. Cashin argues in *Our Common Affairs* (1996) that the circumscribed lives educated women led in the antebellum South produced a culture of "resignation" rather than reform.22

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Jean E. Friedman concludes in her monograph *The Enclosed Garden* (1985) that southern women remained isolated in a world where church and family dominated their lives. Catherine Clinton depicts the condition of elite southern women as particularly severe in *The Plantation Mistress* (1982). The plight of poorer women under southern patriarchy has been analyzed in Victoria E. Bynum's monograph *Unruly Women* (1992). Bynum maintains that women from the ranks of yeoman farmers frequently proved more hostile to the patriarchal order than plantation mistresses. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese identifies the southern household as paternalistic, not patriarchal, in her study *Within the Plantation Household* (1988) yet she too describes a world of limited choices for the region's women, both black and white.23

More recent studies of southern women have expanded upon the literature of the 1980s. Christine Anne Farnham's work on women's education, *The Education of the Southern Belle* (1994), contends that southern schools did offer elite women a comparable education to that of men. The instruction these young women experienced also inculcated the principles of manners and grace, skills that were not emphasized strongly in the female academies of the North. Farnham does not claim a female culture existed within these schools but suggests something akin to the northern ideal of "separate spheres" was dispersed in the classroom. Margaret Ripley Wolfe offers a valuable synthesis of the literature on nineteenth-century women in *Daughters of Canaan*

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She submits that southern women remained isolated from most of the national reforms in United States history and have had a historical experience very different from other American women.  

Since 1980 the growing scholarship on the white family in the nineteenth-century South has also explored questions of gender and class. Jan Lewis describes the changing nature of the white southern family during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in *The Pursuit of Happiness* (1983). Her study of family life in "Jefferson's Virginia" concludes that Revolutionary gentry relationships valued peace over emotional intensity. According to Lewis, only after the disruption of older social values during the early nineteenth century did the Virginia gentry find passion and happiness within their families. Jane Turner Censer challenges the notion of a distinctive, paternalistic South in her book *North Carolina Planters and Their Children, 1800-1860* (1984). Her planter families shared egalitarian, bourgeois values similar to those found in elite northern families.

In contrast to the abundant literature on the antebellum households, few studies have focused upon the household in the Confederate South. Most of them explore the dislocation husbands and wives experienced and its influence upon southern nationalism or post-bellum gender roles. Over twenty years ago, Bell Irvin Wiley maintained that the demands of war improved the southern woman's status as she proved her ability to manage the farm or plantation during her husband's absence. More recently, Catherine Clinton and George Rable argue that the strain of war frequently undercut women's support for the Confederate cause but did not lead to a more significant reevaluation of the racial and sexual mores in southern society. Drew Gilpin Faust reiterates these ideas

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in her essay "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War." Faust asserts that after years of seemingly meaningless bloodshed and deprivation many women directly undermined the South's military and economic ability to conduct war to a successful conclusion. In Faust's most recent work, Mothers of Invention (1996), she carefully describes the various ways the Civil War destroyed solidarity on the southern homecfront.26

Much of the work on the Confederate household has benefited from studies of northern households during the war. One of more successful attempts to combine the literature of the Civil War with that on domesticity has been Reid Mitchell's monograph The Vacant Chair (1993). He examines the close ties between Federal soldiers and their communities. Mitchell convincingly suggests that the Federal government appropriated the image of the family, particularly its masculine authority, in its relations with soldiers. Despite its diversity, most of the recent historiography on the Civil War household, particularly that on the Confederacy, focuses upon constructions of manhood and domesticity in its analysis of the relations between planter wives and husbands. Many of these studies refer, at least tangentially, to merchant women or families and offer an excellent point of departure for this project.27


27Reid Mitchell, The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 23-25, 40-45. Other important studies of gender relations in the Confederate South include:
The Worldview of the Southern Merchant

The view of southern merchant culture that can be pieced together from material in the archives and secondary sources reveals individuals at once conservative and innovative. Storekeepers in the agrarian South had to husband their resources and follow social norms while at the same time be prepared to gamble their capital on commercial opportunities when they arose. Freewheeling businessmen with generally only indirect ties to slavery or farming, most merchants in the antebellum South possessed business habits that were alien to the aristocratic attitude of the planter class. Their business activities functioned well within the slaveholding system but did not rely upon the "peculiar institution" for their success. At the same time, despite their bourgeois inclinations, southern merchants remained distinct from their business colleagues in the North. Dixie merchants traveled to the North, read northern publications, and consumed northern goods at rates far higher than most southerners. The ties merchants maintained with the North, however, were bent through a prism of evangelicalism, kinship, and racism that compelled the region's merchant families to defend the slave South.

The Civil War altered relations within merchant families and revealed the unique business values that would serve these families once war ended. Merchants served in the Confederate army and viewed the conflict as a business opportunity. The Civil War brought rising profits as well as dislocation. Merchants made deals and relied upon their families, particularly their wives, in order for their businesses to survive the conflict. As the war turned against the Confederacy, merchants began planning for the postwar business environment. Those who survived the war generally recovered their antebellum

Scott, Southern Lady; Friedman, Enclosed Garden, several essays in Divided Houses, ed. Clinton and Silber including: Joan E. Cashin, "Since the War Broke Out: The Marriage of Kate and William McClure," 200-12; Bynum, Unruly Women; Lee Ann Whites, The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).
economic standing well before their neighbors. It seems the culture of the antebellum merchant family offered excellent preparation for the world of the "New South."\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{28}See Frank J. Byrne, "Rebellion and Retail: A Tale of Two Merchants in Confederate Atlanta," \textit{Georgia Historical Quarterly} 79 (spring 1995): 30-56.
CHAPTER 1

MERCHANT CULTURE AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE OLD SOUTH

Business shaped the lives of merchant families in the antebellum South. The profession influenced where families settled, how they communicated, and their material culture. Lydia Adriance, wife of Texas merchant John Adriance, came to realize how trade bound merchant families. When her husband tended to his far-flung business interests in Missouri, Texas, and New York, Lydia Adriance frequently waited two or more months for one of his letters. John's repeated absences proved a trial for his family but his wife and children remained steadfast in their support of his career. A letter she sent her husband in 1850 is telling. Staying with her family in Watertown, New York, while in the latter stages of pregnancy, a worried and lonely Lydia Adriance wrote "I am satisfied to make the sacrifice that I know to be necessary to promote your business interests." Their daughter Kitty, raised in a commercial family, told her mother it would be better to have the child before her father returned than to have him "neglect important business" and be "obliged to spend a week or two here in suspense." This practical-minded daughter understood the demands of the marketplace. More fundamentally, Kitty Adriance, like many southerners from antebellum merchant families, lived in the wake of her father's trade.¹

¹Lydia Adriance to John Adriance, 10 August 1850, John Adriance Papers, Center for American History (CAH), University of Texas at Austin.
This chapter explores how commerce distinguished southern merchant families and their culture in the antebellum South. To varying degrees they believed themselves to be, and typically were, more cosmopolitan and financially adventurous than their neighbors. In part, this is necessarily an endeavor in comparative history that examines the various social classes that composed southern society. The measure of the merchant family experience can only be taken in relation to that of their economic and political neighbors, particularly yeoman and planter families. Merchants and their families showed themselves to be atypical southerners in both words and deeds. Many antebellum planter and artisan families troubled themselves over personal financial and legal issues. The degree to which the market enveloped merchant families made them unique. These men and women built their lives solely on their ability to conduct daily business transactions for material gain. Their deep involvement in the market, combined with their financial and political network across the South and Atlantic Ocean, gave commercial southern families a distinctive worldview. Though rarely disowning their southern identity, merchant families prided themselves on their cultural and personal ties to the North and Great Britain. Their shared outlook, their understanding of how things were and should be originated in their identities as businessmen and women. Unlike the southern planter class, the mercantile profession never developed intellectual leaders akin to George Fitzhugh or Edmund Ruffin. Less embattled and in many ways more closely tied to the northern United States than their planter neighbors, southern merchants, not surprisingly, also failed to articulate a single coherent ideological position. Rather, the worldview of these commercial families rested upon the social prestige and economic power they derived from trade. Their work radically defined them. The daily routines merchants performed in their trade divulged the liberal capitalist gospel they and their families embraced.\(^2\)

\(^2\)My discussion of "worldview" borrows from Peter Kolchin's discussion on the subject in *Unfree Labor.*
Few historians have studied the economic activity of antebellum southern merchants, and their peculiar culture and unique place in southern society have received even less attention. Some fifty years after its initial publication Lewis E. Atherton's classic study, The Southern Country Store 1800-1860 (1949), remains the best study of the antebellum southern merchant. Influenced by the work of Frank Owsley, Atherton viewed southern society as essentially rural and middle class. He touched upon the social profile and material culture of the southern storekeeper but kept his primary focus on the merchant's "middleman" role within the region's political economy. Issues that historians have come to regard as crucial elements of southern society, particularly race and gender, are absent from this early work. Thomas D. Clark's monograph Pills, Petticoats, and Pillows: The Southern Country Store (1944) focused overwhelmingly on the postbellum southern store while antebellum and Confederate merchants receive only cursory analysis. Similarly Ronald L.F. Davis' article, "The Southern Merchant: A Perennial Source of Discontent," deals primarily with public reaction to merchant behavior rather than merchants themselves. These and other works effectively emphasize the important economic role southern merchants played in the nineteenth-century South but they do not reveal how the mercantile trade influenced families and communities across the South.3


Most antebellum southerners, like most Americans, produced agricultural or manufactured goods. Merchants and their families typically did neither. As economic middlemen, many claimed they produced little of value. Thomas Jefferson, that most famous of American republican thinkers, declared the "mark of corruption" could be found on those classes of people whose subsistence rested upon the "casualties and caprice of customers." Independent, productive farmers served as repositories of virtue, he believed, while merchants and their trade were "unsound." Yet their roles as importers, wholesalers, retailers, and investors made commercial families indispensable to the health of the southern economy. Once again the example set by the "Sage of Monticello" is instructive. Like many Americans of his class, Jefferson's extravagant consumer habits, including spending over six thousand dollars on wine alone during his first term as president, depended upon merchant enterprise. An examination of the southern business classes, particularly merchants, shopkeepers, and grocers, reveals those common practices that made the region's commercial families culturally unique. Though Jefferson went too far in pronouncing the mercantile profession debased, trade did leave its "mark" upon the merchant class.4

Technically speaking, merchants were wholesalers in both foreign and domestic goods while shopkeepers typically limited themselves to local retail trade and grocers sold both domestic and imported foods at retail. These business classifications applied, with varying degrees, throughout the Old South. These three categories nonetheless ignore a host of other commercial occupations, from the poorest hucksters to the wealthiest cotton factors, that also filled the ranks of the region's business classes. These jobs required different skills and responsibilities. More fundamentally, however, all of

these business positions, scale notwithstanding, shared practices and habits that shaped the lives of commercial families.5

A drive to accumulate, invest, and rise up the social ladder characterized the lives of prosperous southern merchants. Their methods of earning and speculating their capital also distinguished the mercantile trades from the planter and yeoman classes. The close relationship between this economic activity and identity for both the individual merchant and merchant families, is evident in their writing. The correspondence of members of the southern commercial classes exchanged during the antebellum period abounds with themes of industry and economy. Whether corresponding with a business partner or their own children, merchants relentlessly touched upon the close ties between appropriate behavior, both public and private, and good business. Yet more often than not this ethos had little to do with any preconceived notion of honor or gentility. Rather the commercial personality southern merchants manifested during the antebellum period, incorporating the values of frugality, prudence, utility, and possessive individualism, served as both a means and end to enjoying success in the marketplace. Holding an influential but often tenuous position in southern society, men and women in the mercantile trade cultivated personal discipline not only to maximize profits but also in an effort to regulate the emotional swings between overconfidence and helplessness. Like many Americans and western Europeans living within the growing commercial economy, what united the mass of shopkeepers, grocers, and merchants was what historian Peter Gay has called the "negative quality of being neither aristocrats nor laborers, and of being uneasy in their

5Thomas M. Doerflinger, A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia, Institute of Early American History & Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986)17-18. For the sake of economy and variety I frequently use the terms "merchant" and "commercial" interchangeably when discussing all classifications of businessmen and businesswomen employed in the South.
middle-class skins." Though not a coherent political community or an active economic class, these men and women represented the emergence of a southern bourgeoisie.\(^6\)

The Size and Influence of the Southern Merchant Class

In order to explore the business culture of the merchant family, it is necessary to have some idea of its size and place in the antebellum South. Determining the number of businessmen and women employed at any given time is a difficult task. In 1860 the Federal Census Bureau placed the total number of merchants in the slave states and District of Columbia over thirty-eight thousand. Excluding hardware dealers, booksellers, clerks, and furniture and commission merchants, this figure provides a deceptive estimate of those employed in the region's commercial trades. A closer examination of specific counties and towns throughout the antebellum period that includes more categories of trade offers a more realistic view of the southern business community's size.\(^7\)

Even though most rural communities could boast at least one store, merchants and their families tended to establish themselves in more wealthy, settled regions of the antebellum South. One historian of rural Louisiana claimed most settlements contained only a store, saloon, and perhaps a church. The 1850 census reported North Carolina's two thousand merchants comprised little over 1 percent of the working male population as opposed to the state's eighty-four thousand farmers who represented 60 percent of this group. These statistics correspond with the census returns from central Virginia for the same year where those employed in the commercial trades in rural Buckingham County represented 1 percent of the free population. Circumstances apparently did not change in


the short term, ten years later the Alabama census reported 1 merchant for every 385 Alabama residents, including slaves, and a disproportionate number of these businessmen lived in the state's rich Black Belt counties. Of course southern towns and cities contained much larger and more diverse business communities.\(^8\)

Throughout much of antebellum period the population of Charleston, South Carolina, fluctuated between thirty and forty thousand people and in only one decade (1830-40) did the merchant community drop below one thousand individuals in a white male work force that never exceeded twelve thousand. In 1840, Savannah, Georgia, was home to well over six hundred and fifty commercial trades people representing almost 7 percent of the city's entire population. Ten years later Petersburg, Virginia, the state's second-largest city, and surrounding Dinwiddie County contained four-hundred and thirty-one people employed in commercial fields representing 3 percent of the total free population. With a population barely exceeding six thousand people, four-hundred and forty-four men and women traded over one million dollars in goods during 1854 in Atlanta, Georgia. Such evidence suggests that the size of the southern antebellum business community varied over time and place. These statistics also fail to consider the merchants' families, most of whom depended upon commercial returns for their daily survival. If average family size is factored into calculations regarding the total commercial population in 1850 Buckingham and Dinwiddie Counties, the percentage of these respective communities more than double to 3 and 10 percent. The relative stability of the merchant communities in both counties also seems to correspond with the experience of most occupations in the antebellum South. Trade deeply affected this

population while in turn these merchants and their families wielded power in the antebellum South that exceeded their numbers.\footnote{Greb, "Charleston, South Carolina, Merchants," 26; Census of the City of Savannah, Together with Statistics, Relating to the Trade, Commerce, Mechanical Arts & Health of the Same... and of the Charitable Societies, Prepared under a resolution of the city council, by Joseph Bancroft (Savannah: Printed by Edward C. Counsell, 1848), 7-16; Manuscript Census, Dinwiddie County, Virginia, 1860; Williams' Atlanta Directory, City Guide, and Business Mirror (Atlanta: Published by M. Lynch, successor to Wm. Kay, 1859), 11, 35-149. In 1850 Buckingham County had twenty-three heads of commercial households with an average size of six persons while Dinwiddie County two-hundred sixty-one heads of commercial households averaging five members each. Those employed in commercial fields and were not heads of households, typically those living with family members or boarders, were counted individually. Regarding the relative stability of the commercial populations in these two Virginia counties a close analysis of the 1850 and 1860 census schedules for both indicates a persistence rate of 22 percent for Buckingham County and 16 percent in Dinwiddie County. When only the same surname is carried over from the 1850 census to the 1860 census, suggesting family continuity in the merchant profession, persistence rates rose to 39 percent in Buckingham County and 31 percent in Dinwiddie County. This finding supports Gregory Allen Greb's study of Charleston, South Carolina, where he discovered that the persistence rates for the city's merchant population never dropped below 47 percent between 1840-1859. He concluded those who failed to appear in more than one census moved out of the city and that no more than 4 percent of this population entered other occupations, see Greb, "Charleston, South Carolina," 30. For comparative purposes these statistics do not include: barbers, barkeeps, druggists, tailors, and seamstresses.}

Historians have frequently ignored how the important economic roles the commercial classes performed gave them and their families influence in southern communities. Merchants stocked goods from the local area, from regional towns, and staples and luxuries from the distant North and even more exotic, western Europe. The spread of the railroad and telegraph across the antebellum South further strengthened the financial position of these business intermediaries. In the South Carolina Piedmont, historian Lacy Ford noted once railroads arrived the value of goods annually sold between 1853 and 1859 increased by more than 100 percent to $1,477,300. From the Georgia coast to the Mississippi River Valley, railroads and steamboats wrought similar change in hundreds of southern communities. Despite the fact that consumption rates and capital investment in the South still languished beside that in the North, merchants reaped economic and political fruit during this transformation. Yet the debates that swirled...
around trade questions in the antebellum South, and the merchants' role within that trade, suggests the significant influence the commercial classes wielded in the Old South.¹⁰

Town boosters and regional spokesmen alike realized that the commercial trades linked them to essential commodities and investment from the northern United States and western Europe. Indeed both groups expressed more anxiety regarding the strength of local merchants relative to those from rival cities or from northern businessmen than over any conflict between commercial and planter interests. As early as 1826 the editor of the Nashville Whig boasted that the wide variety of stock available in his town enabled rural Tennessee merchants to "lay in his stock of goods on as reasonable terms here as he can in any one of our seaport cities." An editorial written in 1852 by "King Street" in the Charleston Mercury declared commerce to be the "mainspring of healthful and vigorous general action" and warned the South Carolina city's residents that Baltimore and New Orleans increasingly dominated southern trade. The editorial writer, likely a merchant himself, maintained Charleston's salvation depended upon trade. Even when discord between planter and merchant interests did erupt, the dispute frequently arose between rival cities. Defending the interests of Mississippi planters, the Vicksburg Register encouraged its readers to patronize local commission merchants rather than suffer from the "vindictive warfare" waged by the rapacious, interest-raising businessmen of New Orleans. Not surprisingly, such exhibitions of commercial jealousy only increased when southern newspapers attacked the national financial dominance of a Philadelphia or New

York City. The New Orleans Daily Picayune merely voiced the opinion of most southerners when it declared the North was "wrestling with strong and resolute hands to compel commerce into artificial channels." These articles offered numerous, sometimes conflicting, remedies to make the southern economy more competitive. While disagreement existed over the efficacy of internal improvements, government intervention, and a host of other strategies, unanimity prevailed in the belief that without a strong, independent business community the South would forever be eclipsed by the North.11

The Development of a Southern Merchant

The businessmen and women that newspaper editors and others hoped would strengthen their regional antebellum economy hailed overwhelmingly from the South. Rural counties typically exhibited the highest percentages of native-born southern merchants while even cities, though boasting more diverse commercial populations, were still dominated by those born locally or in neighboring slave states. Men represented the vast majority of those employed in both rural and urban commercial settings. Even including such female dominated occupations as millinery and seamstress work, women constituted less than 10 percent of the commercial classes in late antebellum Atlanta. During the same period a Nashville, Tennessee, business directory reported women, excluding those operating boarding houses, represented little over 8 percent of the commercial workforce. The 1860 census reported one woman, a clerk, employed in a commercial field in Buckingham County, Virginia, while one hundred eight-six women constituted 27 percent of the commercial workforce in Dinwiddie County, Virginia. Of this latter number however, only eleven women, little over 1 percent, operated or worked

in establishments outside such traditionally enterprises as dress making or millinery work. The implications this pattern had for merchants and their families will be examined later, but one factor remained a constant. Whether an isolated crossroads merchant or an urban storekeeper, male or female, southerner, northerner, or European, the marketplace and its liberal capitalist values directed the commercial classes of the Old South. In turn these merchants influenced their communities. While his diary deplored the absence of genuine Sabbatarianism in Mobile, Alabama, northerner Henry Benjamin Whipple also testified to the vigor of the southern commercial classes and their market. One Sunday morning a horrified Whipple reported, "all classes may be seen wending their way to the market . . . all seem bent on making the Sabbath morning a day of toil, of merchandise, of money spending & money getting." Whipple merely described what many southerners already understood, that theirs was an increasingly commercial society controlled by planters but heavily dependent upon merchants. Those embarking upon a career in the mercantile trades recognized this relationship and certainly anticipated social and economic returns.  

Few individuals opened a shop or entered into a business partnership without first gaining some commercial experience as a store clerk—often in a relative’s business. In that job, young men and the occasional woman could establish business connections and usually earn a modicum of capital. To be sure, significant numbers of merchants and other retailers hailed from artisan, farming, and planting families as well. Regardless of

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12Henry Benjamin Whipple, Bishop Whipple's Southern Diary 1843-1844, ed. Lester B. Shippee (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1937), 91. In 1850, 94 percent of the merchants working in rural Buckingham County, Virginia, were born in-state. The same census reported 80 percent of the merchants employed in more urban Dinwiddie County were native-born Virginians. This pattern generally held true throughout the South. Seemingly the only exceptions were newly settled frontier states like Arkansas and Texas, and more cosmopolitan cities like New Orleans and Savannah, Georgia, where in 1848 the latter reported only 25 percent of the commercial classes being originally from Georgia. See Manuscript Census, Buckingham County, Virginia, 1850; Manuscript Census, Dinwiddie County, Virginia, 1850; Census of the City of Savannah, 7-14; Williams' Atlanta Directory, 35-149; The Nashville, State of Tennessee, and General Commercial Directory (Nashville: Daily American Book and Job Printing Office, 1853), 35-55, 78-79, 88-91.
their particular backgrounds, most businessmen and their families confronted similar obstacles when entering the mercantile and retail trades in the antebellum South. Two critical areas of concern for young would-be entrepreneurs were location and start-up capital. These issues preoccupied southern businessmen and distinguished them from most of their fellow southerners throughout the antebellum period.13

The troubled relationship between the southern merchant's responsibilities to his family and base economic considerations frequently appeared in decisions regarding store location. Savvy merchants desired stable locales populated with few business competitors and many reliable customers. A reliable clientele, be it farmers or artisans, with cash and assets that depended upon one or two merchants for their goods represented the ideal business environment. Isham Howze believed his new store in Marshall County, Mississippi, would reap a limited but prosperous business because his initial survey of the neighborhood suggested limited start-up expense and a "good" customer base. His diary entry was clear that the decision was quite rational, good in this instance described men who paid their bills. Most communities in the antebellum South presented businessmen with more challenges. Scouting economic opportunities in 1832 Brownsville, Tennessee, on behalf of a merchant friend, Thomas Potter declared "in pecuniary matters the people here are generally extravagant... merchants do & have done a first rate business here often for a while at least" but Potter predicted with many household bills exceeding one thousand dollars, officers of the court would do the best business. Such a business environment, though plagued with credit problems, at least held out some hope for economic success, and eventual bill collections, for the prospective storekeeper. Worse yet were the frontier conditions in Mississippi where one businessman declared

13Suzanne L. Summers' analysis of merchants in Houston and Galveston found that "a sizable portion in each city had at least one blood relative or in-law working in commerce." In Houston 85 percent of those merchants with identifiable backgrounds had at least one family member in trade while in Galveston 56 percent of the merchants were related to someone in commerce. See, Suzanne L. Sommers, "The Geographic and Social Origins of Antebellum Merchants in Houston and Galveston, Texas, 1836-1860," Essays in Economic and Business History 15 (1997): 95-107.
corruption and incompetence in the state judiciary prevented merchants from collecting any money owed to them. The numerous economic factors merchants considered when deciding upon a store location had to be balanced against the demands their families imposed.14

Family obligations influenced business locations in various ways. Parents often wanted merchant sons to live nearby, sibling bonds and business networks frequently overlapped, and at times an aging grocer looked to his or her children for daily assistance. Such family responsibilities occasionally ran counter to good business. Like many nineteenth-century Americans, southern merchants confronted tremendous emotional strain when they moved their families to the seemingly verdant commercial pastures beckoning in the West. The example of merchant Christian Deurr reveals how business location and family relationships, in this case a marriage, influenced each other.

Born in Mecklingen, Württemberg, twenty-four year-old Christian Duerr immigrated to Suwannee Springs, Florida sometime in 1839. Once settled in his new home, Duerr made a living as a merchant, auctioneer, and land speculator. His personal life kept pace with his growing business activities. In 1841 Duerr married Mary Standley Dell, daughter of Colonel Bennett M. Dell, a Florida planter of some means. Before the year was over, however, the young couples' glow of marital bliss waned beneath the responsibilities of parenthood and the weight of business setbacks. Duerr's solution was to move to Harris County, Texas, located near the Gulf of Mexico. There he expected his store to thrive on regional trade and the proceeds from the state's growing cotton economy. The move was a wise business decision but almost destroyed the Duerr marriage. Removal from Suwannee Springs and her father left Mary Duerr distraught. She begged Duerr to move the family back to Florida where her father would help

14Howze Journal, 28 September 1853, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), Jackson, Mississippi; Thomas Potter to Charles Jacocks, 5 February 1832, Charles W. Jacocks Papers, North Carolina State Archives (NCSA), Raleigh, North Carolina; Journal of Commerce in Carolina Watchman, 21 June 1839.
establish him as a cotton planter. Her remonstrations failed to change her husband’s mind but she caught Duerr’s attention when she visited her Florida home in 1843 in order to have a child and proved reluctant to return to Texas. Minding the store in Texas, Duerr read his wife’s letters with anxiety and puzzlement. It seemed clear to him that his family’s economic future rested in Texas, yet the separation from his wife and children left him doubting his priorities. Duerr’s notes at this time abound with themes of self-pity and abandonment. He declared his wife essential to his happiness and "dearer to me than everything else," but he never seriously considered moving his business back to Florida. The Texas store offered the possibility of too much profit. Despite appeals from his wife and father-in-law and the tribulations of an irresponsible clerk, Duerr told his wife that his pride "to even seem to be dependent upon anybody for a subsistence" and his hope for prosperity in Texas would never allow him to remove his family. After eight months, Mary Duerr relented and returned to Texas with their children. Unfortunately the Duerr’s left no personal documents after 1845, thus it is impossible to determine what contentment they may have found in their marriage. The record does reveal that Duerr’s business acumen served him well. The 1850 census reported Duerr owning four thousand dollars in real estate, while the investment his store represented, including outstanding debts and stock, easily surpassed this figure. The Duerr’s move to Texas made financial sense but exacted a heavy emotional toll on the family.15

A promising business location offered a young merchant no advantage without the necessary capital to open a store. Not surprisingly, many entering commercial trade in the antebellum South depended upon financial assistance from their families. Historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown has suggested this type of support represented the primary source

15 The best study on the strain westward migration caused southern families is Joan E. Cashin, A Family Venture; see also, O’Wlsley, Plain Folk, 74-76. John Mack Faragher’s monograph, Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), examined the impact of migration and subsequent community development in a northern setting. Duerr Diary, 23 June, 2 July, 31 December 1843, Mary Duerr to Christian Duerr, 1 August 1843, Christian Duerr to Mary Duerr, 21 August 1843, Christian Friedrich Duerr Papers, (CAH); Manuscript Census, Harris County, Texas, 1830.
of capital for southern businesses. He also maintained parental aid or wealth gained through an advantageous wedding was a peculiarly southern method of financing a small business. There is no doubt that family loans, gifts, and legacies provided an important means of building many small businesses across the antebellum South. There is little evidence to suggest, however, that family capital did not benefit merchants throughout the antebellum North and South relatively equally. The credit reports compiled by the R.G. Dun & Company, a major source for nineteenth-century business history, reveals investigators in both the North and South reported the amount of financial support merchants received from their families.\textsuperscript{16}

An informal sample of southern reports indicates references to parental or marital financial support in approximately 10 percent of the cases. Yet even these references can be misleading when a merchant placed property in his wife's name. After several business failures, Vicksburg storekeeper William Biggs kept most of his property in his wife's name in order to have "little of his own the law could reach." Furthermore, credit reports rarely disclosed how parents and in-laws could burden merchants. Operating a store in Port Gibson, Mississippi, Horace Carpenter, described in one R.G. Dun report as a "trifling picayune," complained that his wife's undeserving family demanded his continual financial assistance. Like many antebellum storekeepers living in the West, Mississippian Samuel Aby regularly sent money to his parents in Virginia. As he explained to his father in one letter, the thirty dollars the merchant enclosed represented all the funds left to him. He needed "every dollar" to meet his business obligations. Family resources often provided critical start-up capital for southern businesses, but obligations to parents and kin could drain precious wealth from merchants as well. Most merchants supplemented,

\textsuperscript{16}Bertram Wyatt-Brown, \textit{Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 214-17. The R.G. Dun & Co. records consist of the confidential, handwritten credit reports of the investigators hired by the firm for the period 1841-81.
or avoided altogether, falling into debt to their families by obtaining start-up capital through credit and business partnerships.\(^\text{17}\)

Virtually all commercial enterprises in the antebellum South, from the nearly insolvent country store to the largest wholesale houses in New Orleans or Charleston, depended upon northern credit for their survival. Most merchants, even those with few assets and little experience, could obtain six months' credit from northern wholesalers. The inherent risk of liberal credit led wholesalers to charge southern merchants exorbitant rates of interest, the cost of which was eventually passed along to customers in the form of inflated prices. Yet to acquire the necessary credit to stock a minimally competitive store or grocery, usually at least $2500 worth of goods but preferably twice this amount, the vast majority of businessmen entered into partnership agreements with one or more individuals. Many successful partnerships developed out of personal and economic alliances between young clerks who eventually saved enough capital to open their own store. Occasionally would-be merchants appealed directly to established members of the mercantile trade they hardly knew for start-up funds. Two young men desiring to open a Texas store proposed that merchant John Adriance furnish them with stock and start-up capital for a shop to serve the country market. The men promised to pay Adriance back with interest but they seemingly had few assets, only their belief that "thar can been some cash made at the business if Juditiously manedged." If Adriance refused to furnish the men with the goods they required, dozens of southern merchant wholesalers, and many more of their colleagues in Philadelphia and New York City, accepted the hazards of making such loans as part of the price of doing business in the undercapitalized South.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{17}\)In my sample of thirty-three entries, three make definite reference to the financial backing of a parent or spouse. William Biggs, Mississippi, vol. 21, p. 97, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration (HGSB); Horace Carpenter, Mississippi, vol. 6, p. 177, R.G. Dun & Collection HGSB; Horace Carpenter to Philinía Carpenter, 4 October 1825, Carpenter Family Correspondence, TSLA; Samuel H. Aby to Jonas (?) Aby, 3 January 1842, Aby Family Papers, (MDAH).

The obstacles young clerks and farmers confronted when becoming merchants paralleled in some respects those faced by the planter class in the antebellum South. Attaining independence as a southern cotton planter certainly required occasional relocation and the financial capital necessary for purchasing land, supplies, and slaves. Closer examination, however, suggests the experience of the merchant and his or her family deviated from the standard historical model of the planter family in important ways. Customers, not fertile land, typically drew antebellum merchants to settle in the southern Black Belt and Mississippi Delta. Country and town merchants continued to rely upon a strong agricultural economy for their survival but they viewed this dependence as an indirect one. This separation from the soil, albeit inconsiderable, subtly influenced merchant culture. Founding a business represented only the formative stage in this cultural process. Once they were established, antebellum storekeepers and wholesalers largely embraced the changes business demanded of them and their families. The daily business activities these merchants performed illustrate the close and unique relationship between commercial work and family values in the antebellum South. Those issues that governed the public world of southern businessmen and women, credit, partnerships, purchasing trips, and employer-employee relations, among others, left their mark upon merchant family culture as well.

Commercial Work and the Making of the Merchant Family

Credit and debt concerns plagued the everyday working lives of the southern merchants. Many of their neighbors, particularly in the planter class, made loans and sought financial credit both at the local and national level. The crucial difference between merchants and wealthy planters rested in the assets and motivations these two groups

Adriance, 30 May 1846, John Adriance Papers, (CAH). The misspellings were committed by the author. In another example a David Brewster of Laurel, Kentucky, asked merchant Thomas Howard for "a few goods about the amount you once told me you started on" later adding "excuse my plane way of Riting . . . you were very Rich and me in moderate circumstances;" David Brewster to Thomas Howard, 8 November 1838, (FCHS).
possessed. Large planting families typically viewed the occasional loans they made to neighbors not only as a means of building goodwill in case they themselves should require financial assistance in the future, but also as an effective way to strengthen political and social connections. Additionally, the debt planters incurred while conducting business with cotton factors and eastern businessmen was backed by their assets—cotton, land, and slaves—and, at least in theory, represented an investment in their plantations.

Most merchant families had a very different experience with credit and debt. In a capital-poor antebellum South, credit and debt represented the lifeblood to a successful retail enterprise. The loans merchants made to their customers certainly held social significance but, more importantly, it was an economic relationship. Storekeepers expected their customers to pay their bills. Likewise, few merchants expected to obtain credit from northern wholesalers on the strength of their personal assets. Small and middling southern retail agents, like merchants throughout America and western Europe, understood that a reputation for sound business practices was essential to gaining access to credit. In the antebellum South, a merchant's standing not only rested on his business skills but upon his moral character and family relations as well.¹⁹

Over the course of the antebellum period, several mercantile credit-rating agencies, the most influential being Arthur and Lewis Tappan's R.G. Dun and Company, recruited hundreds of agents from across the United States to evaluate the creditworthiness of merchants for New York wholesalers and lenders. In 1859 the southern business community obtained $131 million in credit from New York City alone. By the late 1840s small town lawyers, those most often chosen to be credit investigators, could make-or-break a local merchant's credit rating in northern cities. Aside from

summarizing real and personal assets, investigators frequently commented upon the
class of particular merchants and their families. Thus one investigator was shocked to
learn that Mississippi storekeeper Samuel Aby proposed to pay only thirty cents on the
dollar on his outstanding loans when his wife rode in a "splendid" new carriage. Another
R.G. Dun investigator described the Tennessee firm of Pryor & Pregmore as "hardly safe"
because one partner, Jackson Pryor, seemed increasingly "dissipated." Though they railed
against this invasion of their private lives, successful retail agents learned to practice
those personal habits most likely to win favor with creditors and customers alike.20

Located in Thibodeaux, Louisiana, storekeeper Edward Murphy certainly
recognized the importance of reputation to a southern businessman. In the spring of 1849
he procured on credit a large quantity of medicine and numerous doctor's visits for his
dying father-in-law. When his father-in-law died and the bills came due, Murphy
expected his mother-in-law to help pay the debt. When she initially refused to pay he had
to borrow more money in order to sustain his credit with his wholesalers and keep his
local standing in Thibodeaux secure. Murphy berated the mother-in-law to his wife
Josephine, complaining that she "keeps me back" and strongly implied he would sue her
if she were not family. Murphy claimed he only asked that his mother-in-law "deal with
us as she deals with strangers." Murphy's good name with his customers, business
colleagues, and, most importantly, his creditors could have been sullied by his mother-in-
law's delinquent conduct. The seemingly ham-handed way Murphy manipulated his wife's
emotions and shamed his mother-in-law into paying her medical bills threatened to tear

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20 Sellers, Market Revolution, 267-68. Agencies like R.G. Dun & Co. relied upon lawyers who would
charge nothing for the initial investigation with the promise that if a merchant should fail to pay his debt to a
northern wholesaler the lawyer would gain that wholesaler, and of course a commission, in any subsequent
lawsuits. Atherton, "Credit Rating," 534, 542-45, 551; Southern Country Store, 128; Jane H. Pease and
William H. Pease, Ladies, Women, & Wenchens: Choice & Constraint in Antebellum Charleston & Boston
(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 17; Toby L. Ditz, "Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity
Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century
Philadelphia," Journal of American History 81 (June 1994): 54-8, 67; Mississippi, vol. 6, p. 137,
the family apart. He obviously believed the future of his store was worth the risk. In time Murphy's mother-in-law paid the bill and peace was restored in the merchant household. More important to Murphy, his reputation did not suffer. Two years later a local R.G. Dun investigator characterized Murphy as an industrious man possessing excellent business habits and high standing in the neighborhood. Murphy succeeded, in part, by compelling his family to structure their own lives around his business ethics. His actions exemplified the commercial worldview best articulated by southern merchant Isham Howze who declared "the man who owes money which he cannot pay when called upon for it, is not a free man"—or a man who can obtain more credit.21

Ironically, southern businessmen and women found themselves judging the creditworthiness of their own neighbors in much the same manner northern mercantile agencies investigated them. Debt and credit considerations altered the relationship southern merchants shared with their neighbors and customers. Few planters or yeoman farmers felt obligated to extend repeated loans to their neighbors. Particularly for the former, political and social considerations typically guided such decisions. Conversely most retail operations in the antebellum South depended upon credit purchases for the bulk of their business. Historian Lewis Atherton estimated that between 60 to 75 percent of all merchandise purchased by farmers was obtained on credit where the storekeeper would collect accounts once a year—usually January 1. These circumstances inevitably affected the position of the merchant family in southern communities. Storekeepers and their kin scrutinized customers for signs of economic difficulties or moral lapses that could hinder the discharge of debt. When lawyer-merchant Jonathan Worth had difficulty collecting money from one of his customers in North Carolina he judged him "not an honest man" and consoled himself with the knowledge that "this fact is acquiring

21Edward Murphy to Josephine Cross Murphy, 21 April 1849, Murphy Family Papers, The Historic New Orleans Collection (HNOC), Williams Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana; Louisiana, vol. 6, p. 176, R.G. Dun & Co., HGSB; Howze Journal, 17 January 1853, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH).
notoriety." Worth frequently looked to his family, particularly his brothers, for help in collecting bills or information regarding his customers. He also used his significant influence as a neighborhood creditor to encourage poor debtors to work on various building projects he conducted in and around Asheboro. Over the course of his career, Worth came to understand what all southern merchants learned in time, that fluctuating cotton prices and the vagaries of human nature ensured most retail operators would accumulate a certain amount of bad debt on their books.22

Attempts to collect from destitute or shirking customers, often through the courts, necessarily divided community sympathies and sustained the increasing cultural divide between merchant families and their neighbors [see chapters 2 and 3]. Though distinguished by his adamant style, Nashville merchant James H. Turner spoke for many of his colleagues when he ran a notice in the Nashville Republican and State Gazette declaring that after six weeks of bill collecting, "I WANT MONEY!! . . . I am compelled to have CASH to pay my debts, and do not like to dun." Whether collecting from debtor customers or establishing their own creditworthiness to northern mercantile agencies, retail operators in the antebellum South recognized the sundry ways family could influence their businesses. More fundamentally, the personal conduct required to gain access to credit meant that the practices and values these families embraced were cast in a commercial die.23

Partnership agreements proved to be another convention of the nineteenth-century commercial trade that both transformed merchant families and distinguished them from most southerners. Indeed by enabling young men and women to pool their resources, business partnerships served as a cornerstone of the southern retail trade. To be sure,

23Nashville Republican and State Gazette (Nashville, TN), 29 March 1833.
southerners outside the mercantile trade entered into partnership agreements. North Carolina Governor John M. Morehead and jurist Thomas Ruffin shared an interest in the development of that state's railroads while planter James Henry Hammond invested in William Gregg's textile enterprise in Graniteville, South Carolina. Practicing lawyers frequently created partnerships as well. Yet both the regularity and character of mercantile partnerships made them unique.24

Most business partnership contracts were short-lived. Single store agreements, the most prevalent contract in the antebellum South, outlined the economic duties expected from each partner. These contracts usually had to be renewed annually or at the least every three years. Virtually every contract provided a terminal date whereupon adjustments could be made within the partnership or the business relationship dissolved and accounts settled. The partnership agreement between James F. Perry and Alexander Somervell reveals the possible variations within such contracts. As proprietors of the firm Perry & Somervell, located in San Felipe de Austin, Texas, Perry agreed to furnish all the stock, on which Somervell would pay 10 percent on one-half of the goods per year. Somervell would also transact all the firm's business while profits would be split equally between the two men. Kentucky merchants Edward S. Haydon and Haden E. Stone formed a more balanced partnership where each agreed to furnish one thousand dollars capital and split profits and losses equally. They presumed that their clerk would perform most of the daily labor around the store. Shrewd mercantile partnerships could strengthen a firm's credit rating, increase store sales, and build economic alliances. These business relationships had a powerful influence on families as well. The mercantile partnership often represented the most important bond a retail operator had outside his or her family.

24 All of the merchants I have investigated in both manuscript collections and credit reports were engaged in business partnerships with one or more parties. Of course wholly independent merchants did operate in the antebellum South but their numbers remained quite low. Paul D. Escott, Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900. The Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 5; Drew Gilpin Faust, James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1982), 111.
Not surprisingly, their financial ties, combined with hours working together at a store or grocery, often led business partners to develop strong personal attachments.25

The evolution of the firm Howze, Brady, & Pace located in Marshall County, Mississippi, demonstrates how a business partnership could affect merchant households. Two of the three partners, Isham Howze and Tom Brady, had previous experience in the retail profession while Pace provided much of the firm's start-up capital. Howze, at age fifty-eight the oldest of the three, had a clear vision of what each partner's roles were to be over the course of their three year contract. Chronically ill and relatively old, Howze would keep the store's financial records while Brady and Pace would perform "all the selling and hard drudgery" of stocking and keeping inventory. Thought to have "good taste, good judgment, and sufficient confidence in himself," Brady was also to make the annual trip East where he would purchase the firm's goods. This business arrangement benefited all the partners, particularly Brady, who was finally able to make the leap from a clerking position, where he had shown "very good" business habits, to the ranks of the merchant class.

Soon after the store opened Brady began spending considerable time with the Howze family. Indeed it seems for several weeks he boarded with Howze and his wife Elizabeth. Within a year Brady was attending local parties with the Howzes' oldest son, twenty-two year-old George Adrian. Howze hoped the camaraderie between his partner and son would prove beneficial to both young men. Howze's confidence seems to have been well placed, for upon his death in 1857 Brady continued to remain in close contact with Elizabeth and the Howze children long after the business of the firm had been settled. Days they spent working behind the store counter, going over the books, and

simply passing the time discussing politics and religion produced more than a mere business connection between the partners of Howze, Brady, & Pace. Their mercantile partnership swiftly generated a social network of dinners, revivals, and political meetings that included their families. Like many storekeepers in the antebellum South, the partners of Howze, Brady, & Pace belonged to an occupation where their professional and personal lives disappeared into one another. Even those in the business community who enjoyed less than harmonious relations with their partners found that this connection encroached upon their personal lives.26

North Carolina merchant Cushing B. Hassell hoped for the best when he entered into a partnership with William S. Williams, the younger brother of a trusted former partner Henry Williams, but things did not turn out well. At the very least the arrangement seemed to answer the capital needs of his Williamston store but less than one month after the contract had been signed the two businessmen were at odds over their finances and work responsibilities. Hassell claimed he would be dashing about the counter serving customers while Williams would be "looking on suspiciously or in the Counting Room scrutinizing his conduct & hinting his suspicions to his brother." Additionally, Williams would hurt the store's business by dismissing the value of their goods in the presence of customers. Hassell offered no rationale for Williams's odd behavior aside from his partner's apparent jealous nature. The enmity between the two men quickly led to the dissolution of the firm. During the financial turmoil of 1837, before the partnership was a year-old, Williams fled Williamston leaving Hassell with losses amounting to fifteen hundred dollars for the year and another thirty thousand dollars left to be collected from customers. Like many troubled partnerships during the antebellum period, both parties ended up in court. After several years Hassell eventually

26 Howze Journal, 5 June 1854, 21 July 1853, 22 February 1855, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH); Mississippi, vol. 15, p. 19, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, (HGSB).
collected at least some financial compensation from the suspicious Williams but the experience left its mark upon his family. The "evil eye of his partner" had made the family, particularly the Hassell children, feel ridiculous and embarrassed publicly. In light of the travails his father encountered in the business world, Theodore Hassell came to view the mercantile trade with distrust and anger. During his youth only his home served as a safe haven from a chaotic business world. Theodore Hassell believed the demands of trade and individuals like Williams compelled good men like his father "to grind the faces of the poor" or suffer financial loss. The emotional toll a failed partnership could have on a merchant family left a legacy that could not be measured in any business ledger.27

As parties to business partnerships, most southern merchants found the necessary time and resources that allowed them to practice a third business convention that influenced their family culture—northern buying trips. Over the course of the antebellum period, hundreds of southern merchants sallied forth annually from their homes to purchase dry goods, hardware, and even some kinds of groceries in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York City, and Boston. Included in this group were the vast majority of medium and large scale general stores, those grossing at least five thousand dollars per year, and even some marginal firms. The business these merchants brought with them represented a boon to seaboard cities. For example, in 1849 southern retail operators purchased seventy-six million dollars in merchandise in New York City alone. Ten years later these sales had almost doubled to $131 million. As early as 1822 successful merchants like Horace Carpenter from Port Gibson, Mississippi, purchased over seventeen thousand dollars worth of goods in New York City. Six years earlier Benjamin

27 Hassell Diary and Autobiography, 1837-38, Introduction, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, Southern Historical Collection (SHC), University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Of course a tremendous range of issues caused discord within southern business partnerships. John Dunlap's experience in an 1844 New Orleans firm was typical. He complained to his wife Beatrice in Augusta, Georgia that his partners lacked industrious habits and business acumen thus making his job that much more difficult. Contrasting definitions of proper business conduct and personal values left many partners divided estranged from each other (see chapter 3); John Dunlap to Beatrice Dunlap, 6 November, 10 November 1844, Dunlap Correspondence, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library (HTML), Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.
Smith, another Port Gibson storekeeper, brought home a "handsome assortment" of goods from Philadelphia worth at least twenty-five thousand dollars. More typical was Cushing Hassell's commercial junket in 1848 to Gotham where he spent eight thousand dollars on goods. Aside from the wholesale or auction price of their northern goods, southern merchants had to pay charges for freight and insurance as well. James Perry paid $23.26 in drayage fees simply to have his purchased goods placed on a packet ship in Philadelphia for removal to his Missouri store. He paid another $111.55 to the American Insurance Company to insure the goods. Overall the minimum cost for buying in the East easily reached three hundred dollars. Business representatives to the Third Commercial Convention (1838) held in Augusta, Georgia, concluded that the expense of a New York City buying trip for a merchant from Montgomery, Alabama, covering everything but the cost of the goods themselves, totaled $1,383. These trips required southern merchants' to sacrifice considerable time and money yet most were able to make the journey. By the late antebellum period southern nationalists opposed these trips on the grounds that they impaired the growth of a strong, independent mercantile trade below the Mason-Dixon line. These protests aside, the rationale for southern merchants to buy their goods in northern cities remained compelling.28

Southern merchants ventured North to purchase their wares because it was there that they found credit, selection, and prestige. Despite the vocal boosterism of the financial and civic leaders in cities like Richmond and Charleston, no southern city could

28Atherton, Southern Country Store, 57-61, 321. Atherton estimated at least a third of all western storekeepers traveled East for goods. My informal sample suggests even higher rates for southern merchants, see, Atherton, Frontier Merchant, 69-71. Horace Carpenter to William Carpenter, 5 September 1822, Carpenter Family Correspondence, (TSLA); Benjamin Smith to Abram Barnes, 5 October 1816, Barnes-Willis Family Papers, (CAH); Hassell Diary, 6 March to 1 April 1848, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC); Drayage and Insurance Receipt, 21 October 1830, Perry (James Franklin and Stephen Samuel) Papers, (CAH). Of course one must remember that the Commercial Convention movement called for direct trade between Europe and the South thus they would tend to inflate the cost of purchasing goods in the North, see, Minutes of the Proceedings of the Third Commercial Convention, Held in Augusta, Georgia, in October, 1838; with the Report of the Committee on the Object of the Convention, by James Gadsden, Chairman (Augusta: Benj. Brantly, Book and Job Printer, 1838), 15.
rival the capital reserves of the wholesale merchants in Philadelphia and New York City. Only New Orleans offered significant competition for the business of southern merchants but even with its pivotal location at the mouth of the Mississippi and the low interest loans its banks could offer, the city split the business of southwestern merchants with the North. In addition, storekeepers claimed that northern wholesalers offered the widest selection of merchandise. When Louisville merchant George Meriwether wanted the latest styles of silk shawls or Liverpool ware he went to Joseph Robard or Henry O'Neill & Co. in New York City. The desire for "New York Goods" among southern merchants and their customers hardly abated over distance. Only the finest eastern clothing and "pantaloon stuffs" could satisfy the patrons of Robert Crawford's store in Washington, Texas. The prestige associated with selling the latest goods from New York City, London, and Paris offered yet another reason for southern merchants to buy their merchandise in the North. Despite the obvious dangers associated with these buying trips, including shipwrecks, fluctuating interest rates, and theft, most southern storekeepers believed the trade's advantages outweighed its risks. Viewing these trips as crucial to business success, merchants considered the profound effect the practice had upon their families as regrettable but necessary. Separated families represented yet another price attending commercial business in the antebellum South.29

The expanding transportation network of steamboats and railroads did nevertheless decrease the amount of time merchants spent apart from their families. When his partner required only three weeks to complete a buying trip to the North in 1857, Isham Howze declared "how swift the times are—steam has wrought wonders." For

29Not surprisingly the rising tide of sectionalism after 1850 led many southern leaders to call for the region's business community to end its trade with the North, see, Richmond Republican in Charleston Mercury (South Carolina), 27 March 1850, 28 February 1851; Richmond Enquirer (Virginia), 27 September 1851, 6 August 1855; Winnsboro Register (South Carolina) in Charleston Mercury, 5 September 1853. New Orleans served as a primary distribution point for groceries and other more perishable items. See for example, Anton F. Wulff to John Leyendecker, 5 June 1856, John Zirvas Leyendecker Papers, (CAH); Business Receipts, August 1815, George Wood Meriwether Papers, (FCHS); Robert Crawford to the firm of Beardslee & Adriance, 27 November 1837, John Adriance Papers, (CAH).
most merchants such expeditious and trouble-free commercial trips were rare. Poor weather, mechanical breakdowns, and business upheaval in northern cities made for trips lasting between four to eight weeks. It is little wonder then why business colleagues and friends regularly expressed concern and "earnest petitions" over the welfare of a departing merchant. Likewise congratulations abounded when merchants and their goods safely returned. The regular, prolonged absence of merchants from their homes influenced their families in numerous ways. The example from the beginning of the chapter suggests how business trips affected the marriage of John and Lydia Adriance. When Horace Carpenter returned to his Mississippi home after conducting business in New York City he was introduced to his strapping six week-old son. These family separations saw children born, parents die, and marriages evolve. Few prosperous merchants desired their wives' help behind the counter, because, at least in theory, partners and clerks performed such duties. Yet the long absences of merchant husbands and fathers inevitably weakened patriarchal authority in various small ways. Louisiana storekeeper Edward Murphy's experience is illustrative.30

Before leaving on a purchasing trip in 1852 to the North, Murphy acquainted his wife Josephine with the operation of their store. He seemed particularly concerned about the safety of his merchandise, telling Josephine "you cant be too careful of fire, make the people put out their lights before you go to bed and see that the fire is out in the store." Aside from raising their infant son, Josephine Murphy had the added responsibility of supervising the family's slaves and clerks while Edward Murphy scoured northern wholesale markets for bargains. The duties merchant wives discharged, especially when

30Howze Journal, 13 March 1857, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH); Perkins Diary, 15 July 1849, 22 September 1850, Constantine Osborne Perkins Papers, Virginia Historical Society (VHS), Richmond, Virginia; Horace Carpenter to William and Charity Carpenter, 23 September 1822, Carpenter Family Correspondence, (TSLA). Some merchants avoided long absences from their families by bringing their wives and children with them. This practice avoided straining familial relations but also shaped these families in rather unique ways. See, Samuel Aby to Charles Aby, 31 July 1853, Aby Family Papers, (MDAH).
their husbands' were away, left them living within a unique cultural middle ground between northern and southern women that will be explored in chapter three. In the end many wives and children in these households viewed the demands of the mercantile trade with great ambivalence. The same commerce that provided families with a relatively high standard of living also required fathers, and on rare occasions mothers, to leave home for weeks at a time.31

The merchant-clerk relationship proved to be another critical feature of antebellum commercial trade that distinguished merchants and their families from the rest of southern society. On a daily basis grocers and storekeepers were among the few southerners who hired and worked alongside employees. During a prosperous year a modestly successful merchant like Cushing Hassell hired three white clerks in addition to the two black slaves already working in his store. In 1859 the wealthy firm of Beach & Root employed at least nine different clerks in their large store in Atlanta, Georgia. The 1860 Federal Census reports that 298 clerks worked in Dinwiddie County, Virginia, representing over 43 percent of the population involved in the retail trade. Even rural Buckingham County, Virginia, boasted sixteen clerks in a commercial population of fifty-nine people. Of course most storekeepers hired only one or two clerks per year while a significant number of smaller establishments survived without any help at all. Nevertheless, the merchant-clerk relationship, in both a commercial and personal context, was rather unique in the antebellum South. A brief examination of the ties planters and overseers shared suggests the exceptional bond between southern merchants and clerks.32

Planters and their overseers betrayed a wretched state of relations during the antebellum period. The impossible expectations of southern slaveholders could never be

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31 Edward Murphy to Josephine Murphy, 20 July 1852, Murphy Family Papers, (HNOC).
32 Hassell Diary, 22 April 1850, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC); Williams’ Atlanta Directory, 57; Manuscript Census, Buckingham County, Virginia, 1860; Manuscript Census, Dinwiddie County, Virginia, 1860.
met by a class of employees deemed overwhelmingly "illiterate" and troublesome. Striking a balance between obtaining efficient work from the slaves under their control without resorting to severe violence, all the while maintaining a deferential attitude toward a demanding employer, proved beyond the ability of many southern overseers. Once again James Henry Hammond spoke for many of his fellow planters when he scornfully remarked "an overseer can't conform to routine more than twice." The contempt planters routinely heaped upon their overseers and the bitterness the latter felt for their employers was qualitatively different than the sentiment found in merchant-clerk relationships. The occasional merchant did criticize his clerk for laziness, stupidity, and other perceived moral failings. Yet most employers proved reluctant to make damning generalizations about their employees as a class. Many merchants learned their trade as clerks. They frequently encouraged family and friends to enter the trade as clerks and work up through the ranks to attain an eventual proprietorship. Rather than a legacy of the southern agrarian tradition, this ideal of occupational achievement resembles the perspective of ambitious young men living in such places as Utica, New York, in the 1840s. A spirit of camaraderie tempered the hierarchy of the antebellum southern store.  

Clerks typically found work through newspaper advertisements and personal connections. The job ads that merchants ran sought clerks with steady habits, good penmanship, and experience with bookkeeping. Personal referrals offered an even more common and trusted procedure for merchants to obtain help. A letter of introduction from an old employer affirming a clerk to be a "gentleman" and in "every way worthy and steady" gave merchants some basis from which to judge a prospective employee. Once a clerk could confirm that he had experience working in a store, meaning that he had

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received a "commercial education," he usually found employment. Obviously family ties could effect the same ends. The income a clerk could earn varied over time and place in the antebellum South. By the 1850s those employed in the prosperous firms located in villages and larger towns alike made several hundred dollars a year. In 1851 B.W. MaCrae earned four hundred and fifty dollars in the Clarksville, Tennessee, firm of John S. Harts while in 1859 Richmond clerk Robert A. Grannis made four hundred dollars plus another twenty dollars in store credit working in the firm of Kent, Paine, & Company. After a year of dependable service Grannis received a one hundred dollar raise in 1860.34

Southern clerks carried out a wide range of duties for their pay. Storekeepers expected their clerks to wait on customers, stock shelves, conduct regular inventories, and occasionally assist with the bookkeeping. The hours spent in the store varied with the demands of a seasonal trade, but most clerks worked at least twelve hours a day. During rush periods, when the remnants of last year's stock had to be sold and new stock unpacked, clerks often worked eighteen-hour days. Describing the increased respect he had for his position at the Nashville firm of Shephard and Gordon, clerk George O'Bryan wrote his mother that despite the fatigue attending his work it hardened his muscles and benefited his health. When young O'Bryan entered his profession the prospect of working consecutive twenty-hour days chilled him, but now he claimed to be "daily waxing stronger." More importantly he believed the Nashville firm to be "the finest place in the world to acquire a knowledge of business." O'Bryan based this conclusion on the merit of the professional and personal attachments he had developed with his employers.35

34*Nashville Republican and State Gazette*, 26 December 1832; R.A. Howard to Major O. Evans, 3 January 1853, John Zirvas Leyendecker Papers, (CAH); Grays Firm to A. Barnes and Linton, 17 August 1824, Barnes-Willis Family Papers, (CAH); Memis Timlin to Robert Collins, 18 April 1860, Henry Patillo Farrow Papers, Hargrett Library (HL), University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia; B.W. MaCrae to A. Amelia MaCrae, 5 February 1851, B.W. MaCrae Correspondence, (TSLA); Grannis Diary, 1 January 1859, 21 January 1860, Robert A. Grannis Diary, (VHS).

35*George O'Bryan to Barcia Norfleet Gordon O'Bryan, 9 September 1851, 1 May 1851, O'Bryan Family Collection, (TSLA).
The bond that developed between clerks like O'Bryan and their merchant employers left its mark on commercial households. Clerks frequently boarded with their employers' families. Merchant households offered stability for young men living away from home for the first time. Likewise, such an arrangement gave merchants ample opportunity to supervise the personal habits of their young clerks. Even older clerks occasionally lived with their employers. When William Biggs, then in his mid-twenties, relocated to New Orleans and assumed a clerking position in the W. Watts Commission Company he and his family lived in the same house with the Watts family. Not surprisingly, Biggs came to know a great deal about his employer's household. Time spent together in the store, as well as after hours often created emotional ties between merchants and their clerks. George O'Bryan considered his employer and fellow clerks to be a "family" that provided him with "a good house, good companions, a good room, a good bed, a good servant that cleans up my room, in truth every thing good." That O'Bryan's employer, the firm of Shephard and Gordon, provided a slave to clean his room is telling. Some storekeepers came to regard their clerks as an important part of their own household. Richmond merchant Horace Kent routinely treated his clerks to supper at Layetelle's and had a select few over for Thanksgiving dinners. Despite the family's obvious wealth, daughter Emma Kent courted several of her father's impecunious clerks and eventually came to marry one after the Civil War. This peculiar amalgam of generosity and self-interest led the firm of Kent, Paine, and Co. to purchase a company pew in a Richmond church for the religious edification of its employees. Merchant wives came to depend upon their husband's clerks for help around the home while children often viewed these young men as boon companions. Thus, in return for their obedience and hard work, young clerks acquired vital commercial experience and received standing within the merchant family and larger community. Such intimacy could make the
merchant-clerk relationship, and the values each embraced, unique in the antebellum South.36

Conclusion

Credit, debt, trade, and merchant-clerk relations fundamentally ordered the lives of southern merchant families. Ranging from such mundane concerns as credit anxiety to the vital buying trips, the conventions of the retail trade distinguished these southerners from the majority of their neighbors. The region's farmers, planters, and artisans often viewed the merchant's commercial world—credit, sales, and trade—with suspicion or outright hostility. Conversely, the southern merchant's family came to view regular separations, paid employees, and partnership risks, as natural and even essential to their livelihood. These business practices, and the domestic changes they produced, enabled merchants and their families to prosper in the antebellum South. Nevertheless, such commercial habits did exact a toll. The economic power merchant families wielded in southern society could appear great but their social standing often remained tenuous. Even the most prominent southern merchant occasionally felt embattled by their critics in the agrarian South. Economic dislocation and jealousy led many in the Old South to challenge merchants and the liberal capitalist gospel their trade presumably spread.

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36 William Biggs to Kader Biggs, 29 April 1842, Kader Biggs Papers, (NCSA); George O'Bryan to Barcia Norfleet Gordon O'Bryan, 12 June 1851, O'Bryan Family Collection, (TSLA); Grannis Diary, 22-30 September, 26 November, 28 December 1858, Robert A. Grannis Diary, (VHS).
CHAPTER 2

THE ANTEBELLUM MERCHANT IN
SOUTHERN SOCIETY

The business activities that ordered the internal lives of merchant families also helped fashion their public identity. Commercial activity, buying, selling, and investing, made merchant families conspicuous in the antebellum South. Every day merchants had to perform before an audience, as it were. Whether selling goods to a reluctant customer, mollifying a nervous creditor, or simply attending church, men and women in merchant families negotiated public roles bound by their trade. Moreover, the parts these commercial actors played in southern communities fundamentally influenced how they were perceived by planters, farmers, and slaves. Successful merchants understood the sundry ways their public behavior could affect profits and made sure they and their families acted accordingly. This chapter will explore this conduct and its influence on the popular image of the merchant in the Old South.

Many white southerners viewed those who participated in the mercantile trade with suspicion. Newspaper editors, politicians, and others who shaped regional opinion expressed great ambivalence towards shopkeepers, factors, and lowly hucksters. These groups appeared to love money too much and their sharp business practices violated community standards. Some feared that virtuous planters and farmers, lured by the merchants' siren song of consumerism, would find themselves awash in debt. Even more troubling was the prospect that these southerners might embrace the servile habits
popularly associated with the commercial profession. The commonly held and false assumption that most merchants operating in the South hailed from Europe and the North, "Jews" and "Yankees," intensified the alarm. The editor of the Richmond Enquirer was hardly alone when he declared excessive commercial activity threatened to become a "curse" upon the Cotton Kingdom. At the same time southern spokesmen had to acknowledge their region's dependence upon the business acumen of its commercial classes.¹

As observed above (chapter one), antebellum southerners regularly obtained a large number of goods from their local merchants. Not surprisingly, such personal dependence upon shopkeepers for imported foodstuffs, medicine, and other necessities could produce tension in southern communities. Yeoman farmers needed and resented merchants at the same time. Likewise, many of the same political leaders who denounced the growing influence of commercialism upon southern character came to regard a lively retail trade as essential to the health of their towns and counties. The evidence suggests that a growing ambivalence prevailed where economic reality met cultural practice. The competing images of the honest, thrifty merchant with that of the grasping businessman represented part of the larger conflict between conservative and liberal capitalist thought in the antebellum economy. Cautious white southerners who regarded merchants as possibly dangerous interlopers in a stable, virtuous agrarian economy clashed with their neighbors. Commercially-oriented southerners viewed the merchants as essential to the financial and even cultural development of their region. The latter viewed the development of a growing mixed-economy as a positive good. In the final analysis both positions had merit and revealed much about southern identity.

The merchant's professional life and public identity centered around their role in selling merchandise to the public. While planters kept accounts of their crops, slaves, and

¹Richmond Enquirer, 30 November 1855.
other farming activities, shopkeepers tried to keep track of their daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly sales. Dependent upon commerce for their livelihood, merchants naturally filled their public and personal writings with business information. Double-entry bookkeeping and other accounting techniques helped some merchants produce a rough estimate of their annual profits. Most retail and wholesale operators were more interested in and better able to track sales and stock accumulation than yearly profit. Figuring annual rates of capital depreciation and appreciation proved particularly troublesome. Many retail operators failed to even distinguish between business capital and total assets or between business and household expenses. Southern merchants did understand that the crop season of cotton, tobacco, sugar, and rice largely dictated their sales. December and January, when farmers had the money to purchase yearly supplies and perhaps a few Christmas treats for their families, saw the highest sales while the summer months were typically "dull" times. In an effort to offset slow sales periods, credit strain, and the cost of transporting goods, merchants typically priced their goods one hundred percent or more above the wholesale cost. Clearly such prices, along with geography, credit, and temperament affected a merchant's ability to turn a profit. Seller and buyer dwelled upon these factors at length in their writings.2

Fluctuating sales often framed how merchants viewed themselves. Funding an expanding debt and growing family, poor sales always brought "the blues" to Atlanta shopkeeper Samuel Richards. Of course what constituted good sales depended upon such factors as the location of the store, its size, and its value. Successful merchants in such urban areas as Atlanta, Louisville, Charleston, and New Orleans typically exceeded several hundred dollars a day in sales. The largest firms could sell thousands of dollars in

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goods on a single day. Conversely village shopkeepers and those living in the rural South often tallied daily sales well below one hundred dollars. Recording strong sales and busy days in account books heartened ambitious southern businessmen, yet even proven merchants endured periods of sluggish trade. Only the very wealthiest merchants in the antebellum South managed to avoid the kind of periodic business crises that shook the confidence of the typical shopkeeper.³

The Southern Economy, Anxious Merchants, and their Customers

For over twenty years Thomas and John Jefferson ran a profitable father-son grocery store in antebellum Louisville. R.G. Dun & Co. variously described their firm as "thrifty, undoubted" and "perfectly good for any debt" but John Jefferson's diary remained fraught with anxiety over business. The young Kentuckian regularly bemoaned the dull months even if sales were good. When the store enjoyed "beautiful" sales days Jefferson still remained chastened by the experience of his less fortunate colleagues. Indeed he need look no further than his uncle Henry Jefferson's new store that opened in August of 1857 with a pitiful one dollar and fifteen cents in sales, a sum that horrified the entire family. Financial anxiety echoes throughout the diaries and letters of the southern merchant classes. Cushing Hassell's Williamston, North Carolina firm, Hassell & Biggs, received strong credit ratings during the antebellum period but still the merchant agonized over monthly sales of "only" one thousand dollars in July or seventeen hundred dollars in January. Of course sluggish trade proved even more daunting for marginal retail businesses. One discouraged Texas shopkeeper described his fifty dollar a week trade as "doing nothing or as nothing as possible." A southern merchant's self-esteem, indeed his very identity, rested heavily upon shifting sales. The diaries and correspondence left by successful businessmen reveal a deep anxiety over the quantity and quality of sales. Proud

³Richards Diary, 24 October 1860, Samuel P. Richards Diary, 1855-1882, Special Collections, Atlanta History Center (AHC); Grannis Diary, 11 April 1860, Robert A. Grannis Diary, Virginia Historical Society (VHS), Richmond, Virginia.
to be members of the mercantile profession, merchants remained wary of their place in southern society. An uncertain commercial economy, suspicion between retailers and their customers, and the public image of the merchant in the antebellum South helped place the region's commercial classes in a cultural middle ground between the North and South.  

Small profit margins and the larger boom-bust economy of antebellum America contributed to the southern merchant's gloomy obsession with sales figures. Once again John Jefferson's store was representative of a larger antebellum store. In 1859 his grocery sold over sixty-five thousand dollars in goods producing approximately three thousand dollars in profit. Likewise, the firm of "Hassell & Biggs" regularly made between one and four thousand dollars every year during the 1850s. Returns for both businesses seem very high when compared to a per capita income in the South, which barely exceeded one hundred dollars in 1860. In reality these figures represented only small returns, if any at all, on the capital these merchants had invested in their stores. Hassell and many other storekeepers found that after factoring in taxes, rents, and growing families, their profits amounted to "scarcely anything." The end of the financial year saw many businessmen reexamining their store logs in the vain hope that they had made some accounting error to their disadvantage. Only the prospect of a boom year or a steady upturn in business gave partners in marginal firms hope in their unpredictable economy.  


5Jefferson Diary, 4 August, 29 September 1859, John F. Jefferson Papers, (FCHS). The per capita income figure is for the entire population, free and slave. The national per capita income for the same year was $128, see Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 247-50, see also Lee Soltow, Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); Hassell Diary, 1 July 1850, 31 Dec. 1858, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC).
The antebellum experience of merchants in the rural Dade County, located in northwest Georgia, is suggestive. The R.G. Dun & Co. kept records on nineteen firms in Dade County. Eleven (61%) of these firms received marginal or unsafe ratings while eight firms (42%) were valued at a modest two thousand dollars or less. Similar to those slaveholders living at the margins of the planter class, Dade County storekeepers with limited means, as well as their colleagues throughout the region, fought to remain solvent. This anxious labor compelled a discipline and psychological cost that impressed merchant identity. Account books had to be kept, sharp deals made, and money employed wisely. The nature of this retail economy generated more than a preoccupation with sales on the part of the commercial classes. Fundamentally it helped govern the relationship between merchants and their customer-neighbors.®

Questions surrounding different currencies, delivery dates, and insurance rates plagued the southern merchant. These issues affected how storekeepers and their neighbors viewed each other as well. The balance between cash and credit sales was a particularly troublesome issue. All merchants hoped for cash sales while most eventually gave credit to cash-strapped customers with the expectation that the debts would be paid after the year's cotton crop was sold. Like many optimistic merchants, John West believed his country store in Buckingham County, Virginia, would not have to rely upon significant credit business. The one great advantage he and his partners enjoyed was their location near the Female Collegiate Institute of Virginia. This Methodist academy housed between thirty-five and fifty young women who regularly purchased such items as hose, pins, lace, and ribbon with cash. Word of this favorable location gained the notice of the R.G. Dun & Co. who reported in 1850 that "John S. West & Co." sold a great deal of

goods to the "Institute girls at a very high price." Yet even this "close fisted business man" found himself forced to give credit to many customers. In addition to farmers from the surrounding countryside, the dozens of students from the Institute relied upon credit for even small expenditures. The primary difference between the two groups being that the young women needed the financial support of their families to obtain credit. At the close of 1860, John West's log book included 265 accounts with planters, yeoman farmers, and numerous students totaling over ten thousand dollars in sales, much of it still uncollected. Even thrifty businessmen like West found themselves seeking payment from customers, occasionally in court, a year or more after the initial sale. Forced to rely upon credit sales for their economic survival, it is not surprising that debt payment influenced how storekeepers related to their customers.

Southern merchants viewed debt collection as a very unpleasant but necessary task. Uncertain business conditions and a mobile clientele compelled most merchants to try and collect any outstanding debt on their books at least every twelve to thirteen months. When B.J. Hobson decided to leave his neighborhood in rural Buckingham County, John West had his business partner hunt their old customer down and have him pay his debt to the store. Like most southern businessmen, West understood that the difference between success and failure in the mercantile trade could rest upon less than a dozen unpaid bills. With this in mind, a motivated storekeeper could resort to extreme measures of collecting bills. One Nashville dry goods merchant ran a newspaper

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7 Lewis Atherton has estimated between 60 and 75 percent of all sales in the antebellum South were on credit, usually in the form of merchandise. He also estimated a 20 percent failure rate for loan repayment over the same period see Atherton, Southern Country Store, 54; Lacy K. Ford, Jr., Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 91; Virginia, vol. 7, p. 600, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, (HGSB); William Agee to John West, 17, 22 March 1858, J.S. West & Co. account book, 1 January 1861, West Family Papers, (VHS); R. W. Bailey, ed., The Patriarch: or Family Library Magazine, vol. I (New York: George A. Peters Publisher, 1841), 214. Steven Tripp has attributed the southern merchant's reluctance to accept credit to their lack of appreciation for the "social value of casual credit and debt networks," see Steven Elliot Tripp, Yankee Town, Southern City: Race and Class Relations in Civil War Lynchburg (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 30. I suggest that more base economic motives encouraged merchants to avoid credit sales when possible, mainly the risk that customers would fail to pay their store accounts.
advertisement that announced "I WANT MY MONEY" while a Lynchburg, Virginia, clothier quipped in his local newspaper that he had "not yet learned to do business [with wholesalers] without money." Plying his trade in Huntsville, Alabama, businessman Alexander A. Campbell declared that he was "hard pushed for cash" and that those indebted to him should pay or "expect to settle with an officer." Sometimes even court judgments failed to help merchants holding debt.⁸

Virginia Robert Preston and his partners owned stores in Alabama and Tennessee where they regularly won court decisions for back payment from debtor customers. By 1830 four years of mixed sales and court appearances left the firm holding over twenty thousand dollars of debt, half of which was considered uncollectable "bad debt." The kind of financial pressures Robert Preston and others felt in their daily experience with debt collection affected the ties with their customer-neighbors. Merchants depended upon the financial discipline and personal scruples of their largely agrarian customer-base for their very economic survival. From the smallest huckster to the largest wholesaler, merchants found this position disconcerting.⁹

Bad debt, produced either by economic depression or unscrupulous customers, drove merchants to distraction. At the same time the income derived from prompt loan payments, "good debt," provided the lifeblood for the mercantile trade and the foundation for commercial power in the antebellum South. This circumstance explains, in part, the often schizophrenic quality of southern merchant's public and private correspondence. After economic dislocation and troublesome customers left him awash in bad debt following the Panic of 1837, storekeeper Samuel Aby wrote his parents from Grand Gulf, Mississippi, "one thing I know that if ever I sell goods again, I must have the cash down

⁸William Agee to John West, 17 March 1858, West Family Papers, (VHS); Nashville Republican & State Gazette, 29 March 1833; Tripp, Yankee Town, 39; Daniel S. Dupre, Transforming the Cotton Frontier: Madison County, Alabama 1800-1840 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1997), 53.
⁹Rhea & McCrabb to Preston & Son, 3 November 1826, Robert Preston to James D. Rhea, 13 February 1829, Preston & Son to Whitehall, Jaudon & Co., 29 December 1830, Preston Family Papers, (VHS);
this credit system has done me great injury." Aby was hardly alone. Southern business correspondence is replete with such declarations but few merchants could afford to turn away the bulk of their trade. During another commercial depression some twenty years later dry goods merchant Benedict Semmes wrote his wife Jorantha that bad debts and poor business led him to lose "all confidence in individuals as well as Banks." In a second letter sent a few weeks later Semmes pursued the subject further, revealing that he had "lost all confidence in every body and am in a constant state of fear." Despite such lamentations, both Semmes and Aby remained in the mercantile trade and continued to depend upon a sizable credit business. Certainly economic necessity dictated that most storekeepers accept at least a limited retail trade built upon credit. Furthermore, as one of the few sources of credit in an agrarian economy, merchants wielded power in their communities that few could deny.10

By denying credit to economically marginal customers and threatening to end its supply to defaulting neighbors, merchants made sure that most southerners managed to pay off their store debt. Evidence suggests some businessmen enjoyed this financial control. Merchant-lawyer Jonathan Worth was one such man who wielded this power and occasionally lorded it over his poorer neighbors. Regarding a particularly derelict customer Worth boasted "Drake never paid a debt before that I know of on demand" but ultimately Drake would pay because "he is afraid of me." This businessman and later politician, described by one North Carolina newspaper as possessing a short body, short fingers, and stooped shoulders, understood how to employ his economic leverage to great effect. Commercial correspondence and public records indicate storekeepers like Jonathan Worth were in a distinct minority within their profession. Merchants tended to find their credit practices, including browbeating their customers to pay bills, an annoying

10Samuel H. Aby to parents (Middletown, Virginia), 18 November 1840, Aby Family Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), Jackson, Mississippi; Benedict Semmes to Jorantha Semmes, 9, 23 October 1857, Benedict Joseph Semmes Papers, (SHC).
necessity. Indeed the most articulate members of this commercial class came to view the loans they made to customers as a special burden they had to bear in order to build a prosperous regional economy. As one Kentucky country storekeeper described the southern condition, a cash-only business offered no inducement for the farmer to raise more than subsistence crops for his family resulting in the merchant selling few goods. Credit sales, even transactions conducted by barter, ultimately diversified and strengthened the local economy. As commercial agents in a cash-starved South, merchants came to view their role in the retail and credit markets as fundamentally virtuous. This conviction both influenced and evolved from the merchant classes' understanding of their place within the antebellum South.11

As already noted, fluctuations within the economy and the difficulties associated with retail credit led many storekeepers and other commercial agents to cast a wary eye on the southern financial order. More fundamentally, the demands imposed by sales and debt practices encouraged merchants to view the political economy of their communities as underdeveloped and turbulent. This perception was strengthened by the boom and bust cycle of the national financial and manufacturing structure, a regional economic system dominated by capital-rich but cash-poor planters, and a growing but still nascent consumer base in a regional slave society. Merchants and others believed this instability could not promote the general welfare in southern society. Rather social harmony had to rest on a strong diversified economy and vigorous civic involvement. Ambitious

merchants made sure they would play a significant part in creating this social and economic order.

The public roles southern merchants performed during the antebellum period betray the influence of both liberal and republican thought. To varying degrees most storekeepers subscribed to an unarticulated liberal capitalist ideal that individual self-interest promoted the general good. They resented having to pay for their mercantile and liquor licenses or government interference in the daily operation of their businesses. The credit and commodities merchants supplied in return for cash or goods represented their contribution to a vibrant economy. At the same time, merchants often embraced a social ethic that called upon the individual to sacrifice his or her interests for the good of the community. This commercial interpretation of traditional agrarian republicanism prompted small storekeepers and large commercial wholesalers to conflate their interests with that of their communities. This worldview led them to conclude true freedom, for individuals as well as societies, did not only resided in agrarian economic independence but in commercial entrepreneurial liberty as well. Their leadership and organizations would bring about greater social harmony while also furthering their business interests. Those in the merchant classes regarded themselves as leading citizens who were devoted to the South and its people. In return they expected a measure of the deference accorded to the region's planter class. Ironically, the very traits and activities that allowed merchants to succeed in the marketplace clashed with certain southern values and produced popular criticism that only further confirmed their outsider status.12

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The Southern Merchant’s Public Roles

Professional and religious organizations represented important arenas where public-spirited merchants and their families could develop southern communities while enhancing their own social position. For example, during the 1830s merchants and other businessmen in Nashville, Tennessee, formally met to discuss strategies for improving mail and transportation services. Along the same lines in 1839 the Mercantile Library Association of Baltimore built a reading room open to all classes and both sexes. A decade later the Mercantile Library Association of Charleston, South Carolina raised over seven hundred dollars for a reading room that would prove a monument to the commercial community's "intelligence, liberality and taste, a credit to their profession, and an honor to our city." Outlining the contributions of its city's merchant community and their board of trade the Richmond Enquirer concluded "in their enterprise, in their sagacity, and in their practical energy, consist the true elements of growth and progress in every commercial community." Middle-class fraternal orders such as the Druids, the Odd Fellows, the Tribe of Red Men, and the Masons claimed many members from the commercial classes. These groups raised money for charitable causes, brought lecturers to town, all the while underlining the respectability of its membership. The wives and older daughters of established merchants frequently participated in such organizations as well. Jane and William Pease have found that in 1830 over 20 percent of the leading women in secular or church-related charities in Charleston, South Carolina, were wives or widows of merchants. In comparison less than 10 percent of this female leadership were married to planters. The available evidence reveals that the southern merchant community were heavily involved in community organizations. This discovery is consistent with what has already been noted regarding the worldview of southern merchants during the antebellum period. They hailed the rise of stable commercial markets but still saw the need for
strong, even paternalistic, leadership by the region's "respectable" classes. Predictably, the Whig party offered the natural political home for these southern citizens.13

The Politics of the Merchant Class

The same cultural values the Whig party publicly espoused during the 1840s, mainly hard work, frugality, domesticity, gentility, and self-improvement, most southern merchants held dear. Similarly both these businessmen and Whig leaders believed economic policies such as the Bank of the United States and federally-funded internal improvements offered the political means to achieve many of their economic goals. A national bank offered the promise of easier credit and a stabilizing force behind state bank notes. Likewise, internal improvements appealed to merchants who generally transported their goods at great cost hundreds of miles from the eastern seaboard over primitive roads and hazardous rivers. Finally the Democratic party itself, particularly under Andrew Jackson, alienated many retail and wholesaler dealers across the South. The merchants' conservative faith in a social hierarchy based on merit clashed with a Jacksonian democratic ethic that celebrated egalitarianism and small government. The contempt most southern merchants felt for the Democratic party was passionate and would only fade before the growing sectional crisis of the 1850s.14

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14 While few historians have investigated popular party affiliations across the South during the Jacksonian era, the evidence that exists suggests merchants overwhelmingly belonged to the Whig Party. One informal sample of frontier merchants, a category that included Texas, Arkansas, as well as several northern states, Lewis E. Artherton determined 70 percent of all merchants belonged to the Whig Party, see The Frontier Merchant in Mid-America (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1971), 33-34. My own sample of over
The correspondence between dry goods merchant Charles Jacocks in North Carolina and his brother Jonathan suggests the disdain southern merchants had for Democratic leaders and the party's values. In early 1834 Jonathan wrote his brother from Washington D.C. where he witnessed the proceedings of Congress and had an opportunity to meet Andrew Jackson. Clearly the encounter with the President did not leave Jacocks in awe as he reported to his like-minded brother "alarming manifestations of the final success of him who rules and has usurped so much popularity, and scattered with so much liberality among his followers 'the spoils of Victory.'" The letter ended with words of praise for Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun. Two weeks later Jonathan Jacocks penned another letter that made explicit the brothers' complaints with Jackson and captured the essence of the future Whig platform. The note related a discussion Jonathan had with several close, unnamed associates of Jackson who declared:

> those who are in debt & all those who do business upon borrowed capital (and they generally embrace the most enterprising part of the community, and are generally truly the Diamond in its rough state,) must and deserve to fail—that he [Jackson] never will restore the Deposits if he can prevent it & that he never will sign a bill chartering or rechartering a National Bank.\(^{15}\)

Such rhetoric made southern merchants suspicious, if not outright hostile, to the Democratic party. To varying degrees most favored some type of national bank but all businessmen understood credit was essential to their way of life. Merchants could not compromise on the availability of borrowed capital. The vehemence of Jonathan and Charles Jacocks' hostility towards Democratic policies seems to have been exceptionally strong even by the standards of their class. Indeed, Jonathan once sarcastically remarked...
he would rather send his son to Germany rather than have him live under the rule of "King Martin." This said, the import of Jonathan Jacock's denunciation of the Democrats generally reflected southern commercial opinion between 1835 and 1850.\textsuperscript{16}

Combining Whig and southern principles, merchants worked to build a liberal capitalist economy with conservative republican social values. For example, as a Whig representative to the North Carolina state legislature during the 1840s, dry goods agent Jonathan Worth supported a strong active state government while challenging the expansion of the suffrage on the grounds it was politically unsound. Outside the halls of government Whig merchants advanced their political agenda in a number of ways. Like dozens of others in his profession, John Burbidge, a storekeeper from Walterboro, South Carolina, attended one of the many commercial conventions held across the South during the antebellum period. These meetings offered a platform for southern commercial men to lobby for favorite Whig issues. Commercial conventions, state and local government, and lyceum halls offered venues where southern merchants joined fellow Whigs and the occasional commercially-oriented Democrat to push for liberal markets and conservative values. They promoted a benevolent, active role for government and the rule of law, two themes they hoped their fellow southerners would rally around. Under the leadership of men like Henry Clay and William Henry Harrison Whigs expected political glory, a virtual "Elysian fields" according to one merchant-farmer in 1840. The antebellum merchant community failed to achieve their political and social objectives. Sectionalism and party rancor destroyed their party while the mass of white southerners never embraced the dissonant values they associated with the merchants working in their communities.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16}Jonathan Jacocks to Charles Jacocks, 20 November 1834, Charles E. Jacocks Papers, (NCSA). Jacocks frequently referred to Martin Van Buren and Andrew Jackson as self-proclaimed "Kings" in his correspondence with his brother.

\textsuperscript{17}Zuber, Jonathan Worth, 37-40; John Burbidge to Rosina Mix, 7 May 1839, Rosina Mix Papers, (SHC); Minutes of the Proceedings of the Third Commercial Convention, Held in Augusta, Georgia, in October.
Throughout the antebellum period the southern commercial classes tended to support unionist, nationalist principles. Evidence suggests that most retail and wholesale businessmen opposed the protective tariffs of 1828 and 1832 but were at the same time quick to denounce John C. Calhoun's nullification doctrine. Twenty years later during the sectional political upheavals in 1850 merchants continued to be strong opponents of fire-eating states' rights principles. During the secession debates held in South Carolina, Lacy Ford has found that the vast majority of upcountry merchants and entrepreneurs opposed secession and supported political compromise. The same crisis led Mississippi storekeeper Isham Howze, a self-described "union man" and "law-abiding man," to support political leaders who favored the Compromise of 1850. He remained confident that "God is on the side of union men, and will sustain their cause." At the close of 1852 Howze continued to bitterly denounce the fire-eating secessionist in his diary as "an enemy of God and man" and deserving to be "hung upon a gallows as high as that of Haman." Even as the as the Whig party disappeared amid the decade's growing sectional discord, southern merchants often remained pragmatic, even fervent, unionists.18

Feeling politically abandoned after their poor showing in the national elections of 1852, many Whig businessmen expressed their frustration at the lack of alternatives in a South increasingly dominated by the Democratic party. Merchants like North Carolinian Cushing Hassell condemned the Republicans as an "abolition party" while remaining cool to his Democratic neighbors. Such men defended slavery and attacked the apparent Republican threat to their region's institutions yet continued to seek an honorable

1838: with the Report of the Committee on the Object of the Convention, by James Gadsden, Chairman (Augusta: Benj. Brantly, Book and Job Printer, 1838), 3-10; John M. Sacher, "The Sudden Collapse of the Louisiana Whig Party," Journal of Southern History 55 (May 1999): 226. Asa Biggs, a member of a large North Carolina mercantile family, is an excellent example of a strong states' rights, commercially-oriented leader in his state's Democratic party. A strong supporter of Andrew Jackson, Biggs vilified local Whigs all the while supporting internal improvements and other policies that would have warmed the heart of Henry Clay, see Asa Biggs to Kader Biggs, 12, 24 December 1844, Kader Biggs Papers, (NCSA); Daily Journal (Wilmington, NC), 1 July 1853; James Evans to brother, 7 November 1840, James Evans Papers, (SHC). 18Zuber, Jonathan Worth, 37-40; Ford, Origins of Southern Radicalism, 207-8; Howze Journal, 1851, 1 July, 30 November 1852, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH).
compromise with the North. Evidence suggests that a majority of businessmen in 1860, if they voted at all, supported the unionist platform of the Constitutional Union party. After the election, when momentum for secession became irresistible, cultural ties and economic pragmatism led most in the southern mercantile classes to accept the political reality of the Confederate States of America. By early 1861 some merchants had joined the leading ranks of secessionists in their communities while others had not nor ever would fully embrace the Confederacy. At this late date one of the few surviving bonds that tied these disparate political factions together was the realization that their economic goals for their section, the policies most associated with the Whig party, failed to gain a strong foothold in the South. Commercial conventions and occasional Whig victories did not create a diversified economy in an antebellum South where cotton and its court, the planter class, remained king. Equally troubling to the commercial classes, their social status within the agrarian South remained marginal.19

A few merchants gained positions of cultural authority within their communities but most white southerners viewed the mercantile trade with great ambivalence. Ironically, the very attributes that made a storekeeper successful, prudence and economy, led many of their fellow southerners to regard merchants as cultural interlopers—individuals wanting in those virtues essential to southern character. Most people recognized the health of their communities depended upon the activities of their

commercial population, yet many refused to embrace this class as authentic southerners. As one editor sarcastically remarked, the job of a dry goods salesman required "the shrewdness of a politician, the persuasion of a lover, the politeness of a Chesterfield, the patience of Job, and the impudence of a pick-pocket." This clever recital of stereotypical merchant characteristics begins to suggest why many agrarian and self-styled Jeffersonian republican southerners held the mercantile trade in some contempt. An examination of the attitudes southerners held towards merchants, particularly two prominent stereotypes surrounding the profession, reveals why they remained on the cultural periphery in Dixie.20

"No Friendship in Trade": The Public Image of the Antebellum Merchant

Antebellum southerners based their opinions of the mercantile trade mainly on personal experience. Since dry goods and grocery stores frequently served as one of the few social centers in a community, especially in the country, this gave most individuals some basis for reaching a judgment. In much the same way that stores served as centers in economic exchange networks, they also offered hubs where southerners, black and white, male and female, could socialize. Not surprisingly, this also led many people to view their local storekeeper as a neighbor and friend while still condemning the trade in general.

Adolphus Williamson Mangum's store in Orange County, North Carolina, rivaled the local church as a community focal point. There he and his customers shared long discussions about politics, religion, and temperance issues. Individuals living relatively close to their neighborhood store frequently dropped by not to make a purchase but to exchange gossip, whittle sticks, and discuss horse racing and cock fighting. Court days, muster days, election days, and auctions in particular, found southern shops bustling with business and personal traffic. Merchant Cushing Hassell's store in Williamston, North Carolina, always benefited when his cousin Colonel Asa Biggs gave a political speech in Greenville Mountaineer (South Carolina), 29 November 1855.

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town. Southern store culture also offered the chance for entertainment. James Wiggins, a slave in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, would accompany his master on trips to Annapolis where the young man would dance the jig for male and female customers in the town's stores. This work earned Wiggins enough money to buy extra clothes and shoes for himself. Like most white and even black southerners, Wiggins and his master saw their trips to general stores in both economic and social terms. Personal and business relationships overlapped in southern stores. Friendships developed and pleasantries passed between salesman and customer. This space, however, was more complicated than many sentimental memoirs and novels would have us believe. Tensions flourished amid the communities that existed within antebellum stores.21

Long hours and the continual threat of bankruptcy led some merchants to describe their clientele in rancorous language. The tight-pocketed and light-fisted patron is a ubiquitous figure in merchant diaries and letters. While clerking in his father's shop in Louisville, Kentucky, John Jefferson and his co-workers referred to their customers as "Russians" behind their backs and employed battle analogies when evaluating sales trends. During a very busy day in April, 1857, the Russians appeared "quite formidable" but after sales exceeding four hundred dollars they were "vanquished at last." Certainly Jorantha Jordan would have appreciated Jefferson's commercial spirit. In an 1848 letter to her fiancé Benedict Semmes, a struggling merchant in Washington D.C., she reminded her beau that "there is no friendship in trade." Rather than complain about the harsh

realities of the marketplace, this practical daughter of a New York congressman coolly
told Semmes she "liked it" that way. The daily struggle to survive economically as a
merchant in the antebellum South certainly promoted such attitudes on the part of the
commercial classes. In an attempt to incorporate traditional republican values within their
liberal capitalist trade, retail and wholesale traders demanded a high degree personal
honor from customers and fellow businessmen. The sense of betrayal many felt when
their high standards were not met occasioned bitterness or personal detachment.
Customers and observers of the mercantile trade typically shared the same feelings
towards the southern commercial classes.22

Blanket condemnations of southern merchants filled antebellum newspapers,
travel accounts, and memoirs. The authors of these attacks generally based their claims on
personal experience or anecdotal evidence gleaned from local opinion. For example,
when northerner Henry Whipple visited Macon, Georgia, in the early 1840s he learned,
evidently from prominent town residents, that "everyone" regarded the town's
businessmen as "shavers." Merchant business activities, particularly haggling and
speculation, encouraged an agrarian southern population to look upon the transfer of
commodities from producer to consumer as "a kind of swindling operation." Certainly the
southern press bolstered such opinion. Decrying the rising number of young men entering
upon mercantile pursuits, The People's Press and Wilmington Advertiser urged its readers
to count the number of successful merchants and compare them to the region's
agricultural population and witness "the vast amount of ruin and disgrace attendant on the
former, and of comfort and competence on the latter." A similar refrain appeared in an
1851 edition of the Richmond Enquirer that declared without the power of the bank and
ability to obtain credit the "merchant prince" is ruined, he is "dishonored and his pride is

22Bart DeWitt to John Leyendecker, 27 June 1857, John Zirvas Leyendecker Papers, (CAH); Jefferson
Diary, 1 April 1857, John F. Jefferson Papers, (FCHS); Jorantha Jordan to Benedict Semmes, 10 October
1848, Benedict Joseph Semmes Papers, (SHC); Anne C. Rose, Victorian America and the Civil War (New
crushed." There is evidence to suggest even slaves assumed the mercantile trade to be unnatural and benighted.23

When Fred Bibble's master died after being crushed by a falling box of freight goods in a New Orleans wholesale house, the Texas slave and others concluded the "accident" was actually murder. The ill-tempered, penurious merchant finally received his just due when some wronged party cut the rope holding the box in place while Bibble's master, I.D. Thomas, stood underneath it. Whether it was murder or an accident, this slave, like many white southerners, assumed commercial activities could be so repugnant that it might result in violence. While white solidarity and social cohesion continued to be the norm in the antebellum South, undoubtedly class tensions, particularly between storekeepers and the planter class, helped fostered popular contempt towards the southern commercial classes.24

A small percentage of the merchant community belonged to wealthiest ranks of southern society. These individuals tended to reside in the handful of larger towns and cities in the antebellum South. Most merchants, generally those of more limited means, worked and lived in the vast southern interior where they came into daily contact with yeoman farmers and wealthier planters. It was here that friction between busy storekeepers and their agrarian customers created the most ill-will. Yeoman farmers, defending their world of harmony and independence, still relied upon country merchants

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for such necessities as coffee and sugar. Such dependence bred resentment. Uneducated farmers questioned why merchants avoided speaking in local "dialect" and flaunted their relative wealth by purchasing expensive clothing or carriages. Likewise, members of the wealthier planter classes joined yeoman farmers in challenging southern merchants over the price of their goods or the availability of credit. Planters also had reason to suspect unscrupulous merchants proved willing customers to slaves trading in goods stolen from their masters. As the dominant political and economic class in the antebellum South, the complaints planters had against storekeepers often manifested themselves in displays of outright contempt.25

The case of planter Basil Kiger is illustrative of this disposition. As a large plantation owner and family patriarch in Warren County, Mississippi, Basil Kiger expected the members of his household to marry well. Predictably, Kiger became angry upon hearing that his sister-in-law Bettie, a widow with a small child, planned to marry a poor boy she met while on vacation. He felt sure the match would fail and Bettie would be left penniless. When other family members sought to assuage Kiger's misgivings by

telling him the boy was a partner in a country store the planter scoffed, an establishment
"with a stock no doubt that might be carried in a mans coat Packet consisting of a Bag of
shot 10 lbs of sugar as much coffee and a Bbl. of sweet cider flanked by a home mad[e]
ginger cake." Most men of Kiger's wealth and standing would have agreed with his
assessment of the situation. After six months of family turmoil Kiger emerged victorious,
and the wedding was called off. Of course even the pragmatic storekeeper would on
occasion return the favor by heaping scorn upon imperious, debt-ridden planters. Seeking
over ten thousand dollars in payment for outstanding debts incurred largely by local
planters, merchant John Burbidge declared the lot "dreadfully avaricious, that when they
can get a fair value for their produce, they always expect and look for a greater price,
there is no end to their avarice." Unified around the inviolability of slavery and the
necessity for racial control in the South, class divisions could still divide antebellum
white communities. These economic divisions within the South ultimately weakened the
social authority and prestige of the merchant classes. More fundamentally, class tension
tended to reinforce conservative arguments that characterized merchants and their liberal
capitalist behavior to be foreign, and likely detrimental, to an agrarian South.²⁶

A powerful example of the way opinion-makers and communities marginalized
the commercial classes is illustrated in how the mercantile trade as a whole was
characterized as particularly Yankee, Jewish, or both. Southern newspapers, books, and
letters often made such claims against successful storekeepers, whether true or not, as a
means to cast opprobrium on the profession and its members. Of course all evidence
suggests that a clear majority of antebellum merchants were native-born southerners but,
as is often the case, perception proved stronger than reality. The presence of a small
number of northern and Jewish merchants living in the South gave license to some

²⁶Morris, Becoming Southern, 161; John Burbidge to Rosina Mix, 24 February 1841, Rosina Mix Papers,
(SHC).
southerners to freely depict the trade as dominated by alien interests. This practice and its implications for antebellum merchants can better understood by examining a few southern states more closely. The personal example of Moses Cohen Mordecai and the lives of native-born, northern, and Jewish businessmen in North and South Carolina exemplifies the social barriers merchants confronted and their attempts to construct a more southern public identity.27

On October 7, 1854, a brief message to state senate candidate Moses Cohen Mordecai appeared in the columns of the Charleston Mercury (SC). A resident of the city writing as "A SUFFERER" demanded to know Mordecai's position regarding unrestricted free trade between Charleston, South Carolina, and the West Indies. Many believed the trade had brought disease into the port city. They advocated a more stringent quarantine to shield the local population. Two days later a writer in the Charleston Daily Courier declared Mordecai to be a city candidate who remained unknown to the people and leaders in the "remote portions" of the state. Editorials suggesting Mordecai belonged to the anti-immigrant "Know-Nothing" party also emerged in the pages of the Mercury and other Charleston papers during the fall of 1854. As a candidate for a contested seat to the South Carolina Senate, Mordecai recognized the politics behind these questions and aspersions. He replied in the Mercury that the reports had been intended to injure his chances in the upcoming election. To be sure, the conventions of local politics in an antebellum southern city explains much about these attacks. The peculiar nature of the

27Census figures show that in 1850 Dinwiddie County, Virginia, an urban and relatively cosmopolitan county by rural southern standards boasted well over four hundred practicing merchants of whom over 80 percent were born in the South while 3 percent hailed from the North and over 12 percent from Europe. By 1860 the percentage of native-born southerners in the country dipped to 77 percent while 5 percent had migrated from the North and almost 17 percent from Europe, see Manuscript Census, Dinwiddie County, Virginia, 1850, 1860. Not surprisingly the figures for native-born southerners rose for rural counties. Over 90 percent of the merchants living in Buckingham County, Virginia, were born in state while only one northerner (1.7%) and three Europeans (5.1%) pld their trade in 1860, see Manuscript Census, Dinwiddie County, 1860. It is difficult to determine the number of Jewish merchants living in the South but with the exception of those living in larger cities like New Orleans or Savannah most appear to have been first-generation European or northern immigrants.
criticism that candidate Mordecai received, however, derived from his position as an established merchant.28

A merchant and a Jew in the antebellum South, Mordecai seemed especially vulnerable to the charge of being an outsider. During the 1854 campaign, his detractors avoided religious slurs. While planter-politician James Henry Hammond had described Mordecai as a "miserable Jew" in his diary, the public press in Charleston remained silent on such matters. His standing as an influential merchant proved more troublesome.29

Mordecai's opponents claimed he represented the city's merchant class. Their newspaper attacks implied that the interests of the powerful merchant class rested outside the commonweal. The close ties between the city's merchants, and Mordecai's place within that community, raised suspicions. As early as 1842 Hammond believed "the secret is that [Mordecai] is a man of force and influence in Charleston." References to Mordecai as "the candidate of the merchants" characterized the campaign. Eventually friends of the candidate came to his defense. In a Mercury article entitled "Mr. Mordecai as a Merchant" a writer ["Community"] asserted Mordecai's election did not "alone" rest upon his brother merchants but on the "general" vote of the people. The editorial broadsides between the two factions continued until election day. When it was over Mordecai had achieved a resounding victory. He received more votes than that of his two rivals combined. The manner in which the state election unfolded in the Charleston newspapers during 1854 revealed the ambiguous position merchants held within the antebellum South. Moses Mordecai commanded significant economic power in South Carolina. The size of his electoral majority established community approval. This

28Charleston Mercurv (Charleston, SC), 7, 9 October 1854.
campaign provides further evidence of the ambivalence newspaper editors and many of their readers felt towards merchants.\[^{30}\]

The press wielded tremendous influence in the antebellum South. Their expense and limited availability curtailed readership to the educationally and financially privileged. This class of people, however, disproportionately molded and frequently reflected southern popular opinion on such issues as politics and the economy. The language southern editors adopted when discussing merchants begins to suggest how they and their audience understood them. This case study will explore the "merchant themes" that emerged in newspapers in North and South Carolina during the antebellum period. The tremendous diversity within these two states makes them excellent candidates for this study.\[^{31}\]

**Representations of the Merchant Class in the Press: A Case Study of North and South Carolina**

Political, economic, and social divisions characterized the antebellum Carolinas. Men and women defined themselves by their ties to family, neighborhood, class, and

\[^{30}\] Bleser, ed., Secret and Sacred, 95; Charleston Mercury, 10, 12 October 1854. Indeed, Mordecai was one of three powerful spokesmen for Charleston's commercial interests in the legislature, the others being Thomas Bennett, Jr., and Ker Boyce, see, Greb, "Charleston, South Carolina," 57-58.

race. Despite the political differences between upcountry and lowcountry residents or the economic gulf between yeoman and planter, Carolina newspapers exhibited a consistent, ambivalent disposition regarding southern merchants. Generally the press described storekeepers as either greedy, malevolent interlopers or as compassionate wealth producers who represented essential forces for town building. Such ambiguous popular images troubled individuals who depended upon their public reputation for economic survival. Carolina merchants responded to these broad stereotypes by attempting to depict themselves as industrious, sophisticated southerners.32

The stereotype of the greedy merchant portrayed in antebellum Carolina newspapers reflected a popular sentiment that originated in colonial American society. Eighteenth-century southerners believed merchants encouraged imprudent planter expenditures in order to reap increased commissions. Many, resenting Scottish and English domination of the colonial trade, condemned merchants as foreign agents in the South. Peter Earle and others have discovered within England and her empire "merchants were singled out by contemporaries as a race apart from other members of the commercial world." This legacy continued, albeit in an altered form, into the antebellum South. Rather than attacking covetous European merchants, however, the New England "Yankee" became the new exemplar of commercial greed. D.R. Hundley spoke for many southerners when he described the majority of merchants as "unscrupulous Southern Yankees." A significant minority had been born and raised in New England and those who had not had seemingly adopted Yankee ways. This prejudice helped shape the merchant image in the Carolina press.33

33Davis, "Southern Merchant" in Southern Enigma, 131-33; Earle, Making of the English Middle Class, 34; D.R. Hundley, Social Relations in Our Southern States (New York: Henry B. Price, Publisher, 1860), 103.
North and South Carolina newspapers frequently presumed trade to fall within the Yankee domain. In November 1832 the [Salisbury, North Carolina] Carolina Watchman printed an anecdote entitled "Profit and Loss" that related the story of a Boston shopkeeper who pretended to sell his goods extremely low while telling his customers he sold at a loss. When asked why he continued in such a business the thrifty shopkeeper replied "oh, I couldn't stand it at all, only I do so much of it." The story implies both the depth of Yankee business acumen and sophistry. The reader is amused at the merchant's strategy while realizing his base duplicity. D.R. Hundley imputed the same habits to southern merchants. According to the southern writer, they appeared "full of their own conceit, but prodigal of bows and compliments, and always smiling of countenance, yet, did one credit their own most solemn assertions, always selling every thing at a 'most tremendous sacrifice.'" The Greenville [South Carolina] Mountaineer related a tale of a local sales clerk who tricked a "fashionable lady" into paying twenty-two shillings for five shillings worth of discarded silk after convincing her it was the last piece in town. The editor of the Mountaineer found the clerk's élan amusing but warned his female readers to learn the moral of his anecdote. Mainly that southern merchants displayed the same rapacious capacity for making a dollar as Yankee traders. Distrust of Yankee mercantile practices led the Carolina press too censure local merchants with close commercial ties to the North.34

The critique of Yankee business practices and their influence upon southern merchants often merged with sectional political broadsides during the late antebellum period. In 1850 the radical Charleston Mercury denounced the close ties between local merchants and northern business. Following the course outlined by the paper's fire-eating leader, Robert Barnwell Rhett, Mercury editors lamented the fact that local merchants

34Lefler and Newsome, History of a Southern State, 110, 365-66; Carolina Watchman (Salisbury, NC), 10 November 1832; Hundley, Social Relations, 101; Greenville Mountaineer (Greenville, SC), 29 November 1855.
made their spring purchases in such northern cities as Philadelphia and New York where the leading journals "never mentions the word South without a sneer, except when it invites Southern trade, and asks Southern men to kiss the hand that smites them." The trade between shopkeepers from the Piedmont "interior" and New York City particularly vexed the Carolina press. The opprobrium placed upon a marketing system that seemingly benefited northern interests at the expense of the South helped perpetuate the popular image of the merchant as a "Southern Yankee."35

In addition to possessing Yankee manners, the antebellum Carolina press also suggested members of the mercantile trade belonged to an effete profession. Newspapers described how shopkeeping activities broke with the agrarian traditions of the South. In 1834 the editor of The People's Press and Wilmington Advertiser, a newspaper printed in the growing port of Wilmington, North Carolina, wrote an editorial bemoaning the lack of young men entering upon agricultural and mechanical pursuits. Looking around Wilmington the editor witnessed parents forcing their children into the learned professions while looking with contempt upon the mechanical arts. He concluded that parents wished their sons to hold a degraded rank in a class they esteemed rather than enter upon the "useful arts." The rising number of Wilmington merchants proved most troubling. The editor mocked the idea of a "dealer in tar, rum, and fat, looking upon the occupation of a farmer or mechanic . . . and thanking God, like the pharisee, that he is not like other men." The high failure rate among the city's merchant community belied their claims to business success. The editor predicted trouble for Wilmington and the nation if parents continued to encourage their children to enter upon the life of the "genteel vagabond"—the mercantile profession.36

35Osthaus, Partisans of Southern Press, 78-79; Charleston Mercury, 27 March 1850, 28 February 1851; Gray, History of Agriculture, 931; Davis, "Southern Merchant," Southern Enigma, 133; Woodman, King Cotton, 169-173.

36The People's Press and Wilmington Advertiser (Wilmington, NC), 15 October 1834.
A paper in the coastal town of Edenton, North Carolina, expressed a similar opinion in 1841. The editor of the *Edenton Sentinel and Albemarle Intelligencer* wrote an article responding to a recent story found in the *New York Sun* entitled "Profession vs. Trade." The story described how two advertisements had been placed in a New York City paper, one for a clerk in a store, the other for an apprentice to learn the blacksmith's trade. A day later the number of applicants for the clerking position reached fifty while no one had inquired about the latter. The *Sun* compared this degradation of physical labor in the northern Atlantic states to that in the slave South. The *Sentinel and Albemarle Intelligencer* offered a different explanation. The rising prominence of the mercantile trade represented part of a larger break with agrarian tradition. Urban shopkeeping symbolized this change. According to the editor, the hundreds of young men "lounging about in our large towns" furnished "indisputable evidence that many of the rising generation are contracting habits which in after life, must cause a large amount of sorrow and wretchedness." The new generation of clerks lacked the industry of the southern farmer. Carolina newspapers asserted that the mercantile trade was less virtuous and masculine than agricultural or mechanical pursuits. The image of the effete merchant published by southern editors served to warn readers of the inherent dangers in a commercial life. Separated from the land and physical labor, the dissipate urban merchant presented "a melancholy picture." Yankee manners and degraded labor represented two critical elements in the Carolina press' representation of the greedy southern merchant.37

Antebellum papers in North and South Carolina confirmed the stereotype of the grasping merchant with the commentary in their news stories. A writer in the Wilmington *Daily Journal* attacked local merchants for speculating in food. With the successful 1854 harvests in America and Europe, the writer believed the price for a barrel of flour in Wilmington ($13.50) to be fifty percent too high. The paper blamed the avarice of

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37 *Edenton Sentinel and Albemarle Intelligencer* (Edenton, NC), 1 May 1841.
merchants. Later that same year the *Daily Journal* ran a story about a mechanic in a nearby village who had moved after his business failed. The mechanic had not paid the account he owed the local merchant before his departure. After a few weeks the storekeeper located the young man who lived 115 miles away. The penurious merchant, according to the paper worth over $75,000, hired an agent to obtain the debt from the mechanic. Eventually the account was settled. In the end the merchant paid ten dollars to recover thirty cents the mechanic owed for a comb and paper pins. The paper concluded by mocking the merchant's "feelings of exultation" upon reception of the debt and eventual "deep gloom" when he realized his losses. The writer portrayed the storekeeper's greed as uncontrollable and irrational. While the veracity of the story is debatable, the *Daily Journal* presented it as fact. Other Carolina newspapers chose to lecture upon the evil of merchant greed in their editorials.\(^{38}\)

An editorial printed in the *Carolina Watchman* on November 25, 1847, addressed the problem of young merchants and greed. The editor asked why so many failed in the mercantile trade. The answer, according to him, could be found in work habits and avarice. The rising generation of merchants lacked steady work habits. More importantly, their appetite for luxuries and "excursions of pleasure" led them to neglect their business. The *Watchman* advised young merchants that the path to success lay in diligent work and preventing the "brightness of gold to dim your integrity, or seduce your honor." The editorial concluded with the admonition that the future of Salisbury depended upon its young merchants. The *Watchman* featured articles that exemplified this theme. In 1846 the paper printed a story from the *Richmond Observer* entitled "The Two Neighbors Reconciled" in which two rival merchants become the best of friends after embracing religion. The "scandalous enmity" and jealous greed that existed between the neighboring

\(^{38}\) *Daily Journal* (Wilmington, NC), 19 September, 9 October 1854; On merchant control of local markets in North Carolina see Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites*, 36-37; Kenzer, *Kinship and Neighborhood*, 37-38.
storekeepers disintegrated before piety. Protestant order represented one answer to the growing dissipation of the merchant class. Carolina newspapers viewed greed among the region's merchants as a threat society must resist.\(^{39}\)

The disparaging images of antebellum mercantile life found in North and South Carolina newspapers centered around three main themes. First, merchants' subscribed to cunning Yankee practices in their trade. Second, this ability to turn a profit through artifice and the inherent nature of commercial trade combined to make storekeepers indolent. Finally, merchant greed, particularly among the younger generation, threatened the virtue of the merchant as well as the larger community. Together these themes represented the retail businessman as a capricious force in southern communities. Storekeepers seemingly subscribed to values alien to Dixie. The experience of businessmen like Moses Mordecai in 1854 Charleston, however, suggests that the relationship between the Carolina press and southern merchants was more complex. Indeed, while newspapers busily recounted stories of rapacious storekeepers they simultaneously portrayed them as indispensable community builders for the region. The "better" class of merchants exhibited solicitude, produced needed wealth, and served as economic pillars in Carolina towns. The profound contradictions between this interpretation and the theme of the greedy merchant seems to have eluded most journalists in North and South Carolina.

Few Carolina newspapers printed stories regarding benevolent merchants during the antebellum period. Articles that did reveal the gentler side of the southern merchant are remarkable for their maudlin didacticism. In 1838 the Carolina Watchman printed a story entitled "The Compassionate Merchant" that illustrated the typical characteristics of this narrative. The merchant visited a tenant in order to collect the rent. Upon entering the home he found the tenant critically ill and surrounded by a hungry family. The merchant

\(^{39}\)Carolina Watchman, 25 November 1847, 22 May 1846.

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choked down his grief at the sight of the "little urchins" while placing money on the kitchen table. He returned to his store and ordered his clerk to deliver provisions to the family. The writer ended his account by commenting upon how much better the merchant felt after having accomplished his good deeds. The Charleston Mercury expanded upon this theme by applying it to nation states. Quoting Hunt's Merchants' Magazine the Mercury editor declared commerce to have a pacific influence upon foreign relations. The coarse of history led him to conclude "all commercial communities have been the friends of peace, and the strongest opposers of war." Trade and its disciples, merchants, civilized the barbarian and enlightened the ignorant. The editor believed that as Christian sojourners, tradesmen would soon "make the policy of all nations pacific by sending them the Gospel of the Prince of Peace." Descriptions of compassionate storekeepers and the calming effect of trade represented positive elements in the Carolina press' ambivalent construction of the southern merchant.40

When not charging merchants with avarice, the press in North and South Carolina hailed their essential role in the southern economy. In 1843 the Carolina Watchman ran a story describing the merchant as a critical economic agent. Without this commercial middleman agriculture and industry would reap few rewards. Quoting the Southern Quarterly, the article concluded that it served southern interests for merchants to accumulate vast amounts of capital because "the richer the merchant . . . the more laborers are stimulated, and the better they are rewarded, the less fluctuation there will be in prices, the fewer revulsions in business, the greater certainty in all investments." The writer called for an end to the prejudice against the merchant class. The following year the Watchman printed a "moral sketch" by T.S. Arthur entitled "The Merchant's Dream." The story related the plight of Algeroff the merchant. Weary of a tedious commercial life wasted in the pursuit of gold, Algeroff yearned for a life occupied with music and books.

40Carolina Watchman, 4 October 1838; Charleston Mercury, 5 August 1853.
That night, after the unhappy merchant fell asleep, a "beautiful being" visited him. She called upon the storekeeper to take her hand and view the world with a "broader intelligence." The angelic guide in this Dickensian journey showed the merchant how his trade paid the artisan, textile weaver, and farmer for their products. Eventually the merchant realized he represented a "link in a great chain" between producer and consumer. Algeroff awoke a new man, cheered by the thought that he "ministered" in his sphere "to the good of all around him." Stories such as "The Merchant's Dream" not only depicted merchant good works but served a didactic purpose as well. They helped teach southerners the importance of commerce. Specifically, Carolina newspapers highlighted the merchant's role in building towns and developing the region.41

Local newspapers in North and South Carolina measured the growth of their community by the size and energy of their mercantile establishments. The press regularly boasted of their town's most recent commercial gains over rival communities. Editors attributed this progress to their thrifty merchants. An editorial in the Wilmington Daily Journal detailed the scale and practices of the town's wholesale stores. One china store operated by the firm of McRae & Harriss had recently moved into a new granite faced building and represented one of the largest in North Carolina. With a depth of over 100 feet front to back stocked with imported china from Liverpool, the story proclaimed the store "will be quite the equal to any in Charleston." The editorial listed the most successful Wilmington shops and concluded "their name is legion, and their proprietors gentlemen." A later notice in the Daily Journal observed the improvements a Mr. Munde completed in his bookstore. For the local paper his additions offered further evidence of the "spirit of progress which is abroad in our town." During periods of economic stagnation the press also looked to local merchants for relief. An 1852 editorial in the Charleston Mercury lamented that rival cities Baltimore and Savannah had begun to

41 Carolina Watchman, 1 July 1843, 11 May 1844.
eclipse Charleston in the relative growth of the import trade. The writer determined that the city could revive its sagging fortunes if it elected more merchants to the South Carolina legislature. Such articles openly acknowledged that the city's growth depended upon its merchant class. Even less obsequious stories in Carolina newspapers implicitly recognized the storekeeper's town-building capabilities. Whether protecting the reputation of a community's cotton harvest, helping the poor, or attracting trade, the press in North and South Carolina frequently presented merchants as community leaders.\textsuperscript{42}

Carolina newspapers printed stories recounting the unseemly conduct of greedy merchants beside paeans to the contributions of the southern merchant. This odd juxtaposition begins to reveal the ambivalent position the merchant held in the antebellum South. Though censured for their collective rapacity and Yankee traits, the Carolina press frequently ignored these flaws if individual merchants contributed to the prosperity of a particular community. Indeed, newspapers presented the achievements of this better class of merchant as an example for southerners to follow. This array of conflicting mercantile images becomes more complex when considering the merchants' self-representations in North and South Carolina newspapers.

Paid advertisements offered southern merchants the most direct means to influence their image in the Carolina press. Regular advertisements in the antebellum United States ran without change for months at a time. What the ads lacked in variety they made up quantity. Southern merchants purchased thousands of advertisements in antebellum newspapers. The vast majority of these advertisements simply notified readers of the arrival of goods or the availability of new items. During the 1840s more successful mercantile firms experimented with visually appealing illustrated newspaper

\textsuperscript{42}Daily Journal, 3 October 1851, 25 March 1854; Charleston Mercury, 12 October 1852; John A.B. Fitzgerald to Joseph Cathey, January 12, 1854, Joseph Cathey Papers, (NCSA). In 1802 merchants in Savannah, Georgia, repackaged cotton that entered the city in order to detect false packing and protect the reputation (and price) of Georgia cotton. Similar activities were occasionally attempted elsewhere in the South, see Gray, History of Agriculture, 706.
advertisements. Their content, however, like most written advertisements during the period, remained elementary. When Carolina merchants attempted to create more subtle representations of their profession in local newspapers they resorted to editorials and the influence of their civic associations.43

Merchants viewed themselves as champions for orderly habits and sophistication in the South. They believed in the adage that time was money. A strong work ethic, regular business competition, public education, travel, and white racial hegemony represented key elements of this nascent ideology. In contrast to their ambivalent image in the Carolina press, many storekeepers attempted to publicly link themselves with these values. A smaller number of merchants sought to impress these ideals upon their neighbors. The press offered southern merchants an important tool for both these purposes.44

Reprinted articles from Hunt's Merchants' Magazine and Commercial Review served as a mouthpiece for merchant interests in North and South Carolina newspapers. These articles consistently expressed the virtues of orderly business habits. A January 8, 1850, editorial in the Charleston Mercurv recommended the suggestions of one such article to local residents. The story compared the energy of the merchant possessing strong business habits to the skilled "forest bred Indian." Both individuals had "schooled his senses into unerring habits of nice and accurate observation." Success depended upon their ability to understand and react to changes in their respective environments. This expertise rested upon good business and moral habits. Publicly merchants honored the virtues of hard work over luck in the volatile world of commerce. A merchant later suggested in the Mercury that "lucky fellows" to be the ones "that know what they are

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doing, and how to do it the right way." The personal correspondence of Carolina merchants reflected these themes of morality and order.45

Merchants' business habits influenced their reputation in the community and their standing with important creditors in the North. Firms that produced credit reports on southern merchants, R.G. Dun & Co. being the most important, determined the financial health of a store by evaluating its yearly sales, capital investment, and business reputation. The local merchants and lawyers who wrote these reports paid special attention to the latter. A northern wholesale firm hired Fayetteville merchant Peter Mallet to write credit reports on the stores in his district of North Carolina. The reports he wrote in 1846 reveal the importance placed upon a strong business ethic. Mallet recommended that Greenville, North Carolina, merchant W.K. Delaney receive a generous extension of credit. The brief report estimated Delaney's capital between twelve and fifteen thousand dollars and his yearly sales to be eight thousand dollars. More importantly, Mallet concluded Delaney had good character, moderate business habits, and to be generally a "fine fellow." The Washington, North Carolina, firm Bernard & Sons boasted capital exceeding $75,000. According to Mallet, Mr. Bernard served as the "Capitalist" rather then his son, a lawyer by profession, who seemed to be "no business man."

Establishments with only "tolerable" business habits received more critical treatment in Mallet's reports. One such firm in Greenville, Cooper & Strong, had the added burden of being recent "Yankee" arrivals. The credit report bluntly concluded "its well enough to let them along." Mallet held his fellow merchants to a high standard of public conduct in business. A level he himself seems to have achieved when in 1827 he assisted a Cheraw, South Carolina, storekeeper by carrying $3,390 in cash to his partner in Fayetteville.

Southern merchants depended upon ready credit in northern cities. A strong business reputation proved critical in acquiring access to that credit. Not surprisingly many

45*Charleston Mercury*, 8 January 1850, 17 July 1854.
southern merchants embraced respectable public rituals to improve their credit standings.\textsuperscript{46}

Antebellum merchants in North and South Carolina shared their opinions regarding the public role of the businessman in their personal writing. Shortly after his eighteenth birthday, aspiring merchant Cushing B. Hassell adopted a lengthy list of resolutions. He wrote in his diary that henceforth he would follow temperance principles, quit gaming and the use of profane or silly language (i.e. "by granny" or "dog my cat"), and exhibit honesty on all occasions. These rules of conduct derived from Hassell's deeply-held Protestant beliefs. Following such resolutions also prepared Hassell to assume the expected public role of the southern merchant. A reputation for gambling or dissipation could ruin a Carolina storekeeper. Joseph Biggs and others in Williamston, North Carolina, were mortified when a merchant named Bayley left for a purchasing trip to New York City in an utterly drunken state. Biggs wrote his brother that the man appeared "hardly able to ride." Similarly, in 1837 John Burbidge wrote a friend that when he discovered an associate had been seen in "bad company" or late in a gambling house he pitied him. Like many businessmen, Burbidge assumed such behavior revealed a lack of integrity. Ultimately such conduct would adversely impact business. Burbidge declared he remained too ambitious to meet such an end. Carolina merchants like Burbidge and Hassell attempted to shape their public image in personal correspondence and newspaper editorials. These activities, however, had only limited influence upon their representation in the press. Membership in civic associations offered a more effective means of public self-construction for merchants.\textsuperscript{47}

Forming active civic associations allowed Carolina merchants to garner favorable publicity as community leaders while simultaneously disseminating mercantile values.

\textsuperscript{46}Peter Mallet Papers, Mallet credit reports, 1846, (SHC); Atherton, \textit{Southern Country Store}, 181.
\textsuperscript{47}Hassell Diary, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC); Joseph Biggs to Kader Biggs, 23 October 1843, Kader Biggs Papers, (NCSA); John Burbidge to Rosina Mix, 27 November 1837, Rosina Mix Papers.
Southern merchants and the associations they supported became especially prominent in the field of education. Many storekeepers nurtured schools in their communities. Jonathan Worth, a Quaker merchant in Asheboro, North Carolina, invited coreligionists to teach in a local academy he financially supported. As a young merchant in Halifax, North Carolina, Cushing Hassell joined a debating club called the "Philodemic Association." Later he and his brother paid a New Hampshire teacher $150 to teach female scholars in Williamston, North Carolina. By 1849 Hassell had been appointed a trustee to both the Williamston Academy and the University of North Carolina. In 1856 merchant Joseph Cathey served as a representative from his hometown and county, Forks of Pigeon, Haywood Co., to a general convention of the "Friends of Education in North Carolina." These activities imparted a prominent status to these businessmen. The cultural accomplishments of merchant clubs and associations, however, gained even more recognition in North and South Carolina newspapers. The development of the Mercantile Library Association in Charleston, South Carolina, represents one such example.48

Formed in 1844, the Charleston Mercantile Library Association pursued the "improvement" of each member through the joint contributions and collective efforts of the membership. The association's board of directors believed merchants needed to learn the principles of their trade. The association's 1852 report declared that the businessman's "hazardous profession" required an education to protect him against consequences "against which no mere experience can ever effectually protect him." The report hoped that the instruction available through the association would continue until the "love of knowledge is stimulated, habits of industry encouraged, the taste refined, the standard of excellence elevated, and the mind enlarged beyond the limits of mere trade and profit." To achieve this end the association sponsored lectures and established a city library. Thus

48Jonathan Worth to Simson Colton, 30 August 1853, Jonathan Worth Papers, (NCSA); Hassell Diary, 15 March, 1 November, 1847, Cushing Hassell Papers, (SHC); Letter, 30 August 1853, Joseph Cathey Papers, (NCSA).
a Colonel Preston from Columbia, South Carolina, might deliver a lecture on the dignity of modern commerce one evening while the following week an engineer would explain the operation of the "Caloric Engine." The association's reading room came complete with a course of study for those members who sought to add method to their efforts at self-improvement. The local Charleston newspapers announced the meetings of the Mercantile Library Association and reviewed its lecture series. These articles depicted an organization of professionals dedicated to personal and community development. The reality behind the image presented in the newspapers was that the Mercantile Library Association had difficulty recruiting members and supporting its reading room. Its public relations success appeared more certain. The board of directors recognized that the association's efforts to refine public taste would "gain a strong hold upon public favor and sympathy, which would greatly redound to its reputation and prosperity." Organizations like the Mercantile Library Association proved useful to Carolina merchants seeking to publicly embody strong business habits.  

Social grace represented a second major theme in the self-construction of the merchant class in antebellum North and South Carolina. Storekeepers employed regional newspapers to advance an image of refinement that reflected their own values. Careful to always swear allegiance to the slave South, merchants did pass judgment on the coarser aspects of their society. The absence of civility in developing southern towns particularly galled antebellum merchants. The Carolina Watchman printed an extract from an 1839 letter written by a merchant recently settled in Vicksburg, Mississippi. As conditions in the western state looked "worse and worse," the merchant pitied his associates who "can't collect any thing—the only money collected is by foreigners in the U. States Court." Businessmen could not seek compensation through the courts because the state's legal system busied itself arbitrarily enforcing brutal criminal laws. The merchant informed his

49Charleston Mercury, 13 November 1852, 7 January, 23 May 1853,
friends back in North Carolina that without serious reforms Mississippi offered no future for the civilized merchant. Carolina merchants shared the perspective of an 1845 merchant who described his neighbors in Columbus, Kentucky, as "rough in manners but I think I shall like them after getting a little accustomed to their ways." Shopkeepers who periodically moved their operation further West became especially interested in the cultural life of a region and the civility of its people. Well-traveled merchants wrote editorials in Carolina newspapers comparing the advantages of particular towns. These self-styled urbane gentlemen cared whether a community had a reading room or academy. Pronouncements in North and South Carolina newspapers made their concerns and pretensions known.50

Business and cultural ties to northern cities also served to make southern merchants appear sophisticated. Carolina editors allowed local storekeepers to use their publications for describing recent purchasing trips or reporting the latest financial news from the North. Their familiarity with cultural and business trends in the North even impressed many southern partisans. Editorials and advertisements for clothing publicized the socioeconomic ties between southern merchants and the North.

North and South Carolina newspapers denounced local merchants for Yankee sympathies while filling their columns with business advertisements for the "latest fashions" from New York City or Philadelphia. In announcements intended to lure female customers, merchants rhapsodized over the clothing they purchased from the "most fashionable" northern tailors. The occasional storekeeper promised to teach women the northern "art" of cutting garments. The firm of Hastie & Nicol, located in Greenville, South Carolina, made their ties to the North explicit by naming their shop the "New York Store." Carolina merchants used local newspapers to introduce the concept of annual

50 Carolina Watchman, 21 June 1839; George Barron to John Barron, December 21, 1845, George Barron Papers, (KHS).
fashion seasons. Advertisements declared that with the beginning of the spring, summer, or winter smart dressers should purchase the latest clothing. Of course for the fashionable, last year's style would no longer due. Even stores serving poor farmers in rural communities advertised new designs for simple calico dresses. Carolina editors aided the retail enterprise of antebellum merchants by cultivating a fashion sensibility among its readership. The Charleston Mercury kept its readers apprised of the latest bonnet styles and which one was appropriate for each occasion. The editor gave a typical fashion recommendation in 1853 when he declared the latest style of European bonnets a success because they appeared "light as a feather, transparent as gauze" and lay on the head like a "Neapolitan plateau." Editorials and advertisements confirmed merchants' status as sophisticated southerners. As purveyors of northern fashion and culture, merchants presented themselves as arbiters of southern refinement.51

The self-image storekeepers advanced in the Carolina press contained a number of inventions. The merchants' orderly habits and work ethic did encourage them to accept the dictates of timed "work-discipline." This said, the nature of their labor required few merchants to work as long or hard as yeoman farmers in the South. Selling, trading, and purchasing goods exacted greater psychological than physical demands from the storekeeper. Merchant representations in North and South Carolina newspapers also embellished their relative sophistication. They did travel and study more than most southerners but their cultural accomplishments rarely matched the region's wealthy planter class. Southern merchants projected a distorted image in the Carolina press. Their representations contrasted with the equally misleading stereotype of the greedy,

51 Carolina Watchman, 12 May 1838; Greenville Mountaineer, 30 May 1835, 26 April 1850; Charleston Mercury, 25 November 1851, June 10, 14 June 1853.
Yankeefied merchant. These two divergent themes helped shape the public contours of merchant culture in antebellum North and South Carolina.  

**Conclusion**

Storekeepers in the antebellum South operated within a cultural and economic no-man's land. They represented middlemen in a society that subscribed to the agrarian values articulated by the wealthy planter class. White southerners depended upon merchants to sustain the agricultural economy. This relationship fostered both popular contempt and admiration toward the merchant class. This begins to explain the conflicting images of the grasping storekeeper and the civic-minded merchant found in the North and South Carolina newspapers. The clashing depictions presented in the Carolina press reflected popular ambivalence regarding the mercantile trade. Merchants further muddled the picture by offering their own constructions in Carolina newspapers. Their attempts to portray themselves as refined and industrious southern businessmen seems to have had little success assuaging public suspicion of their profession. Southern whites recognized the business practices described in the first chapter as fundamentally distinguishing the merchant class from themselves. While the extent to which these commercial habits made the merchant class bourgeois is a complicated question, clearly a great number of opinion-makers and common folk viewed merchants as cultural interlopers in their idealized agrarian South. The time and ink such people spent on this point has been overlooked by historians.

As will be discussed in the next chapter, those merchants that managed to overcome popular distrust depended upon their families and business associates for

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support. Moses Mordecai's political campaign in the 1854 reveals much about the tenuous merchant hold in the antebellum South. Editorials in the press questioned where the merchant's sympathies would rest once elected. Several newspapers suggested Mordecai belonged to a self-serving business class. His defenders replied that the talent Mordecai exhibited in trade would benefit all his constituents. In the end, Mordecai wielded enough influence to overcome the contested ground of the Charleston press and win the election. Although this victory did not end public debate over the mercantile trade. Merchants would continue to be subjected to ambivalent treatment in Carolina newspapers until war eventually changed the face of southern society.
CHAPTER 3

THE MERCHANT FAMILY IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

Family represented the center of southern merchant culture. The ties between husband and wife, parent and child, brother and sister, provided the ultimate foundation for merchant values. While the political economy of the antebellum South circumscribed merchant culture, family defined it. Household relations affirmed the bourgeois and conservative ideals that combined to distinguish merchants from the mass of southern society. The dynamics of all nineteenth-century white families revealed varying elements of affection, materialism, patriarchy, and racism. The peculiar blend of these qualities within the merchant family made it unique. The families of neighboring yeoman farmers sought independence, political standing, and growing market return from the land's bounty. The planter family achieved yet more financial rewards and political prestige from the cotton economy of the slave South. The merchant family not only exhibited characteristics similar to those displayed by the yeoman and planter classes; its values spanned the growing sectional divide of antebellum America.¹

The men and women in merchant families embraced a variety of bourgeois and conservative cultural ideals. Over the course of the antebellum period their households became more emotionally inward-looking than those of their southern neighbors. Well-read parents exposed their children to northern magazines and European literature before sending them to private academies or tutors. This emphasis upon education helped demarcate a cultural boundary between merchant families and most white southerners outside the planter class. Education and the dictates of the mercantile trade also transformed marital relations. Husbands and wives experienced the separate spheres of home and work long before most antebellum southerners. Few families lived above their store and the presence of a merchant's wife behind the counter, although resorted to on occasion, still provoked comment. Merchant households saw their economic self-sufficiency decline as wives and children produced fewer goods in the home. The same process began to recast the antebellum planter family. Most historians contend, however, that the market economy left a more superficial impression on the planter household. Indeed, many wealthy planters feared the social effect of unrestrained commercial relations upon the South. Far from feeling threatened, merchant families attempted to improve their material lives by consuming the growing abundance of goods provided by the expanding American economy of the mid-nineteenth century.²

Economic ties to such commercial cities as Philadelphia and New York City allowed merchant families to wear French fashions, read the latest English novels, and decorate their homes with goods produced in northern shops. When not spending store profits on family consumption, merchants invested their money and accumulated capital. These activities seem to correspond with the intellectual mores and liberal capitalist

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practices of the bourgeoisie in Victorian England and the northern free states, yet these
cultural parallels remained incomplete. The antebellum merchant family observed too
many tenets of a conservative southern ideology to realize a comprehensive bourgeois
identity like that found in the industrializing North.

Slavery, patriarchy, and evangelicalism profoundly influenced the intellectual and
material ventures of the merchant family. Like many of their southern neighbors,
merchants bought and sold slaves. Those merchant families who did not have slaves
residing within their household still defended the institution and subscribed to the racial
codes of the antebellum South. Despite their education and increasing national cultural
ties, fathers, husbands, and brothers exhibited little interest in exchanging their
accustomed prerogatives within the family for the presumably more equitable gender
relations then evolving in northern and English families. Evidence also suggests that men
and women in merchant families viewed their world through the prism of southern
evangelical Christianity. Their religious sensibility held preaching, Bible study, and the
conversion experience as fundamental to proper Christian living. Over time this religious
horizon alternately complemented and challenged the behavior of merchant families in
the antebellum South. Ultimately all of these factors tended to restrain the influence of
northern bourgeois culture in southern merchant families.\(^3\)

\(^3\)No historical works have examined antebellum merchant views on race, gender relations, or religion. The
Louisiana State University, 1949), focuses upon business activities. In more general studies of antebellum
southern history white racism and the ideology of slavery is explored in: Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over
Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press
for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1968); Drew Gilpin Faust, ed., *The Ideology of
Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University
(Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987). Elements of southern white patriarchy are examined in:
Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books,
1982); Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Suzanne Lebsack, The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and
Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984); Fox-Genovese,
*Within the Plantation Household*; Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*; Drew Gilpin Faust,
*Motives of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in American History* (Chapel Hill: University of
North Carolina Press, 1996); Joan E. Cashin, ed., *Our Common Affairs: Texts from Women in the Old
South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996). The most recent study of evangelical Christianity in the Old
A first step in unfolding the many layers of antebellum merchant culture requires an examination of how these competing liberal capitalist, even bourgeois, and traditional values shaped daily family life. A description of these two sides of the antebellum merchant family helps explain its prestige within and alienation from southern society. Indeed, these families were from the South but not of South.

The antebellum merchant families integrated numerous bourgeois practices and values into their daily activities. Perhaps the physical separation between home and work represented the most distinctive feature of these households. Like many northern professionals and artisans, southern merchants, overwhelmingly men, left their wives and children each day to attend to their store, while most southern men, be they farmers or artisans, lived and worked near their families. Husbands and wives in merchant families rarely saw each other during business hours. This physical barrier to daily contact remained a constant in merchant culture. Passing the time on a lazy summer day, Wall Hill, Mississippi storekeeper Isham Howze wrote "What can I do? I could find work to do at home, but here I must stay, whether I have any thing to do or not: I must be found at my post, whenever I am able to be there." Heavy sale periods further increased the merchant's absence from his home. Samuel Aby wrote his parents that the heavy fall trade of 1847 kept him and his partners "up late & early all the time busy as bees." To attract the business of distant farmers who traveled several hours to buy goods, merchants like Aby typically opened their stores at dawn and conducted business well past seven o'clock.


*Isham Howze Journal, June 20, 1854, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), Jackson, Mississippi; Samuel H. Aby to parents, 19 October 1847, Samuel H. Aby Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, (MDAH)."
in the evening. The physical separation between home and work helped create divergent worlds for husbands and wives.\footnote{Atherton, Southern Country Store, 52-5. For the influence of northern Victorian culture in the antebellum South see, Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 23.}

Operating a southern store required time discipline. Merchants measured time and attested to the veracity of moral platitudes that equated time with money. A closed store sold no goods. The minutes spent traveling to the store and the hours employed within its walls reflected their commitment to a commercial regimen. Atlanta merchant and Civil War blockade-runner Sidney Root articulated this pervasive commercial spirit when he declared "among my rules, which became habits, were these: to retire early and rise early, to work hard and master the business." John Burbidge, operating a store in Walterboro, South Carolina, assured his New York cousin that personal and familial ambition demanded industry. At the end of one letter Burbidge confidently wrote "you will not find in me a rolling stone which gathers no moss."\footnote{Sidney Root, "Memorandum Of My Life, 1893," Special Collections, Atlanta History Center (AHC), Atlanta, Georgia; John Burbidge to Rosina Mix, February 24, 1841, Rosina Mix Papers, Southern Historical Collection (SHC), Chapel Hill, North Carolina.} Though he bungled the quote, there is little doubt about Burbidge's meaning. Time away from home and in the store came to be viewed as productive. Even a bored Isham Howze knew that the work he could have been accomplishing at home rather than languishing behind his counter would not redound to his long-term economic condition or reputation.\footnote{Richard D. Brown, Modernization: The Transformation of American Life 1600-1865 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 135-144; Mark M. Smith, "Old South Time in Comparative Perspective," American Historical Review 101 (December 1996): 1447-48; Smith, Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South The Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 69-128.}

This time discipline and dependence upon the store also shaped the merchant household. Women regulated the order of the merchant home. Merchant husbands on occasion did employ the business skills of their wives and daughters in the family store, particularly if they wished to save having to hire a clerk. More likely, husbands applied...
the money their wives brought to the marriage toward improving the operation of their businesses. Aside from these contributions, most women supported the merchant family from within the home. With their husbands away at the store or on purchasing junkets in eastern cities, wives held profound influence within the family. Although they, like many plantation mistresses, produced fewer goods within the home over the course of the antebellum period, they became their families' primary consumers. They purchased food, medicine, clothing, and household goods for their families. The wife of a successful merchant might also have the responsibility of overseeing the family's house slaves. John Fite, son of an Atlanta merchant, remembered his mother as a household "superintendent." She personally did little physical labor but supervised "the negro women" who performed "the spinning and weaving . . . and very often my mother would hire a white woman to make the clothes." More fundamental than securing the material wants of the family, child-raising remained the principal duty of merchant wives. Indeed as parents, both merchant husbands and wives revealed a bourgeois mien.

Enterprising Parents and Disciplined Children: The Merchant Family at Home

Like many parents in the antebellum South and in the wider Victorian world, merchants and their wives looked homeward to their children for personal happiness. Most could relate to the sentiment expressed by widowed Governor Israel Pickens of Alabama who viewed his children as "now my only objects of affectionate concern and the very trouble they afford me is perhaps at this moment a blessing, as they furnish subjects of attention both to my body and mind." Unlike Pickens and many other planters, however, merchant men and women raised their children in a manner that sought neither

9For an enlightening analysis of comparable activities among merchant wives in Europe see, Bonnie G. Smith, Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoisie of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 4-6. A useful, though overstated, account of the business roles of antebellum merchant wives is offered in, Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 214-15. More recently, Mark Smith has suggested that the manner in which southern women ran their households revealed the influence of a northern bourgeois economy; see Smith, Mastered By the Clock, 62.
to raise aggressive, much less "ferocious," boys or dainty ladies. Nor did they seek to
 crashes their children's self-will. Rather parents in merchant families struggled to instill in
 their children a self-discipline shaped by hard work and Christian morality. Parents
 braced for the task, in part, by adopting bourgeois familial roles.\textsuperscript{10}

The father, as the family's presumed moral guardian, attempted to direct the
 intellectual and moral education of the children. Once again the example set by Isham
 Howze is instructive. The Mississippi merchant displayed a keen interest in molding the
 consciences of his children from their infancy through adulthood. Howze's journal reveals
 his deep interest in the moral qualities his seven children exhibited. He wrote long
 passages exploring the children's character and the likely obstacles they would confront in
 life. An 1851 entry declared his eldest son, Adrian, his "chief hope." The eighteen year-
 old displayed "industry, economy, and morals: and for his age and experience, skillful and
 enterprising [sic]." The discipline Adrian received as a youth had its desired effect. Later,
 as a young clerk in Memphis, the young man avoided the temptations that appeared in a
 "thousand forms." Howze left similar descriptions, with differing assessments, for each of
 his children. He hoped his son William might some day be a "literary man" while young
 James, then age four, would receive a preacher's calling. Tellingly, aside from their
 potential for marriage little comment is offered on the prospects of his two daughters,
 Susan and Elizabeth. While Howze's journals disclose his own assumptions regarding

 Wyatt-Brown asserts the southern parents, particularly those from the ranks of the planter class, followed a
 policy of "bemused indulgence" with their children that eventually led to aggressive young boys, see
 \textit{Southern Honor}, 138-143. This conclusion varies from that of Dickson D. Bruce Jr. who maintained that
 southern childrearing practices aimed toward repression and denial, see \textit{Violence and Culture in the
 Antebellum South} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 44-56; Mintz, \textit{Prison of Expectations}, 13-20;
 Rose, \textit{Victorian America}, 146; Mary P. Ryan, \textit{Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County,
 New York, 1790-1865} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 155-78; see also, Philip J. Greven,
 Jr., \textit{The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Childrearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early
what constituted virtuous character, the intent behind the observations were prescriptive.\textsuperscript{11}

Howze filled his diaries and letters with advice to his children. This counsel assumed neither a commanding nor supplicatory tone. The merchant suggested his children follow the moral precepts his experience had proven sound. When his children failed to observe this general code, however, Howze noted his objections and accepted their decisions. Thus he cautioned his children to "not be in haste to marry—25 or 30 years of age will be soon enough for my boys, & 20 for my daughters." When several of his children neglected this admonition and married young anyway, Howze promptly resigned himself to the new circumstances. This unarticulated philosophy of child-rearing manifested itself four years later when his son Adrian accompanied Howze's business partner to a neighborhood party. Isham Howze believed such activities threatened its participants with dissipation and eventual ruin. Though he entered a cool entry in his journal, the merchant permitted his son's attendance with only a prayer for the Lord's protection. In practice, the paternal régime Howze established seems neither delinquent nor onerous. Evidence suggests that many southern merchants embraced a similar approach to child-rearing.\textsuperscript{12}

Cushing B. Hassell also sought to teach his children through example and judicious counsel. In 1847 the Williamston, North Carolina, merchant and father behaved in a manner reminiscent of the middling course taken by Isham Howze. Early spring saw Hassell order a piano from the New York firm of White & Barnes. The presence of the expensive instrument in the family parlor testified to the success he enjoyed as a merchant. Yet the stated object behind the purchase focused on pedagogy. Hassell had

\textsuperscript{11}Howze Journal, 1851, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH); LeGrand James Wilson, \textit{The Confederate Soldier}, ed. James W. Silver, (Fayetteville, Ark.: 1902; reprint, Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1973), 206.

\textsuperscript{12}Howze Journal, 22 February 1855, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH).
obtained the piano for the edification of his daughter. Such material possessions reveal as much about Hassell's child-rearing practices as they do about any hidden anxieties he might have had over status. The children of southern merchants found themselves surrounded by music and books. Parents expected their children to grasp the lessons conveyed by this environment. Fathers and mothers employed such material objects, along with formal education, in order to instruct their children both intellectually and morally. The discipline required in such education was explicit while its method remained benign. Hassell directed the education of his children through the environment as well as cautionary tales from his own experiences. When the instruction failed, he accepted the outcome with the same aplomb Isham Howze exhibited. Shortly after the purchase of the family piano, Hassell reluctantly allowed his children to attend a traveling circus. He declared such exhibitions frivolous yet relented in the belief that "it was well enough to gratify children with a view of them once but grown people should have better sense than to be led off so repeatedly to the gratification of a vain & idle curiosity." Such resignation to the will of children reflected a philosophy of child-rearing that revered individual volition. Merchant parents did define the parameters of their children's instruction, yet an internal appreciation for Christian morality and intellectual accomplishment served as the ultimate goal. Mothers in merchant families sought to achieve the same objectives through other means.13

The relations between antebellum merchant mothers and their children demonstrated the influence of a growing national bourgeois culture. Like most southern women, the identity women in merchant families assumed proceeded from their domestic and, more fundamentally, their maternal roles. Yet where many of their southern sisters

13Hassell Diary, 17 March 1847, 8 April 1847, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC). It should be noted that members of the planter class often followed similar practices with their own children. Jane Turner Censer found that planters in North Carolina "urged self-control as well as thrift and industriousness upon its offspring." See, North Carolina Planters and Their Children 1800-1860 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 51. This conclusion differs from that found in the work of Bertram Wyatt-Brown and others.
lost themselves amid obligations to children and husband, merchant mothers kept much of their personal character intact in the performance of their maternal duties. Their childrearing practices frequently mirrored those of their husbands. Mothers taught their children discipline and personal responsibility by their own Christian example. Their approach toward childrearing rarely depended upon physical coercion. Within their domestic realm mothers instructed their children in reading, religion, and social grace. Lessons from the Bible and rules of social etiquette supplemented the more formal education of the school house. Quite often merchant women continued these lessons, for financial gain, when their children left the home. One such woman from a South Carolina merchant-planter family decided to teach guitar lessons while her children attended school. More typically, merchant women remained focused on their children while cultivating their own personalities. In practice such education by moral persuasion represented a bourgeois ideal seldom realized. Parents whose children failed to exhibit self-discipline were open to criticism. Catherine Stine, whose husband operated a Cake & Beer shop in Baltimore, Maryland, questioned the childrearing practices of her merchant brother Samuel Aby and his wife Sarah. Writing her mother in 1843, Stine declared her nephew Tom "one of the worst of children," a boy spoiled by Sarah who "never pretends to correct him." Tom's reckless character is particularly apparent when compared to the behavior of his brother, Charles, whom Stine describes as a "sweet boy." Stine held her brother and sister-in-law, particularly the latter, responsible for the boy's poor conduct. The parents failed to inculcate "little Tom" with the self-discipline expected from children of their social position.\(^{14}\)

Upon examination it is not surprising that merchant wives shared many bourgeois values with their husbands for they came from similar backgrounds. Like their husbands,

\(^{14}\)Mattie C. Tennent to Anna Louisia Lesley, 23 January 1847, Norris and Thomson Families Papers, The South Caroliniana Library (SCL), The University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina; Catherine Stine to Aby, 22 October 1843, Aby Family Papers, (MDAH); Mintz, Prison of Expectations, 10-12.
most merchant women received an excellent education by the standards of antebellum southern society. Similar to the instruction poorer children received in nineteenth-century New England, the lessons they mastered in the school houses and the more exclusive academies across the South highlighted such Victorian ideals as self-discipline and time management. The letters Mary Caroline Jacocks wrote from the Oxford Female Academy in Oxford, North Carolina, to her merchant brother Charles Jacocks are both suggestive and typical. When relating the progress of classes Mary devoted special attention to her marks. She excelled in most subjects but her instructors seemed especially pleased with her self-discipline. The stock phrase "deportment very good and person neat" echoes through the evaluations Mary Jacocks received from the academy. The experience of twelve year-old Elizabeth Adams offers another example. In 1844 young Elizabeth, who would marry Louisiana merchant Jean Baptiste Bres four years later, passed the winter writing essays entitled "Perseverance & Friendship" and "Neatness and Order." She believed the latter represented "two great qualities necessary in all classes of life whether it be among the rich or the poor." Elizabeth concluded her reflections on the subject by adding that her teacher "does not fail to impress it on our minds while we are young that we may grow up and be patterns of neatness and order." Securing marital and domestic happiness remained the fundamental purpose of education for young ladies in the antebellum South. Despite this more conservative goal, a more modern appreciation for self-discipline, thrift, and work figured prominently in their instruction. The bourgeois values young ladies like Mary Jacocks and Elizabeth Adams, and their friends from the ranks of the planter class, learned during their formal education they later passed on to their own children. Childrearing represented only one area of responsibility where merchant wives, like their husbands, disclosed their cultural values.15

15Mary Caroline Jacocks to Charles W. Jacocks, 8 May 1824, Charles W. Jacocks Papers, North Carolina State Archives (NCSA), Raleigh, North Carolina; Elizabeth Adams Essays, 23 January 1844, Bres Family Papers, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library (HTML), Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana; Margaret Ripley Wolfe, Daughters of Canaan: A Saga of Southern Women (Lexington, KY: The University Press of
The Domestic and Public Roles of Women from Merchant Families

Compared to most southern antebellum women, mothers and daughters from merchant families enjoyed more opportunities outside the home. Many women taught school for several years before marrying. There is little evidence to suggest merchants viewed young schoolteachers as particularly attractive matches—emotionally or financially. It seems more likely that a mutual regard for education and more diffuse liberal capitalist values frequently brought teachers and merchants into the same society. Once betrothed, most commercial men expected their brides to leave the school house behind. This domestic ideal often collapsed before economic necessity. The money Elizabeth Howze earned while teaching in Chulahoma, Mississippi, sustained her family during several periods when her husband Isham’s mercantile career appeared moribund. Teaching alternately in local schoolhouses and within her own home while raising seven children proved trying. In 1852 a gloomy Isham Howze reflected in his diary, "my poor wife has a hard time of it with her little school to attend to, and her sick family upon her hands, and her husband powerless." Mothers, sisters, and daughters from merchant families voiced similar frustrations or hopes. Martha Webb declared to her brother Charles Jacocks that her pupils proved so "irregular" in their habits that the only reward her four months of instruction had reaped lay in the scholarly accomplishments of her own children. Returning to the classroom in 1851 after raising several merchant sons, Barcia Norfleet Gordon O'Bryan worried her small class in Franklin, Tennessee, seemed insignificant though she tried not to "despise the day of small things." These and other women during more tranquil moments in their lives found their classroom activities personally fulfilling.16


16Howze Journal, 8 July 1852, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH); Martha Webb to Charles Jacocks, 9 July 1844, Charles W. Jacocks Papers, (NCSA); Barcia Norfleet Gordon O'Bryan to...
Aside from teaching and occasional work in the family store, merchant wives in more urban settings busied themselves with community activities. The experience of the "Ladies Benevolent Society" in Wilmington, North Carolina, is illustrative. A volunteer organization of women from mercantile, professional, and planting families, the society operated a store where gentlemen could send their clothes for mending. The "depository" also offered a setting where women could receive instruction in proper needlework. Like their work in the classroom, participation in such associations gave merchant wives an opportunity to perform a more public role than most white women in the antebellum South. In various forms most of their social roles involved teaching, whether disseminating lessons on thrift, economy, and hard work in the classroom or the larger community. Naturally most merchant wives subscribed to the domestic ideal. One southern newspaper plainly captured the essence of this concept when he told women it was better to submit to household tasks "however repugnant" than to "doom yourself to a loveless home." Only sound household management and a measure of submission on the part of the wife could justify her husband's love. Custom and law circumscribed the role women in southern merchant families could play. Despite these obstacles, merchant wives frequently employed their skills within and without the home. Their conduct reveals the growing influence northern and European bourgeois culture had on southern life, particularly among the region's commercial classes.¹⁷

The larger influence of nineteenth-century Victorian ideals extended to the sibling relationships within merchant families as well. Affection and business dictated the tone of

sibling relationships in merchant families across the Old South. Family ties proved the most enduring avenues of commercial and emotional support in an unpredictable agricultural economy. The themes of sibling love and commercial trade are intertwined in the historical record. The very discourse employed in personal letters suggests the occasional subversion of any distinction between the former and latter. The very intent of these letters, designed to inform a loved one on a wide variety of issues, made the coincidence of these subjects quite pronounced. The manner in which familial devotion and business interests shaped these sibling relationships once again affirms the impact of a commercial bourgeois culture upon the families of southern merchants.¹⁸

Sibling Relationships within Merchant Families

Upon receiving news of his father's death in the spring of 1853, merchant Samuel Aby wrote a letter to his brother Charles, a midshipman then serving on the U.S.S. Delaware. Reflecting on this sudden change in his life, Samuel revealed to Charles that "I can hardly enjoy myself, that I shall feel all the time sad & unhappy, for really & truly did I love & respect him." He continued in this melancholy vein over several paragraphs. As the family suffered a profound loss, the death of its moral patriarch, Samuel Aby shared his grief with his brother. The solemn tone of this letter, however, was fleeting. Aby concluded his devotional epistle with a lengthy description of his business activities. He reported that the new goods he had ordered for his store had yet to arrive but "trade with us has been very fair and prosperity are cheering." Aby hoped a strong cotton crop that year would mean "fair seas ahead" for his business. This thematic juxtaposition of business and family is characteristic of merchant correspondence. Like most southerners, from the small farmer to the largest planter, merchants passed along work-related news to their brothers and sisters. What distinguishes the sibling correspondence of southern merchants from the writings of contemporaries is the vast number of references to sales,

deal-making, and general business enterprise found within. Details from the ledger book flourished amidst paragraphs relating family gossip. Even in letters to family members with no connection to the mercantile trade, merchants dwelled upon their commercial interests.19

Southern merchants enjoyed sharing their business philosophies with their brothers and sisters. Throughout 1823, Port Gibson, Mississippi merchant Horace Carpenter sent money to his family in Munroe, Connecticut. The financial support seemed freely, even lovingly, given. Carpenter made no remonstrations against his family's demands but did lecture his brothers and nephews on their unsteady habits and faltering ambition. He held himself up as an example of what a "determination to succeed" could accomplish. Carpenter boasted that he never conformed to "old established opinions or customs—or shaping any conduct by any other rule, than that prompted by the monitor within." After further strong counsel the Mississippian went on to give an account of his profits over the preceding two months. Trade advice and summaries of profit margins in family correspondence only increased when more than one sibling worked in the mercantile trade. The letters passed between the Biggs' brothers, Asa, Kader, Joseph, and William, all of whom operated stores in North Carolina or Mississippi, included long discussions of the nature of business in the antebellum South.20

Of course not all such communication glorified the profession. Edward Rumsey operated a grocery in Greenville, Kentucky, from the mid-1830s through the 1860s. When his brother James contemplated entering the mercantile trade, Edward warned him "it is a

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19Samuel Aby to Charles Aby, 19 April 1853, Aby Family Papers, (MDAH).
20Horace Carpenter to Philinia Carpenter, 14 December 1823, Carpenter Family Correspondence, Tennessee State Library & Archives (TSLA), Nashville, Tennessee. Virtually every letter in the extensive correspondence between the Biggs brothers touches upon some business concern, for two examples see: William Biggs to Joseph Biggs, 24 October 1841, William Biggs to Kader Biggs, 28 October 1841, Kader Biggs Papers, (NCSA).
specious + delusive business and cannot succeed to any great extent, without patience, much attention + economy in all its details." Sibling devotion induced Rumsey to caution his brother against entering such a volatile career. As the letter stated, only regular habits, indeed even a bourgeois mentality, could secure prosperity for a southern merchant. There is no evidence to suggest that James Rumsey left his teaching position in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, for a career in the mercantile trade.\

The ties between siblings from merchant families traversed obstacles familiar to most antebellum southerners. Religion, marriage, illness, and westward migration are several factors that mediated these family relationships. Whether facing adversity or enjoying success, the correspondence between brothers and sisters in merchant families reveals confidence in specific principles. Assumptions regarding economy, discipline, and success shaped the world of the southern merchant family. Siblings reflected upon these issues in their personal letters. They cultivated order in their public and personal lives and expected the same from their families. The merchant home attempted to integrate emotional support with business opportunities to create a cohesive whole. The financial and psychological success of this delicate balancing act depended upon the specific characteristics of the family. Despite such individual variation, the sibling correspondence of merchant families suggests that a certain bourgeois design imbued the larger merchant culture of the antebellum South.

**Merchant Courting and Marriage**

Tellingly, these factors also fundamentally shaped such apparently private concerns as courting and marriage. Love and money typically dictated the courting practices found in antebellum merchant culture. In this respect they found abundant company in the Old South. Examining courtship manuals and specific encounters,

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21 Edward Rumsey to James D. Rumsey, December 1835, Edward Rumsey Letters, Kentucky Historical Society (KHS), Frankfort, Kentucky.
historian Steven M. Stowe found that by the 1820s young southerners, particularly those with means, placed a growing importance on personal happiness over such mundane considerations as wealth when entering into a courtship with thoughts of eventual marriage. The courting letters and diaries from merchant families reflect this theme of romantic passion. More practical considerations influenced these customs as well. Wealth and social position rarely disappeared from personal calculations. Like the men and women from the growing northern middle classes, courtship and marriage practices within southern merchant culture attempted to reach an eminently respectable balance between the demands of an increasingly bourgeois society and impetuous romanticism.

Courting and its various rituals gave southern women a rare opportunity to realize meaningful control over their personal lives. Men from antebellum commercial families, like other southern men, generally expected deference from their wives and daughters. Southern custom and law publicly sustained their private assumptions. Courting, more specifically the practice of choosing a marital partner, represented a notable exception to this order. It was during this period that women, particularly those from wealthy or established families, could exercise significant independence in rejecting or accepting suitors. As romantic ideals like affection and friendship came to shape how southerners envisioned marriage, families left a growing number of marital decisions in the hands of their daughters. More educated, better read, and more sophisticated than most of their southern sisters, women from merchant families wielded this fragile authority to attain, they hoped, affection and status.


Cushing Hassell, a merchant and Baptist minister in Martin County, North Carolina, experienced the ultimate power a woman could wield during courtship. In 1838 the thirty eight year-old Hassell courted the widow Foreman for most of the year. Despite his best efforts, Foreman demurred when he proposed marriage because she found the idea of raising his four children too unsettling. Hassell pleaded with her, declaring that if she refused him he would never court again, but Foreman nonetheless refused his hand. Merchants occasionally recognized their weakness vis-a-vis women during courting in quite explicit terms. When Jane Marriot seemed indifferent toward her beau Isaac Proctor during his many visits, the young storekeeper begged her not to "trifle" with his affections. He compared the tenor of their recent correspondence and found where his letters "had breathed so much devotion" hers "said so little." Proctor explored his pathetic situation in some detail. Jane Marriot, like Mary Leonard and the widow Foreman, had the power to accept or reject her suitor. The relative command women enjoyed while courting often proved real but fleeting. Yet placed within a broader analysis of the language and rituals of courtship, such discretion suggests the development of a bourgeois identity within southern antebellum merchant culture.24

Like the children of the southern planter class, with whom they frequently socialized, male merchants and the daughters of established commercial men sought each others' company at dances, picnics, and family socials among other activities. Such affairs allowed young men and women to mingle within a relatively structured environment. There they remained free to choose their company. Diaries and letters suggest that parents in mercantile families rarely directed their children to marry for such purely base considerations as wealth or status. To be sure, parents with means improved the odds of a favorable match by seeing that their children generally circulated in the same society as

24Hassell Diary, 20 September 1848, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC); Isaac Proctor to Jane Marriot, 5 October 1852, Proctor Papers, (NCSA).
the children of lawyers, doctors, and planters. Yet even as parents and other family
members might share their misgivings during a courtship over the shortcomings of an
eventual match, most relented before the will of the interested couple. Status and wealth
continued to influence whether or not a family approved of a prospective spouse for a son
or daughter. As the antebellum period came to a close, however, young people within
merchant society increasingly sought a marriage that combined such practical matters
with an idealized romantic love.

The very language couples adopted while courting and during the first years of
marriage highlights the significant roles romantic passion and business played within
merchant culture. Early in their long courtship, the aforementioned merchant Isaac
Proctor declared that his "excess feeling of affection" toward Jane Marriot filled him with
melancholy. Scattered in letters describing the daily activities of his store in Raleigh,
North Carolina, and his other financial plans, he solicited Marriot's devotion with poetry.
Despite his peevish disposition, young Proctor successfully won the hand of his intended.
Beyond this mere juxtaposition of romantic affirmations with financial matters, young
couples occasionally incorporated mercantile subjects and language in their
demonstrations of affection.25

In the summer of 1848, Jean Bres, a twenty eight year-old French Creole and
partner in the New Orleans commission firm Bres, Frellen & Company, wrote a love
letter to his seventeen-year-old fiancee, Elizabeth Adams. Complimenting her upon the
quality of veil she had procured for his sister Jan, Bres playfully suggested to Adams "I
think you had better turn your attention to the commission business and be a Commission
Merchant I think you would prosper at it." A few days later Adams tenderly replied that
she could not decide whether to be a merchant or planter for she feared "that if I were
Merchant the only articles I could bargain for would be hearts; and as a Planter the only

25Isaac Proctor to Jane Marriot, 11 June 1848, Proctor Papers, (NCSA).
seeds I would sow would be seeds of Discord . . . " This exchange framed expressions of love within a mercantile discourse. Bres implicitly praised Adams' shopping expertise, a profitable skill for a businessman's wife to have, by comparing her activities to that of a commission merchant. Adams' returned the compliment by suggesting perhaps Bres and his mercantile would be in her future. Similar language is found in the courting letters passed between Benedict Semmes and Jorantha Jordan.

Marylander Benedict Semmes spent 1848 and 1849 selling dry goods and wooing Jorantha Jordan, the daughter of a New York Congressman. While following commercial pursuits in Washington, D.C., Semmes kept Jordan informed of his commercial activities. Like Jean Bres, Semmes blithely speculated upon the business skills of his betrothed. Concerning Jordan's neat handwriting Semmes remarked "I have often said that you would make a capital clerk under my management you have an enquiring mind--speak precisely--act readily and are not Dull at figures." In the same paragraph he flirtatiously inquired if she would "show me your books" upon their next meeting. Business concerns rarely left Semmes' mind even while writing love letters. A month before marriage he attributed a delinquent letter to the rush of business. Semmes had penned three lines to Jordan when several "valuable" customers entered the store thus he explained "instead of writing to you I made about $120 for you." The romantic passion southern merchants articulated during the antebellum period readily accommodated the language of bargains, speculations, and profits. The daily practices demanded by their profession impressed upon merchants a discourse they subsequently used in many facets of their personal lives, including courtship and marriage. More fundamentally, the language and subjects these men and women adopted while courting emanated from values that frequently deviated from the norms established by their yeoman and planter neighbors. After marriage, newlyweds in antebellum merchant society continued to shape a life together that
reflected the romantic ideals and materialism that initially brought so many of them together.26

Upon the successful culmination of courtship—marriage—men and women of the merchant class attempted to establish a respectable economic and social position in the antebellum South. Purchasing material goods for home and family offered a means toward achieving this end. Despite the wide distribution of wealth among southern merchants, most could afford to provide their family with some degree of material comfort. In an era when the personal wealth of southern farmers ranged from a few hundred dollars for the poorest to several thousands for the more "middling" nonslaveowning yeoman farmers and tens of thousands for affluent planters, most merchants secured enough wealth to purchase at least a limited number of material goods. Merchants in 1860 Sumter County, Alabama, reported an average of $1,246 in real wealth and another $2,900 in personal wealth. A sample of the economic backgrounds of Confederate veterans from physician and merchant families in antebellum Tennessee found a median wealth of $20,000 each. Historian T. Lloyd Benson's study of Orange County, Virginia, determined the inventory amassed by the lowliest merchant came to only $1,500 while one of the wealthiest merchants in the county had a personal wealth and inventory exceeding $78,000. Nationally, clerks who possessed little or no financial stake in a store could expect to earn between $400-600 a year. The same study concluded that the average retail store in 1840 represented a capital investment of $4300. While few merchants could surround themselves with material comforts rivaling that of the region's slave-rich planter class, many could expect to purchase material goods beyond mere food and shelter. Indeed, even merchant families with more limited means purchased luxury goods when economically feasible. The logic behind such behavior became more explicit

26J.B. Bres to Elizabeth Adams, 2 August 1848, Elizabeth Adams to J.B. Bres, 6 August 1848, Bres Family Papers, (HTML); Louisiana, vol. 11, p. 312, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration; Manuscript Census, Orleans Parish, LA, 1850; Benedict Semmes to Jorantha Jordan, 24 September 1848, 14 March 1849, Semmes Papers, (SHC).
as the antebellum period advanced. Exhibiting behavior historically associated with the northern middle classes, southern merchant families readily embraced the developing capitalist market economy.\(^{27}\)

**Merchant Families and Material Consumption**

There is significant disagreement among historians over the degree to which commercial relations influenced households across the antebellum South. One side in the debate includes Lewis C. Gray, Robert Fogel, Stanley Engerman and James Oakes who contend the rational economic behavior of the planter class belies any incompatibility between slavery and capitalism. Conversely such historians as Eugene D. Genovese, Steven Hahn, Barbara Fields, and others claim the impact of slavery upon the political economy of the region helped produce an ideology antithetical to capitalist development and commercial penetration. In her study of the plantation household, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese maintains that slavery and staple production "established distinct limits on the penetration of market relations into the interstices of southern households." Yeoman farmers in the South remained even further removed from the forces of the market economy. According to Steven Hahn, yeomen in the Georgia Upcountry lived in a world where "kinship rather than the marketplace mediated most productive relations . . . family self-sufficiency proved the fundamental concern." Reaching a more guarded conclusion, Lacy Ford found that Upcountry yeoman families produced goods for the market.

economy but energetically sought to keep individual members from participating in the labor market. The experience of merchant households, by definition a group tied to the marketplace, receives scant attention in these larger works. The material condition of these southern households reveals the cultural impact of the growing nineteenth-century commercial economy. The merchant families' consumption pattern also betrays aspects of their bourgeois identity.\(^\text{28}\)

Merchant families exhibited a growing interest in the ownership and accumulation of material possessions over the course of the antebellum period. Following a similar pattern found in the northern United States and western Europe, the southern merchant class attempted to define themselves as belonging among the region's socioeconomic elites through the possession of the appropriate goods. The physical characteristics of the home, and more importantly the possessions found therein, reflected the ideals of the merchant family.\(^\text{29}\)

The very quantity of possessions merchants transported across the South when they relocated their business operations is itself revealing. In 1845 John Dunlap, a merchant and business agent in the Louisiana firm of Dalhonde & Grosbach, prepared to move his family from Augusta, Georgia, to New Orleans. After renting a two-story brick


house in New Orleans, this moderately successful businessman wrote his wife in Georgia to send their things, along with their slaves, by water. Dunlap reminded her to pack his "merchants magazines" along with the family's other books. The inventory of goods sent to their new home included a piano, bed clothing, carpets, waiters, silverware, looking glasses, and hair mattresses. John N. Johnson, whose father was a merchant in Bristol, Tennessee, lived a more sedentary life in an eight-room house with a kitchen, smoke house, and separate brick servants' quarters. Merchants who could afford such large homes filled them with a variety of luxury goods. In 1857 Louisville merchant John Jefferson spent twenty-three dollars for a cherry wardrobe with veneered panels. A few days later Jefferson noted in his diary that his mother purchased a solid silver soup ladle and a porte-monnaie [purse] for his father on his fifty-fourth birthday. Jonathan Worth, an antebellum merchant and postbellum governor of North Carolina, bought his daughters silver sets, sofas, along with such modest gifts as subscriptions to Harper's Magazine.

Even storekeepers with little capital and even less business success amassed quantities of luxury goods. Isham Howze, known to his creditors as having very few assets, transported a wagon load of items including his books, book cases, and secretary when he moved his family from Tennessee to Mississippi in 1854. Similarly, at a time when Samuel Aby could repay his creditors a mere thirty cents on the dollar, a neighbor described his wife riding in a "splendid new carriage of the finest kind used here (Grand Gulf, MS)" with a pair of "splendid matched Roans." The accumulation of non-essential goods conferred prestige upon merchant families in the antebellum South. Even those with few means attempted to live at a material level higher than most of their neighbors. In addition, merchants and their families, as evidenced by their fashion consciousness, believed consumption made for a more interesting and comfortable life.30

30 John Dunlap to Beatrice Dunlap, 16 February 1845, Dunlap Correspondence, (HTML); Louisiana, vol. 9, p. 68, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration (HGSB); Bailey, Class and Tennessee's Confederate Generation. 23; Jefferson Diary, 11 March, 16 March 1857, John F. Jefferson Papers, The Filson Club Historical Society (FCHS), Louisville, 123
The southern press reflected the allure fashion held for the men and women in wealthy southern families. Southern newspapers, particularly those in larger towns, frequently contained articles describing the latest women's fashions from Paris and London. In 1851 the Charleston Mercury ran a lengthy story on the "fashions for November" in that city. The writer declared "ball and evening dresses will be worn with trains" and predicted that "regarding 'home' dresses, the deshabilles Pompadour will be much worn this winter." Indeed, the pursuit of fashion on the part of Charleston's upper classes occasionally inspired the Mercury editors to resort to satire. Thus an editorial titled "Fashions By A 'First' Hand" pronounced:

Fingers are very much worn; nearly to the bone—skirts and accounts are still very long, while bodies, particularly those that think themselves somebodies, are excessively low, with a great deal of stiltiness [sic] and a quantity of bone about the place where the heart likely to come, if there happens to be any. In evening dress the petticoat is usually very full and the pocket often very empty. The material of the bosom is frequently glace, and covered with a transparent issues of imitation stuff, which may be seen through easily.\(^\text{31}\)

As members of the region's financial elite, wealthy merchant families represented both a target for such sarcasm and important market for antebellum fashion. Like many of his colleagues in the mercantile trade, Williamston, North Carolina merchant Cushing Hassell ordered suits for his personal use directly from New York City. Women from merchant families purchased both finished dresses and bolts of material inspired by the latest European fashion. Wives wrote their husbands letters detailing their latest clothing purchases and mothers raised their children, particularly their daughters, to be consumers of fashion. Families could be quite absorbed by sartorial deliberations. In addition to teaching school and following her son's early mercantile career, Barcia Norfleet O'Bryan


\(^{31}\)Charleston Mercury. 25 November 1851, 10 June 1853.
made sure her daughter Fannie had at least one formal dress of silk and ruffles. Virginia Leslie, a member of a South Carolina merchant-planter family, wrote her sister Louisa that the vogue for bonnet ribbon in 1852 required that it be quilled "then put on under a bow, on that back of the bonnet, and brought round on each side to the top in a point."

Conveniently for Louisa, dress styles had changed little from the previous year. The rationale behind consumption, from silk ribbon, dresses, and parlor furnishings to such minute luxuries as gold pens, lay in the significance merchant families assigned individual items. While it is impossible to reach firm conclusions regarding consumption patterns from the personal documents these southern families left behind, their bourgeois purchasing habits seem to parallel those of the region's planter class.32

Members of the antebellum planter class enjoyed a reputation for luxury. Historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown has asserted hospitality and largess represented two fundamental pillars of planter culture. Marxist historians like Eugene Genovese and Raimondo Luraghi have described the "prebourgeois" consumption habits of the planter class as serving to differentiate them from the mass of southern society. Certainly a predilection for grand estates, thoroughbred horses, and other luxuries suggest planters subscribed to an ethos of gentility and honor that distinguished them from many of their neighbors. Yet most of the goods planters bought, and the language they employed in describing their own consumption habits, varied little from that of merchant families. Indeed, several historians have determined planters spent no more of their income on luxuries than other wealthy Americans. Thus like the wives of successful merchants in the 1850s, fashionable planter women wore hoop skirts "truly prodigious" in size.

Redolent of the bonnet correspondence between the Leslie sisters, Kate Carney of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, kept a diary so she would "know how I was dressed sometimes,

32Hassell Diary, 29 September 1847, Hassell Papers, (SHC); Jorantha Semmes to Benedict Semmes, 29 August 1859, Semmes Papers, (SHC); Barcia Norfleet O'Bryan to Fannie O'Bryan, 15 April 1852, O'Bryan Family Papers, (TSLA); Virginia Leslie to Louisa Leslie, 28 October 1852, (SCL).
& how my dress was made, just to remark the change a few years will make." Planter men kept abreast of New York and European fashions as well. As historians and cultural anthropologists who study upper class behavior have suggested, elites like these merchant and planter families acquired luxuries to create, in part, a barrier between them and the rest of society. A capacity to accumulate luxury goods determined access to privileged bourgeois circles. More fundamentally, merchant families clearly enjoyed owning luxury goods. By the 1850s merchants across the South, but particularly those in larger towns, increasingly expressed themselves through the consumption of goods. Their desire to be fashionably dressed and housed in a dignified manner was not unique for most southerners yearned for the material rewards offered by the growing American commercial market. Yet unlike most of their neighbors, with the exception of those in the planter class, greater access to capital and the northern credit economy enabled an increasing number of merchant families to satisfy their bourgeois consumer appetites.33

The same factors that advanced bourgeois ideals within southern merchant families, close ties to the commercial market and an openness to northern culture, also influenced their experience with illness. Merchants and their families typically followed the most advanced medical practices of the day. Medicine in the antebellum United States, often called by historians the "heroic age of medicine," relied upon such antiphlogistic treatment as bleeding, blistering, vomiting, and sweating. Doctors in the North and South employed the same therapeutic treatments against disease and illness. For the mass of poorer, rural southern whites, access to professional treatment and medicine remained limited during the antebellum period. The wealth and commercial ties

merchant and planter families enjoyed, however, allowed them to employ a wide array of treatments.

Storekeepers served as the principal distributors of patent medicines in their communities. Thus while the price of many of these nostrums, particularly those containing opium, might exceed fifty cents an ounce; wealth and reliable access to credit enabled merchants to use these medicines in treating their own families. It is hardly surprising that sick members of merchant families ingested large quantities of drugs. Isham Howze kept a ready supply of quinine, a drug used for treating malaria, in his Mississippi home. Frequently in the late summer and early fall of the early 1850s his entire family lay stricken with chills, fevers, and bloody discharges. The cost for the necessary medicine that treated the symptoms for the family's various afflictions drove Howze into debt but his credit back East remained secure. After consulting many doctors concerning his own ailment, seemingly a degenerative intestinal disease, Howze attempted to sustain himself with morphine and the knowledge that "none of the professors of the healing art can do me any good." Clara Solomon, the daughter of New Orleans' merchant Solomon Solomon, resorted to cocaine against a host of bodily ills. Young Clara's diary is replete with references to such brands as 'Syme's' or 'Burnett's Cocaine.' The Solomon family developed a strong attachment to this "excellent article." On occasion merchants traveled North for treatment. 34

In 1847 North Carolina storekeeper-farmer Joseph Biggs brought his wife with him on his annual purchasing trip to New York City so she could have a wen surgically removed. He and his wife found the constant bustle of the large city exhausting. Yet like

many antebellum merchants, Joseph and Elizabeth Biggs sacrificed comfort and expense for care they perceived to be more refined and therefore superior. The medical treatment merchant families received mirrored that of the southern planter class. Once again the famous southern diarist Mary Boykin Chesnut revealed the experience of many planter families when she related her own dependence upon morphine to see her through headaches and depression. Both planter and merchant families generally secured more expensive and seemingly more scientific medical treatment than most white southerners. While wealth enabled planter families to obtain medicine and professional treatment, access to credit and goods in the North proved more critical to antebellum merchants with limited means. These commercial families distinguished themselves from their farmer neighbors with their ability to obtain the latest medical treatment of the day.35

"General Intelligence and Good Order": Merchant Views on the North

Not surprisingly, the various bourgeois practices merchant families embraced, both within and without the home, and their strong ties to the growing commercial market, fundamentally shaped their view of the North. To be sure, they frequently subscribed to many of the derogatory stereotypes of the greedy, boorish "Yankee" commonly held by many southerners. This more public stand, however, was tempered by significant respect and even affection for the North and its culture. The personal documents merchant families left behind reveals a disposition towards the North as complex as their own place within the South.

The personal histories of many storekeepers provide one obvious explanation for their strong feelings for the North. A significant minority of southern merchants, estimated between five to twenty percent, were born and raised in a northern state. Indeed, when northerner Henry Benjamin Whipple toured the South during the winter of

1844 he discovered "everywhere at the south . . . energetic northerners located & successfully competing with those southerners educated & reared here. . . . and in point of business talent . . . the preponderance is decidedly in favor of the north." Most of these merchants and their families readily embraced their adopted homes without relinquishing their sentimental attachment to the North. A letter written by White County, Tennessee, merchant Tyrus Brainerd suggests the devotion many northern emigrants, particularly New Englanders, continued to have for their homes. The homesick shopkeeper declared to his friend back in Connecticut:

> New England 'with all thy faults I love thee still' I love New England for her political and religious institutions for her general Intelligence and good order and believe there is no country morally and intellectually which surpasses her. Her territory is narrow her resources more husbanded and consequently age and wealth to contend with [sic]. Her young men must come out from her and come out with the right kind of capital business capacity which is the best kind of stock and they are sure to succeed. The honorable and profitable stations her sons occupy in every State and territory in the United States are witnesses to her moral and mental worth.36

Brainerd found his position in Tennessee satisfactory, but like many merchants from the North he never forgot his home. Of course occasionally such emigrants compared their new surroundings with those they left behind in the North and found them wanting.

Mainer Ruth Ingraham, a shopkeeper in August, Georgia, denounced the local "Crackers" for not celebrating Thanksgiving but she and her family did their "best to be thankful" and enjoyed "excellent hominy" that she found to be a "good dish." Frequently a legacy of affection for the North passed down to children born in the South. In 1856 Charleston, South Carolina, merchant George Williams joined the New England Society, a fraternal organization for men with ties or interest in the region, though his father, not he, had been born in New England. The respect Williams and many southern-born merchants evinced

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36Tyrus Brainerd to Samuel Arnold Haddam, 14 January 1838, Tyrus Brainerd Correspondence, (TSLA).
toward a liberal bourgeois northern culture became increasingly uncommon in the sectionalized and defensive slave South of the 1850s. Merchant sentiment went beyond employing New England tutors for the instruction of children, a practice long embraced by the region's planter class. Rather southern merchants attributed a dynamism to the North and its inhabitants absent in the South.\(^ {37} \)

The business literature shopkeepers valued most came from northern cities. Published in New York City, \textit{Hunt's Merchant Magazine and Commercial Review}, the preeminent trade journal for southern merchants and the nation-at-large, tended to idealize northern business practices. The magazine presented the thrifty Yankee trader as the archetypal successful businessman. A regional dependence upon such commercial journals drove southern nationalist James D.B. De Bow to develop a magazine specifically for merchants and industrialists in Dixie called the \textit{Commercial Review of the South and West}. The publication never seriously rivaled \textit{Hunt's Merchant Magazine} in the South. When not following the business advice emanating from the North, merchants and their families regarded its cities as centers of learning and sophistication.\(^ {38} \)

Prosperous merchants made regular trips to northern cities to obtain goods for their stores, as we know, but merchants and their families also traveled to northern cities pursuing education. William Lea, a merchant in Leasburg, North Carolina, raised his six children to take an interest in the larger world and particularly the northern United States.

\(^{37}\)Predictably rural counties had fewer merchants hailing from the North than more urban counties. For example, rural Buckingham County, Virginia had only one northern transplant (1.9% of county mercantile pop.) in its merchant community in 1850 while more settled Dinwiddie County, Virginia, was home to 16 northerners (3.7%) and an impressive 54 European storekeepers (12.6%), see Manuscript Census, Buckingham and Dinwiddie Counties, Virginia, 1850. Kyriakoudes, "Plantation to Town," 49-50, 61; Cecil-Fronsman, \textit{Common Whites}, 99-100; Lester B. Shippee, ed., \textit{Bishop Whipple's Southern Diary 1843-1844} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1937), 73; Ruth Ingraham and Mary Leonard to Susan Fisher, 24 November 1839, (SHC); Merton E. Coulter, \textit{George Walton Williams: The Life of a Southern Merchant and Banker 1820-1903} (Athens, GA: The Hibriton Press, 1976), 47. The Biggs brothers, like many merchants, hired northern instructors, see: Asa Biggs to Kader Biggs, 5 March 1847, Hassell Papers, (SHC). On the increasing ideological divide between the North and South see: Genovese, \textit{World the Slaveholders Made}, 65, 99, 102, 122; Eric H. Walther, \textit{The Fire-Eaters} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 85-87, 201, 224-30, 273-87.

\(^{38}\)Walther, \textit{Fire-Eaters}, 199-201.
Upon graduating from college in 1836, Lea's youngest son, Addison, expressed his wish to complete his education with a tour of several northern cities. Despite this "anxious" desire, Addison Lea's strong religious convictions, he would later become a Methodist minister, caused him to refrain from a trip "without some other object in view than merely to satisfy a vain and idle Curiosity [sic]." Few children of the merchant class let their religious or political views bar at least one pilgrimage to New York City, Philadelphia, or Boston. In the end, "Yankee" periodicals and a deep respect for the cultural and economic achievement represented by northern cities, helped influence southern shopkeepers, a class already economically dependent upon the North, to reach favorable judgments upon the character of northern men and women.39

Antebellum merchants, like the majority of southerners, recognized a cultural divide between their region and the rest of the country. Most merchants would have agreed with pro-slavery theorist George Fitzhugh's conclusion: "benevolence, affection, generosity, and philanthropy are equally common North and South; and only differ in their modes of manifestation. We [the South] are one people." Northerners and southerners alike, from Henry Adams' description of attending Harvard University with a "childlike" William Henry Fitzhugh Lee to James Henry Hammond's speeches hailing a society built upon "King Cotton," reflected upon the obvious contrast between the two regions. Yet despite the growing recognition of cultural differences between the North and South, the very ties antebellum merchants created with northern society frustrated neat distinctions between the two peoples. In the minds of many southerners the practices antebellum merchants embraced made a mockery of Fitzhugh's "one people."40

Daniel R. Hundley's influential study *Social Relations in Our Southern States* declared the mass of southern merchants to be "cunning fellows" who "full of their own conceit" differed "but little from any ordinary shopkeeper in New England or the North-West." Over the course of the antebellum period shopkeepers were forced into the unenviable position of having to defend their southern identity at the same time many recognized the growing number of bourgeois characteristics they shared with northerners. A reliance upon Yankee literature, business advice, and other social affects created an intellectual debt few antebellum commercial families in the South could ignore. Not surprisingly the pressure of sustaining a regional identity while at the same time protecting cultural ties with a bourgeois, liberal capitalist North produced ambivalence in merchant families. Many expressed variations on this theme in their personal writing, as one merchant described a Connecticut couple he recently met: "I like to see people saving; but there is a bitterness, sometimes, in these northerners, that I do dislike. There new friends of ours, seem honest and pious, and I like them much thus far." Seemingly out of habit, protestations of southern cultural superiority appeared beside praise for northerners and their mores. To be sure most antebellum merchant families, like their planter and yeoman farmer neighbors, jealously guarded the rights and prerogatives of their region. Contrary to more extreme southern nationalists, however, these same families refrained from any outright condemnation of a bourgeois culture in a North that boasted so many seemingly valuable cultural attributes.41

Merchant families living in the antebellum South displayed many of the same bourgeois practices historians have frequently associated with the developing Victorian culture and economy found in the northern United States and Western Europe. Unlike

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most southerners, these families enjoyed an opportunity to participate in the expanding commercial market of nineteenth-century America. These men and women hailed the regimen of the commercial market with few of the reservations uttered by a grasping, though ultimately conservative, planter class. Daily the heads of merchant families ventured forth to trade in their shops. These families saw the separation of home from work long before most of their neighbors. At home wives increasingly adopted the tenets of bourgeois domesticity while children learned the value of thrift and hard work in their private schools. Men and women from the mercantile classes invariably revealed a commercial mien in their courting and marital rituals. Following marriage, commercial families participated in the nascent consumer economy to a far greater extent than the mass of southern society. The material culture merchant families realized paralleled that of their wealthier planter neighbors. In these and other ways commercial families emerged as harbingers of a liberal bourgeois culture across the antebellum South. Ultimately, however, the accumulation of these habits did not produce a fundamentally bourgeois merchant class. Their devotion to the conservative traditions of the Old South proved a critical barrier to the kind of intellectual transformation necessary for these merchant families to become truly bourgeois.

Liberalism Eclipsed: The Conservative Tradition in Southern Merchant Culture

Antebellum merchant families from across the economic spectrum, both in towns and rural crossroads, living in the upper and deep South, shared certain cultural traditions antithetical to the modern bourgeois temperament that was taking root in the northern United States. First, men from these families supported the conservative patriarchy established in southern law and custom. Second, the members of commercial families viewed themselves and their place in society through a prism of evangelical Christianity that tempered their willingness to embrace liberal bourgeois practices. This evangelicalism not only shaped how these men and women understood their family roles
and the place of slavery, but such abstract traditions as a southern code of honor as well. Finally, and most important, commercial families embraced the racial order of the Old South. Many merchants owned house slaves and the majority who did not defended the institution against the attacks from northern abolitionists. These customs limited the degree to which antebellum merchant families could imitate their counterparts in the North. Indeed, despite their own increasingly sophisticated bourgeois family and commercial lives, these merchant families worked hard to sustain a southern identity.

Nineteenth-century America was a patriarchal society. Men, particularly fathers, represented the principal authority figure both in and out of the home. Traditionally husbands and fathers enjoyed control over the labor and property of his household. Yet as historians Mary P. Ryan, Steven Mintz, and others have noted, by the mid-nineteenth-century economic change and the rise of political liberalism in northern society had begun to weaken fathers' authority. The decline in household production and the increasingly egalitarian nature of northern families required men to increasingly rule by persuasion rather than decree. No such transformation in household relations emerged in the antebellum South. There the dominant gender ideology still placed fathers at the head of their families while women and other dependents continued to be defined by their relationship to men. As an agricultural economy where the production of goods within most households remained critical, the South proved resistant to significant changes in gender relations. The social code and the isolation of the farm or plantation limited the roles southern women could play. State and common law also reinforced patriarchal organization in the South. A woman's legal existence ended upon entering marriage. Growing women's rights in the North, indirectly through changes in the economy or the rise of the "cult of domesticity," had little effect in a South where the law granted husbands full custody of children, declared that a woman's personal property belonged to her husband, and limited the availability of divorce. Like men in yeoman and planter
homes across the South, husbands and fathers in merchant families expected to govern their households. As the personal papers of merchant families suggest, however, the struggle for patriarchal authority within the family and the responsibilities such power entailed often proved a sobering contest for both men and women.42

As the oldest son, Charles W. Jacocks wielded significant patriarchal authority over his widowed mother and younger sisters. Jacocks operated a dry goods store in Windsor, North Carolina. When not employed in the store, he served as Clerk and Master of Equity in the Bertie County courts. The personal success Jacocks realized as a storekeeper, along with his position in the court, gave him numerous opportunities to exercise the kind of power successful men held in the antebellum South. Active as an agent and executor of several estates, he intimately observed how patriarchy in the South limited women's rights. Widows like Mary Potter of Brownsville, Tennessee, depended upon Jacocks to supervise the sale of their late husband's estates. When the rental income from her husband's land fell short of her current needs, Potter appealed to the merchant as "one that has befriended me heretofore to dispose and manage the business as your better judgment may think proper [sic]." Jacocks performed this and other legal tasks for Potter despite the fact she seemingly did not pay for his services. From the nature of their correspondence, one is left to conclude that Jacocks viewed Potter as a widow in need.

His conduct towards her reveals an important aspect of his own male identity in a patriarchal southern society. Jacocks helped women in need and expected deference in return. Thus when he assisted his widowed sister Martha Webb through a financial embarrassment in 1844 she thanked him in a style sure to please him. Between declarations of gratitude Webb wrote that his "fatherly caution to be prudent with it was greatly received + will be strictly attended to yes . . . I should not be deserving a place among civilized people if I did not attend closely to the advice of the only friend I have in the world." Law and custom encouraged Jacocks to take a direct interest in his sister's affairs and in this instance Jacocks handled himself with aplomb. The growing paternal relationship between he and his sister pleased both parties. Such agreement had not always graced the Jacocks family.43

The frayed ties between Charles Jacocks and his two other sisters, Ann Roscoe and Mary Reed, exemplified both the strength and limitations of merchant patriarchy in the antebellum South. The problem with both women, according to brother Charles, was the men in their lives. As head of the family, he required his sisters to seek his blessing before entering into marriage. Like physician-planter and fellow North Carolinian James Norcom, Jacocks hoped for "cheerful submission" to his will. Furthermore, after marriage Jacocks expected to receive proper respect from his new brother-in-laws. In both particulars he would be disappointed.44

By early 1833 Jacocks had become so estranged from his sister Ann Roscoe that he only communicated to her through another sister, Mary Reed. The last recorded letter he sent Roscoe pleaded with her to reconsider an impending marriage with a minister named James Bunch. By attaching herself to a man with so little public standing Jacocks feared Roscoe would meet ruin. More importantly, the merchant sought to protect the

44Norcom quoted in Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 207.
family's reputation. Jacocks pronounced Bunch to be "one of the most ignorant men in Bertie, illiterate (that is can't hardly read or write) and has several children by a former marriage." He asked his sister if she would disgrace the family with such a marriage. Harking back to the authority of an earlier patriarch, Jacocks declared that if their father were alive: "he would rather that you should be laid in the Grave among the dead. Nay, he would almost put you there himself rather than it should ever be said that a Bunch married into the Jacocks family." Jacocks concluded his threatening missive with the promise that should she go through with the marriage he would have her banished from the family. Thus ended what he described as his "last letter of advice to a last undone sister." As head of the household, Charles Jacocks, a sophisticated merchant with strong economic ties to the North, expected submission from the women and other dependents in his family. Like most southern white men, he possessed only a limited amount of leverage with which to enforce his will. It seems Ann Roscoe finally did marry Bunch and by all indications Jacocks held fast to his vow to end his interaction with his sister. This stand against Roscoe's decision, however, failed to bolster Jacocks' role as family patriarch for only three years later he once again faced an obstinate sibling.45

Another feud arose over patriarchal rights. Charles Jacocks appeared to have a warm relationship with his sister Mary Reed, but after several bitter confrontations, he spurned Mary's husband James Reed. The dispute, mediated by Jacocks' brother Jonathan, involved Reed's sale of family [Jacocks] slaves and his failure to obtain an adequate home for his wife. When Charles Jacocks admonished Reed for his inability to support his sister in the style to which she was accustomed Reed responded by publicly assailing his brother-in-law's character. Mary Reed sided with her husband against her brother Charles, while Jonathan Jacocks, and mother Elizabeth attempted to remain neutral. During the spring of 1836 the acrimony between the respective parties only increased as caustic

45Charles Jacocks to Mary Reed, 23 April 1833, Charles W. Jacocks Papers, (NCSA). 137
letters passed back and forth. Eventually Jonathan Jacocks concluded that Reed had indeed pursued a course "dictated by a disposition to degrade Bro Charles."

Tension within the family further increased when the brothers learned of their mother's plans to move in with the Reed family. Clearly Elizabeth Jacocks held a higher opinion of James Reed than her own sons did. Jonathan Jacocks wrote his mother that he could not "trust you out of the protection of your friends with a man who I have seen myself + many of your friends have often told me does not treat you as he should."

Charles and Jonathan Jacocks had firmly voiced their disapproval of James Reed and their mother's relocation to his home. The former had gone even further by questioning Reed's ability to support his sister. The clash between the patriarchal rights of Jacocks and Reed remained unresolved. While his mother and sisters did not question Charles Jacocks' right to protect the family and its reputation, they did not always follow his direction as evidenced by the 1850 census that reveals seventy-seven year-old Elizabeth Jacocks living in Perquimans County, North Carolina, with daughter Mary Reed's family. Nevertheless, Jacocks continued to expect the same patriarchal rights promised all white men in the antebellum South.46

Merchant Isham Howze frequently reflected upon patriarchy and gender relations in his diary. Like many southern theologians and proslavery ideologues, Howze viewed patriarchy as fundamental to human nature. Undoubtedly the merchant would have agreed with southern intellectual Thomas Roderick Dew when he wrote that a woman's "physical weakness incapacitates her for combat; her sexual organization, and that part which she takes in bringing forth and nurturing the rising generations, render her necessarily domestic in her habits." Seeking to ground his support for patriarchy firmly within Biblical teaching, Howze found Paul's injunctions in Ephesians 5:21-22 particularly

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comforting. It seemed obvious to Howze that "power to decide has to be lodged somewhere in the family, and God has given it to the husband." He conceded that women may become merchants in some lines of stock, but ultimately the "domestic circle" should be their sphere. Despite his belief in the legitimacy of patriarchal relations, Howze's views were hardly static. Through the trials of financial difficulty or emotional upheaval he longed to be able to "shift off my responsibility, as the head, upon my beloved wife, and let her be the head to plan and execute too." Nevertheless Biblical law and social propriety continued to sustain Howze's belief in southern patriarchy. This position appears yet more remarkable in view of his unlikely friendship with the controversial Fanny Wright.47

Howze first met Fanny Wright during the winter of 1850 when he agreed to rent Nashoba, the 2,000 acre farm she owned in Shelby County, Tennessee. During the late 1820s Wright had attempted to build Nashoba into a co-operative community along the lines of Robert Dale Owen's experiment in New Harmony, Indiana. Here black and white residents were to create a classless society that would break free from traditional marital and family roles. Wright declared marriage laws void in Nashoba where "no woman can forfeit her individual rights or independent existence, and no man assert over her any rights of power whatsoever beyond what he may exercise over her free and voluntary affection." By the 1830s political, religious, and sexual scandals brought the communal experiment in western Tennessee to an end but not before Wright had, according to one historian, become the "most notorious feminist radical in America." Howze encountered the feminist socialist near the end of her life, but even at the age of fifty-five she fascinated the southern merchant. Indeed the ambivalent feelings Howze expressed

47Dew quoted in Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 198; Howze Journal, 11 August 1850, 8 August 1851, 3 November 1852, 20 March 1853, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH).
toward Wright suggests the strong attraction patriarchy continued to hold for seemingly bourgeois merchants in the antebellum South.48

The life Wright led posed an ideological dilemma for Howze. During their three year acquaintance Howze failed to reconcile his vision of the proper Christian family with the undeniable respect he held for his radical landlord. He confessed in his diary to loving Wright whom he described as a "great woman" with a "fine" mind. Her failure to accept Christianity and the woman's role within the Christian family, however, made Howze fear for the state of her soul. The esteem he felt towards her led him to pray that "she may bow her knees to Jesus & yet become an advocate for that cause which she now slights."

Unlike many of his Tennessee neighbors, Howze never condemned Wright nor questioned her integrity. The well-read merchant seemingly enjoyed discussing philosophy and religion with the notorious feminist socialist. Howze did agree with his fellow southerners that Wright's denunciations of traditional marriage and family life represented a threat to community mores. He declared her theories ingenious but godless. After Wright's death in 1852, Howze frequently speculated on her eternal reward. Her good works--Wright "fed the hungry and clothed the naked, and had a benevolent heart"--coincided with the southern merchant's maturing bourgeois inclinations regarding poor relief and benevolent associations. Despite this goodwill, Howze feared for Wright's salvation. Her feminist critique of the same patriarchy Howze held dear led him to the sad conclusion that her fate rested in the hands of a Christian God "whose existence and merits she did disown." The merchant could only pray that a loving God would forgive Wright for those heresies that he and his southern neighbors found so disturbing.49

49 Howze Journal, 1 August 1851, 13 April 1853, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH).
The rationale Isham Howze offered in defense of traditional patriarchal relations suggests a second element that checked the development of a mature bourgeois ideology within antebellum merchants, namely the influence of conservative Protestant theology. Like many nineteenth-century Americans living in the North and most residents of the South, the mass of southern merchants considered themselves good Protestants observing a faith grounded in Scripture and traditional Christian teaching. Mirroring denominational patterns in the midwestern United States, evidence suggests merchants in the antebellum South overwhelming belonged to the Presbyterian, Methodist, or Baptist churches. Mere affiliation with such churches fails to convey, however, the profound impact evangelical Protestantism had upon merchant families. By the late 1830s at least half of the South's white adult population regularly attended evangelical preaching. Seeking a personal relationship with God in Christ, merchants and their families joined the ranks of their evangelical neighbors. Even those merchants not inclined to accept conservative Protestant theology found their own families and neighbors caught in the tide of evangelical faith that swept the antebellum South.50

Evangelical ministers in the antebellum South preached a Christian message of emotional intimacy, spiritual equality, and godly self-discipline. A direct outgrowth of the revivalism associated with the First and Second Great Awakenings, by the 1830s the

evangelical call for a "life of holiness" reached an increasing number of southerners from across the social and economic spectrum. Evangelical Protestants maintained that in a world rife with sin only an emotional confrontation with Scripture and subsequent conversion could offer personal salvation to an unworthy soul. Revivalist fervor, self-debasement, and a missionary zeal for a religion of the heart was certainly not a phenomenon unique to the South. Indeed much of this evangelical drive for a Christian society had its roots in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century North.¹⁰

In New England and other northern states Presbyterian, Congregational, and Baptist ministers first called for an active, intimate relationship with Christ. Aside from this broad message of redemption from sin and the search for ultimate salvation, evangelical southerners readily embraced the patriarchy inherent in the rising "cult of domesticity"—a spiritual understanding of the family promulgated by middle-class Yankee evangelicals where women best served the family and her faith by remaining in the home. In both regions evangelical Protestantism enabled poorer and middling farmers to establish a more coherent identity based upon religious solidarity. Northern evangelical reform influenced wealthier southerners as well. Beginning in the 1820s and lasting through the 1850s a number of influential southern Protestants supported such benevolent enterprises as Sabbatarianism, anti-dueling societies, and ministries to the poor. Despite the profound impact northern evangelicalism had upon nineteenth-century America, merchant families and their neighbors shared a distinctively southern religious sensibility.¹²

Where evangelical belief led many in the North to welcome social reform imposed by the state, particularly regarding temperance and abolitionist legislation, the ideological demands of living in the slave South resulted in a socially more conservative Evangelical Protestantism. The psychological need for white southerners to ground their peculiar institution in Scripture led them to develop a conservative proslavery ideology that became inseparable from their religious beliefs. In his analysis of proslavery thought in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America historian Larry E. Tise has found that southern defenders of their institution girded themselves for conflict with their abolitionist critics by becoming "proponents of purity in religion." From the curse of Ham to the sanction of the Apostles in the Epistles, conservative southern Protestants, including many evangelicals, concluded that the master-slave relationship, much like the patriarchal white family, had been ordained by God. The impact such thought had upon southern merchant families, even those not members of a Protestant church, demonstrates the limited effect northern evangelical belief had upon southern communities.53

The imperative for a genuine conversion experience did serve as one critical factor uniting all evangelicals both North and South. Only by acknowledging personal moral corruption and attaining the "joyful release of conversion" could a Christian enter the evangelical fold and receive God's saving grace. The process of religious conversion could be immediate or take many months. Since evangelicals believed humanity entered the world spiritually dead, anyone who failed to experience a "second birth" risked ultimate damnation. Obviously those merchants and their families enduring such a religious transformation found their lives profoundly changed. Indeed, many described their conversion experience as the central event of their life.54

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During the winter of 1827, eighteen-year-old Cushing Hassell felt himself "arrested by some Supernatural power and exceedingly distressed on account of the original depravity of his heart and the consequent impure stream that were constantly issuing from this corrupt fountain." Over several months the young Tar Heel came to believe that "faith in Christ was the only medicine through which peace & pardon could flow." Hassell later recorded both the date he was saved, 13 January 1828, and his baptism, 11 March 1828, in his memoirs. Thus began Hassell's spiritual journey into the Baptist church. George O'Bryan experienced a similar spiritual transformation while employed as a clerk in the Nashville, Tennessee, firm of Gordon & Company. The twenty-four year-old "confessed Christ" in 1856 and soon joined the First Presbyterian Church of Nashville. Like Hassell, O'Bryan resolved to change his life after accepting his new evangelical faith. Merchant George Walton Williams underwent a childhood conversion while living in the Georgia frontier that led him into the Methodist Church. Before being "born again" these and other merchants described feelings of personal unworthiness, isolation, and depravity. After experiencing conversion most claimed their new evangelical faith gave them fellowship with like-minded Christians and powerful emotional support in both their personal and professional lives. After publicly confessing Christ in his Baptist congregation in Houston, Texas, store clerk Constantine Perkins prayed and even cried for the conversion and salvation of his friends. The influence evangelical Protestantism had upon antebellum merchants far surpassed those who joined its ranks. Of course those who became reborn in Christ preached Biblical messages to their friends and associates. Perhaps more significantly, evangelical church leaders depended upon the family to help spread the faith. This calling left merchants outside the evangelical community open to the entreaties of those family members who had already
been saved. Parents, spouses, and children, with varying success, pleaded with their merchant kin to repent and serve the Lord.55

In the years following his conversion experience, merchant Cushing Hassell testified to the saving grace of God to friends and family alike. Indeed by the end of his life he had become one of the leading ministers of the Primitive Baptist Church in Martin County, North Carolina. When not preaching to his own congregation Hassell struggled to convert his relations, particularly his merchant cousins Asa, Kader, and Joseph Biggs. The state of cousin Asa's soul, a merchant who also served in the North Carolina legislature during the 1840s as well as the United States Congress in the 1850s, seemed to hold particular interest for the merchant-preacher.

The prestige Asa Biggs enjoyed as a United States Senator, militia colonel, and wealthy merchant-planter did not stop the poorer Hassell from lecturing his cousin on the subject of religion. Of course Hassell prayed with Biggs and his family. Furthermore he urged the Biggs family strictly to follow God’s "Word" while avoiding the "influence of Methodist excitement" then prevalent in their 1850s North Carolina neighborhood. It seems that Joseph and Kader Biggs shared their cousin's views regarding the need to spread proper evangelical theology. Describing a favorite relative who had yet to undergo an evangelical conversion Joseph wrote Kader, "I saw no evidence to believe he knows any thing about the grace of God in truth and as to his believing in the doctrine of Election, the Election of God, I have no idea." Evangelical families continually attempted to "save" their kin in the antebellum South. Though most evangelicals believed genuine conversions could not forced, merchant Asa Runyon joined his brother in subtlety

55Hassell Diary, 1827-28, Hassell Papers, SHC; George O'Bryan obituary, 1912, O'Bryan Family Collection, (TSLA); Perkins Diary, 4 February 1849, Constantine Osborne Perkins Papers, Virginia Historical Society (VHS), Richmond, Virginia; Coulter, Williams, 8-11; Heyrman, Southern Cross, 26. 145
pressuring his nephew to be baptized during a week-long revival held in Minerva, Kentucky.  

The women in the Jacocks family would have appreciated Runyon's efforts as they attempted to save the soul of the family patriarch, Charles Jacocks. Before she married a man her family deemed unfit, Mary Jacocks first angered her brother by joining the "despised" Methodist Church. She wrote her brother letters begging him "to turn, O turn before you die, do not wait to grow better you may perhaps never have another opportunity if you will give your whole heart to God he will take you just as you are." Seven years after Charles received Mary's appeal his cousin Jane Williams was still praying for the Lord to transform his "sinful heart into holiness." There is no evidence suggesting that Charles Jacocks ever joined the Methodist Church or any other evangelical denomination. Like many apparently religious merchants, Jacocks found himself besieged by a growing number of evangelical family members and neighbors who questioned the power of his belief. Southern merchants, be they Catholic, Jewish, or traditional Protestants like Jacocks and Asa Biggs, could not avoid the cultural influence of Evangelical Protestantism.  

Southern merchants engaged in a wide range of pious duties and religious activities during the antebellum period. At the very least merchants and their families studied the Bible. In spite of his irregular reading habits Isham Howze read the entire

56Primitive Baptists like Hassell emphasized their strong theological ties to John Calvin, particularly his views regarding God's sovereign power and predestination. Primitive Baptists also opposed the centralizing agencies/conventions found in many evangelical churches including both Baptists and Methodists, see Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 127-28. 11 April 1851, Hassell Diary. Cushing Hassell frequently indulged in scathing denunciations of the Methodist Church and its theology. Typical was his comment following a three week Methodist revival in Hamilton, NC, where Hassell predicted that the participants would "to some extent quit getting drunk, gambling, swearing & the like for a few months at that place & then return to their vicious habits with renewed zeal." See, 5 October 1848, Hassell Papers, (SHC). Joseph Biggs to Kader Biggs, 11 December 1848, Kader Biggs Papers, (NCSA); Asa Runyon to Mary Burgess, 12 February 1851, Runyon Family Papers, (FCHS).

Bible at least six times. Aside from this near universal practice many merchants,
particularly evangelicals, assumed various positions of authority within their churches.
While working as a clerk in one of his father's Louisville stores, twenty-four year-old
John Jefferson became secretary of the Brook St. Methodist Episcopal Church Sunday
School. Jefferson worked to reorganize the school and "fix things up ship-shape" while
his brother Lewis attempted to establish a Methodist missionary society. As a young man
Nashville merchant Robert Stewart Hollins, Sr., wrote a lengthy exegesis on the Bible.
Upon becoming a husband and father Hollins led his family in regular prayer and
eventually assumed the position of "Ruling Elder" in the First Edgefield Presbyterian
Church. His neighbor and fellow merchant George O'Bryan joined the First Presbyterian
Church of Nashville after his conversion in 1856. He eventually went on to serve as a
deacon and superintendent of the Sunday school. As the earlier example of Cushing
Hassell suggests, a number of merchants combined business and preaching. Between
1836 and 1843 William Henry Wills split his time between his store in Halifax, North
Carolina, with his circuit-riding activities on behalf of the Methodist Church. In addition
to editing the Methodist Protestant and Central Protestant newspapers, Wills also served
as president of the Methodist Conference in 1849. When pastoral duty called, merchant-
preachers like Wills and Hassell depended upon their wives to sustain the family business
in their absence. Work behind the counter occasionally proved burdensome to merchant
wives who found their own time consumed by church activities. Such conflict, however,
proved exceptional in conservative Protestant merchant families. During the antebellum
period financially successful merchants, including many conservative evangelicals, deftly
wedded their religious values with the demands imposed by the commercial market.58

58Howze Journal, 12 March 1857, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH); Jefferson
Diary, 3 January 1857, John F. Jefferson Papers, (FCHS); Robert Stewart Hollins, Sr., obituary, O'Bryan
Family Collection, (TSLA); George O'Bryan obituary, O'Bryan Family Collection, (TSLA); William Henry
Wills to wife, 11 May 1854, William Henry Wills Papers, (SHC); Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 89-
111; Heyrman, Southern Cross, 167-69, 178, 203-5; Friedman, Enclosed Garden, 113-18.
During the nineteenth century conservative and evangelical American Protestants championed the virtues of discipline and self-denial. The business activities southern merchants and their families practiced during the antebellum period exemplified this broad trend. Successful merchants attended their daily business with almost religious zeal. Many believed hard work and long hours in the store reinforced a Christian regimen. Evangelical storekeepers assumed men and women who did not observe this ethic risked both economic and spiritual failure. New Orleans storekeeper C.E. Catonet offered a typical explanation for his business failure when he attributed his ruin to "dissipation and bad habits." Merchants kept a steady guard against moral lapses that could harm the work place. Such a conviction explains why Cushing Hassell fired one of his clerks for enjoying too much recreation in after hours Williamston, North Carolina. When George O'Bryan acquired his own store he taught his clerks that "all legitimate business could be carried on successfully in the fear of God." As his Presbyterian minister declared upon his death, O'Bryan's rough treatment of his employees provided the "means of saving them at a critical moment from some wrong conduct that would have ruined them both morally and materially." Despite the sometimes ribald culture of the southern store, religious tracts occasionally found their way to the countertop. Isham Howze kept recent copies of The Tennessee Baptist newspaper in his store out of personal interest as well as for the edification of employees and customers. As these examples suggest, southern merchants saw few contradictions between their religious values and their daily business activities. Those who gave such issues any thought generally believed Christian self-discipline actually improved a merchant's financial bottom line. Overall, however, business considerations could limit the influence religion had within the store as well.59

59Greven, Protestant Temperament, 215; Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 62; C.E. Catonet to Beatrice Dunlap, 29 June 1832, Dunlap Correspondence, (HTML); Hassell Diary, 25 December 1850, Hassell Papers, (SHC); George O'Bryan obituary, O'Bryan Family Collection, (TSLA); Howze Journal, 19 March 1857, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH).
Notwithstanding their views on temperance, many southern merchants, including evangelicals, sold alcohol in their stores. Living with such ideological contradictions proved easier over time. Merchants did occasionally comment on the discrepancy between their job as purveyors of trifling goods and Christian admonitions against mindless consumerism. Merchant-farmer Isham Howze chided women who worshipped at the "shrine of fashion." Truly, he believed, before God such ornaments are not valued as highly as a "meek and quiet Spirit." Of course the business activities of Howze and other southern merchants made such adornment possible. Conservative and evangelical Protestant merchants faced more serious spiritual contradictions during periods of political or economic dislocation.60

Atlantan merchant Samuel Richards found it difficult to concentrate on religious matters during the controversy surrounding the 1860 presidential election and the possibility of secession. Temporal concerns regarding the future of his "Book, Music, and Fancy Store" even plagued Richards during worship. On one particularly dreary October afternoon an anxious Richards wrote in his diary of not being able to enjoy church services "for thinking of 'hard times' and fearing for the future which I ought not to do." He tried to place his economic fate in God's hands but found it "very hard to keep my mind intent on divine things" when "we have a good deal of money to pay and none coming in." Comments like these are both revealing and extraordinary. Most merchants believed their business activities fit neatly within a virtuous Christian society. It required political upheaval or economic "hard times" before many reflected upon their dual identities as storekeepers and fervent Christians. When they did so, southern merchants did their best to overlook the inconsistencies within themselves.61

60 Howze Journal, 11 August 1850, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH).
61 Samuel P. Richards, Diary, 17, 24 October 1860, (AHC). For analysis of the contradictions between commercial trade and religious belief in an American and European context respectively, see: Rose, Victorian America, 58; Schama, Embarrassment of Riches, 330-35.
The religious views conservative and evangelical Protestant merchants held in the antebellum South resembled those of their colleagues in the North. Several historians have suggested that by the mid-nineteenth century evangelical Protestantism in the northern United States began experiencing increasing fragmentation and a decline in orthodox belief. The accumulative effect of industrialization, immigration, and family mobility changed the nature of the region's conservative and evangelical Protestantism.

Conversely a religiously heterogeneous South created an atmosphere where Roman Catholics and Jews occasionally complained of bigotry from even Episcopalians who one merchant described as being "nearly Methodists or nearly Presbyterians." Yet as has already been seen, southern merchants, irrespective of denominational differences, enjoyed closer cultural ties to a growing bourgeois North than most of their southern neighbors. To be sure, merchants, like most southerners, generally supported patriarchy in the home and a conservative Protestantism rooted in Scripture. Antebellum southerners seemed to share a religious understanding opposed to the rising tide of individualism and liberal capitalism found in the North. Clearly the merchant experience in the antebellum South challenges such generalizations. The degree to which they supported patriarchy and evangelical Protestantism distinguished these merchants from many northerners but the difference was not qualitative. The one factor that did fundamentally divide southern merchant families from their friends and colleagues in the North was the institution of slavery. Most southern merchants did not own slaves and even fewer entered the ranks of the region's planter class.* Rather the measure of the "peculiar institution's" influence upon merchant families must be measured in their daily lives. Slavery limited their commitment to liberal capitalism, evangelical Protestantism, and radical egalitarianism.62

* The term "planter" refers to a landowning farmer of substantial means. The designation usually applied to those owning twenty or more slaves.

62 Mintz, Prison of Expectations, 50-60; Rose, Victorian America, 41-47, 58; Lears, No Place of Grace, 35-40; Benedict Semmes to Joanthia Semmes, 18 April 1849, Semmes Papers, (SHC); Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 128-30; Lewis, Pursuit of Happiness, 51-67; Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 78; Eugene Genovese, "Our Family, White and Black," Bleser, ed., In Joy and In Sorrow, 72.
The imperatives of slavery ruled antebellum southern society. Although the majority of the white population remained slaveless, the institution transformed the region's political economy and culture. Slavery, and the plantation system that depended upon it, produced an impressive rate of economic growth over the course of the antebellum period. At the same time, political efforts to protect slavery as well the demands of the commercial market created a hierarchical, agricultural society. Historian Peter W. Bardaglio maintains slave labor even slowed the expansion of individualism in the South. As previously discussed [chapter one], the slave South presented those working in the mercantile trade with unusual challenges and significant economic opportunities. Most small and middling merchants, the majority of storekeepers, had only a limited financial stake in the institution of slavery. Cotton factors aside, commercial men and women believed they could survive in both a free-labor and slave economy. Rather what antebellum merchants feared most was instability. They wanted to work within a predictable economy where their services would be justly compensated. To this end merchants and their families embraced the pillar of the antebellum South—slavery. Their customers depended upon yearly cotton sales to pay outstanding bills. Predictably southern businessmen came to hail "King Cotton." Personally they held conflicting views on the relative merits of slavery but in public merchants defended the institution as a cornerstone of their society.63

Environmental factors heavily influenced how those in the mercantile trade perceived slavery. Clearly a storekeeper living in southern Appalachia viewed slavery differently than a merchant operating in Natchez, Mississippi. This said, an examination of merchant diaries and correspondence suggests that by the 1840s a rough consensus had

formed regarding slavery. Once again Isham Howze spoke for the majority of these southern merchants when he declared "our slaves are well-fed, and clothed, and are happy, in comparison with the poor white slave, either in Europe or in our northern states . . . God has decreed a difference in mankind, and some men are born inferior to others, some to rule and some to be ruled." Often acquainted with the work of pro-slavery theorist George Fitzhugh and others, merchants argued from both religious and naturalist principles to claim the best society rested upon stratification and interdependence. The traditional paradigm of white over black and man over women should not be challenged. While this doctrine faced some obstacles within the white merchant household, particularly from mothers and daughters influenced by a more radical egalitarian culture in the North, it prevailed in race relations. The various apologies for slavery both northern and European immigrants produced after moving South indicates the dominance of the region's slave order.64

Daniel R. Hundley astutely described this ideological transformation in his 1860 work Social Relations in Our Southern States. Echoing the sentiments of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Hundley, a southerner, wrote:

When the farmer goes to live in the North he is sure to turn abolitionist, although he may have been a negro-trader up to that time; and so, too when the latter directs his steps Southwards, notwithstanding he may have been previously a constant employee on the Underground Railroad, he immediately discovers a sweet divinity in the peculiar institution, and no Southern overseer could expatiate more eloquently on its manifold beauties than he.

The experience of Yankee transplant Ruth Ingraham confirms Hundley's observation. After moving from Augusta, Maine, to Augusta, Georgia, Ingraham and her family readily adopted the mores of the slave South. Soon after establishing their dry goods and hat store she and her husband hired a slave girl named Ellen to work in their home and

64Hassell Journal, 23 June 1853, Hassell (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH); Genovese, "Our Family, White and Black," Bieser, ed., In Joy and In Sorrow, 70-72; Wolfe, Daughters of Canaan, 77-80; McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds, 171-238; Rable, Civil Wars, 30-36.
occasionally behind the counter. Ingraham also sent her sister in Maine long descriptions of slave women wearing half "turbans" and carrying baskets on their heads. From their laughing in the streets the Yankee merchant thought them "the happiest class of bipeds here." After visits to local slave markets in Augusta and across the river in Hamburg, South Carolina, Ingraham admitted surprise at how quickly she adjusted to the constant presence of African slaves. Initially she did not expect to be reconciled to their "continual presence" but found "habit is everything, I expect to get along peaceably with moskitoes [sic] and bed bugs even." The analogy Ingraham used is revealing. Merchant immigrants to the antebellum South, like their new neighbors, came to view Africans as an inferior race naturally suited for slavery. The slaves' exotic customs and "gift" for mirth and song amused these merchant families but also confirmed many of their racist assumptions regarding the superiority of Western culture. The perception being Africans, free or slave, were not dignified individuals to be taken seriously. After two years in Georgia Ingraham declared to her sister that if northern abolitionists could witness the treatment her hired slave Ellen received "they would not say so much about the galling [sic] chain." Over the course of two years the Ingraham family followed a uniquely southern intellectual journey that began with their tolerating African slavery to ultimately defending the institution before family and friends in the North.65

Though economically bound to the slave system, most merchants never owned a slave. Small and middling storekeepers rarely had the financial resources to enter the master class. Those who were able to purchase slaves generally remained, by choice or circumstance, small slaveholders. There is evidence suggesting that overall few merchants actively sought entry in the planter class. While no firm statistics exist for the rate of slaveownership within the merchant class an informal sample based upon

65Genovese, World the Slaveholders Made, 121; Hundley, Social Relations, 136; Ruth Ingraham and Mary Leonard to Susan Fisher, 24 November 1839, 29 March, 6 April, 1840, 24 January 1841, Susan Fisher Papers, (SHC).
manuscripts, credit reports, and census data reveals that slaveholding merchants owned on average less than six slaves. Commercial families employed their slaves around the home and store or hired them out in the local community. Families living in more urban areas generally needed fewer slaves than those maintaining small country farms. While growing up in Nashville the merchant parents of Robert K. Morris found no need to own slaves. Closer to the country in DeKalb County, Georgia, John Fite's merchant father owned eight slaves who did the plowing on his small farm while their owner did "a lot of hoeing." Inside the home Fite's mother superintended and assisted the work of the family's female slaves. Because waiting servants and house slaves might also work in the family store, merchants were very selective whenever they hired or purchased slaves. The brother of one North Carolina merchant desired a "good looking" mulatto of more than "ordinary intelligence" who could drive his horse and wait on him at work and home.

Cushing Hassell, who bought and sold slaves throughout the 1840s, owned a slave named Harry who occasionally helped out in the store during the holidays and other busy periods. Like Edward Murphy in New Orleans, Louisiana, John Jefferson in Louisville, Kentucky, Kader Biggs in North Carolina, and hundreds of other merchant slaveholders, every year Hassell profited by hiring out most of this slaves. Over time such practices tended to diminish the possibility for any personal relationship between master and slave within merchant households. Rather than developing a paternalistic interest in the welfare of their slaves, many merchants and their families increasingly viewed their servants as simply another commodity to be haggled over in the marketplace. Some mercantile firms like that of J. & J.A. Lane in Vicksburg, Mississippi, even dabbled in the slave trade. For the right price, merchants sold or traded their slaves for cash, cotton, stock, and land.66

66Gregory Allen Greb, "Charleston, South Carolina, Merchants, 1815-1860" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1978), 28-30; Zuber, Jonathan Worth, 72. This is based on a small sample (25). The results do mirror that of Fred Bailey's analysis in Tennessee that found merchants owned a median of six slaves, see Bailey, Class and Tennessee's Confederate Generation, 32. Using the 1850 and 1860 census/slave schedules I eventually plan on arriving at some firm statistics regarding merchant slaveholding in two communities, probably Bertie Co., NC, and Warren Co. Bailey, Class, 32-33; D. Evans to James 154
Clearly numerous members of slaveholding merchant families subscribed to the ideal of reciprocal obligations and deference that historians now associate with paternalism. Some needed to see their slaves as subordinate creatures in need of protection and direction. References to the "white and black" family, the modern historian's favorite linguistic evidence for paternalism, are occasionally found scattered in the correspondence of antebellum merchants. Indeed, slaves themselves occasionally employed such terms. Looking back on her childhood as a slave in a merchant household in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Mary Anngady declared black and white children played together and everyone was "one large happy family." Significantly, merchant-farmers and those living in rural areas embraced the language and sentiment of paternalism more than their peers in southern towns and cities. When William Wills left his North Carolina home on business wife Anna kept the part-time merchant and full-time farmer apprised of his white and black family's health. Violating North Carolina law, Jonathan Worth taught his slaves to read and write. Upon the death of his slave Harry, an emotional Cushing Hassell declared "he was a servant greatly esteemed by the public—regarded as an honest man and a firm friend of the white man." All of these merchants owned sizable farms in addition to their stores. Commercial families living on land worked by their slaves did observe something akin to a paternalistic ethos. Those who did not have cotton fields requiring labor or who lived in town rarely developed such ties. Slaves in these households are more notable for their absence from family documents.67

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Evans, 25 May 1848, James Evans Papers, (SHC); Hassell Diary, 12 March 1847, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC); Edward Murphy to Josephine Cross, 20 February 1849, Murphy Family Papers, The Historic New Orleans Collection (HNOC), Williams Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana; Jefferson Diary, 1 January 1857, John F. Jefferson Papers, (FCHS); L.F. (Biggs) to Kader Biggs, 1 October 1846, Kader Biggs Papers, (NCSA); Advocate & Register (Vicksburg, MS), 8 November 1832; Oakes, Ruling Race, 171-73.

Historian Steven M. Stowe has concluded that far from exposing a close paternalistic bond between master and slave, the personal papers of most planters rarely mention their slaves. Much of the same can be said for the diaries and correspondence of slaveholding merchant families. The principal exception to this trend were those times slave activity inconvenienced merchant masters. Like slaveholders throughout the antebellum South, merchants viewed slave misconduct with a coarse mixture of disbelief and cynical satisfaction. They expected more from their slaves but ultimately viewed their misbehavior as simply more evidence confirming southern white theories on black inferiority. The diary John Jefferson kept while he clerked in his Louisville dry goods store only mentions the family's slaves when they neglected their duties. When his new cow and calf strayed off in the night Jefferson gave a sharp rebuke to the responsible slaves for failing to exercise "prudence & discretion." Less than one week later their slave named Susan, perhaps in response to Jefferson's criticism, slipped away for several days before being apprehended. Needless to say John Jefferson did not consider Susan to be family. Even Isham Howze, who fancied himself a part-time planter, could not control his slaves. Time and again he found himself whipping his slaves for "insolent language" and poor work. His sister proved little better in governing her slaves. As her trustee, Howze attempted to assist his sister in various contests with her slaves. He never successfully controlled her slaves and characterized this added responsibility as yet another "cross that may come upon me." Merchants like Isham Howze and John Jefferson lived in households where slaves cooked, cleaned, and labored in the fields or store. Significantly the names, demeanor, or duties of these slaves barely appeared in their correspondence. The few references to slaves involved rule-breaking and financial transactions (i.e., sales, purchases, hiring out). Howze and Jefferson made distinctions between slaves and seemed to have genuine affection for several. More apparent, however, is the absence of emotional ties between these merchant masters and their slaves. The evidence suggests
that like the Howze and Jefferson families, few living within merchant households, either black or white, developed strong paternalistic bonds. 68

Conclusion

Merchant families straddled a cultural divide between the antebellum North and South. In the South they personified the cultural influence and economic grasp of the rising liberal capitalist order developing in the North and Europe. Merchant families were among the few white southerners to experience a physical and psychological divide between the work place and home during the antebellum period. In both spheres they, like their Yankee colleagues, embraced the principles of time discipline. The manner in which parents in commercial families raised their children and related to each other suggests the growing influence of a national bourgeois culture. Furthermore, they openly admired many of the modern, bourgeois cultural practices they found when they traveled North. These same households nonetheless embraced conservative southern values as well.

The merchant's stand on religion and race typically distinguished him from his business associates in the North. Of course this particular balance between the merchant family's commitment to accepted southern ideals and their embrace of a bourgeois, liberal capitalist North ebbed and flowed over the course of the antebellum period. Commercial development, political crises, and technology influenced the activities and positions of merchant families within the South. Over time these factors might naturally have led merchants to share positions of leadership with the region's planter class in a commercially mixed, slave economy. Of course such a conclusion is mere speculation. Before this transformation could occur secession and war destroyed the South these merchants and their families called home.

68Stowe, Intimacy and Power, xvii; Oakes, Ruling Race, 6-7, 27-34, 194-217; Jefferson Diary, 23 April, 25 April 1857, John F. Jefferson Papers, (FCHS); Howze Journal, 25 January 1854, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH).
CHAPTER 4

SECESSION, MERCHANT-SOLDIERS AND THE
CIVIL WAR, 1860-1863

The election of 1860, secession, and the rise and fall of the Confederate States of America wreaked havoc upon the lives of thousands of southern merchants and their families. War changed business patterns, threatened the safety of homes, and called men away from their families to take up arms for their new nation. This turmoil left its mark upon merchant culture. Many husbands and sons never returned home from war. Wives and daughters exercised increased authority in homes and stores. Freed slaves left merchant families and attempted to create new lives. The Civil War brought substantive and rapid change to the United States. Its significance for the liberal capitalist culture of the southern merchant, however, is less clear. Opportunities for trade, speculation, and investment expanded for merchants during the war. In many ways the conflict rewarded economic habits and values merchants had long practiced. Alternatively, as war spread misery across the South many people discussed the morality and cultural ambiguity of the mercantile trade with a contempt that was absent from prewar debates. Southerners protested the outsider status of its merchant classes with renewed vigor. Rather then transforming antebellum merchant culture, war intensified tensions and habits that had long characterized the lives of southern merchants and their families.
Southern Merchants and the Secession Crisis

The election of Republican Abraham Lincoln in 1860 precipitated the secession of the first wave of southern states. For the first time in the young country's history a sectionalized party, committed to at least the gradual extinction of slavery, had won the presidency. This result, the most serious in a chain of political crises dividing southern and northern sympathies during the 1850s, gave defenders of the South's "peculiar institution" sufficient cause to demand secession. South Carolina, long the most radical fire-eating southern state, led the secession movement when its special state convention took the state out of the Union on December 20, 1860. Six other deep South states quickly followed its example and left the Union. Soon representatives from the seceded states met at Montgomery, Alabama, and formed the Confederate States of America. Of course not all southerners supported the secession movement. Among others, divisions existed between slaveholder and nonslaveholder, rich and poor, those advocating immediate secession, cooperationists, and those claiming the mere election of a Republican president to be insufficient cause for secession, urban and rural southerners, and finally those unionists who opposed secession on patriotic and constitutional principles. Despite the various positions of these rival political and economic factions, a widespread commitment to slavery, white supremacy, and mutual defense against a seemingly hostile antislavery majority united most white southerners behind secession. During this tumultuous period even merchants, by now mainly ex-Whigs and often political moderates, could agree with the southern nationalist James D. B. De Bow when he declared the Republican Party to be "an active, powerful, unscrupulous organization." The more significant question for fire-eating leaders and their followers across the South
was whether the region's commercial classes would take the personal economic risks and support secession and possible war over seemingly abstract constitutional principles.  

The southern merchant community did not have a single position on the question of secession. This is hardly surprising when one considers the financial, geographic, and social divides between storekeepers, larger wholesalers, and regional cotton factors. Those with close ties to the region's political and cultural elite tended to embrace the secessionist cause with a passion. Merchants who had originally hailed from the North and still had family there generally opposed secession. Once again the bulk of the merchant community rested somewhere between these two extremes. They resisted hasty action and believed those most responsible for the current political crisis could be found in the fanatical ranks of both the northern abolitionists and southern fire-eaters. The political and social journey these merchants followed during the secession crisis and the early years of the Civil War, from initial ambivalence to conditional support for the Confederate cause, further demonstrates their ambiguous southern identity.

Merchants large and small privately questioned the merits of secession during the last two months of 1860. North Carolina dry goods merchant Jonathan Worth, a unionist and old Whig, grew despondent witnessing the secession of the deep South. He blamed zealous abolitionists and secessionists for blocking political compromise and destroying his beloved union. Fellow North Carolinian Cushing Hassell described the United States Congress as being in a "fog" during the crisis but also declared his own state legislature to be "equally at fault." South Carolina merchant George Walton Williams, a vehement opponent of abolitionism and the Republican Party, stood firmly against secessionists within his state. Like thousands of their fellow southerners, Worth and Williams initially

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had serious reservations about their state's decision to leave the union. Ultimately, however, both men joined their neighbors in supporting secession once their home states left the Union and formed the Confederate States of America (CSA). Reuben Clark, a clerk-partner in the Knoxville, Tennessee, firm of Cowan and Dickinson succinctly described the predicament he and most merchants confronted. He had personally opposed secession but had to take sides. In the end, Clark, like Robert E. Lee, justified his support for the Confederacy on the grounds that he "could not desert my own people." The secession crisis forced southern merchants to reconsider their values and political assumptions. It also made them anxious about their businesses' economic bottom line.2

Established businessmen with trade connections around the country viewed secession as a dire threat to their economic well-being. Merchants in 1860 Vicksburg, Mississippi, had plans for new railroads, shops, and even a cotton factory. The collapse of the Union not only jeopardized these financial designs but had the potential of toppling whatever social influence merchants had achieved as well. Even smaller storekeepers in the deep South feared the effects of secession upon their trade. Samuel P. Richards and his brother Jabez, both native Englishmen, operated a "Book, Music, and Fancy Store" in Atlanta, Georgia, and had little use for the political leadership that seemed to be driving his business to financial destruction. He did not hide his contempt for outspoken secessionists, who he described in his diary as "professional men and young squirts who have but little or nothing to lose in any event, or politicians who aspire to office in a Southern Confederacy." Richards found the political excitement resulted in dull business for his store. In the winter of 1860 the Atlanta bookseller declared secession to be a

"momentous crisis" he feared would bring "distress and ruin upon us." Businessmen living in the upper South and border states had even greater cause to fear that secession would devastate their professional lives. Wholesale agents in this region often enjoyed a sizable trade with neighboring free states.\(^3\)

Merchants in Lynchburg, Virginia, worried secession would end their lucrative tobacco trade with the North. Predictably, most of them spoke on behalf of the Union. As late as February 1861, businessmen in Williamston, North Carolina, voted to continue purchasing their goods from northern suppliers as long as their state remained in the Union. The availability of cheap goods took precedence over any sympathy these men shared for their fellow southerners living in the new Confederacy. Reckoning the harmful financial effect secession would have upon trade along the Mississippi River in general and their hometown, Louisville, Kentucky, in particular, clerk John Jefferson and his merchant father Thomas Jefferson clung to the "Old Democratic Ship" by voting for Stephen Douglas in the national election and the Union ticket in local elections. The young clerk strongly objected to the violent rhetoric of fire-eaters like William L. Yancey of Alabama. The political havoc such radicals created damaged the Kentuckian's business. Even marginally successful merchants in the upper and lower South recognized the close relationship between shifting political sentiment and trade. Before secession reached what now seems was its inevitable denouement in bloody war, few businessmen joined the leading ranks of states' rights and nationalist radicals across the South. Political moderation and business considerations remained the order of the day. Once a working majority of southerners rallied behind the Confederacy in early 1861 most pragmatic

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\(^3\)Christopher Morris, *Becoming Southern: The Evolution of a Way of Life, Warren County and Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1770-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 177; Richards Diary, 8 December, 10, 17 November 1860, Samuel P. Richards Diary, 1855-1882, Special Collections, Atlanta History Center (AHC), Atlanta, Georgia; Frank J. Byrne, "Rebellion and Retail: A Tale of Two Merchants in Confederate Atlanta," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 79 (Spring 1995): 36-7.
merchants swiftly, if not enthusiastically, joined the civilian and military ranks. Some even came to love their new nation.\textsuperscript{4}

During the first few months of 1861 popular support for secession and the new Confederacy grew in the South. The signs of acceptance and outright support for the Confederate cause grew among merchants and the general population alike. Commenting upon the wild revelry in Atlanta following Georgia's secession from the Union on January 19, 1861, Samuel Richards wrote, "I cannot sympathize in such demonstrations although I have lately been obliged to think that Secession was a stern necessity for us in the present crisis." Nationalist rhetoric and southern pride climaxed when Confederate forces in Charleston, South Carolina, under the command of General P.G. T. Beauregard bombarded Fort Sumter for two days, April 12-13, 1861. On April 14, the commander of the Federal garrison surrendered the fort. In the days immediately following the fall of Fort Sumter President Lincoln called on the states to furnish troops to restore the Union. Refusing to take up arms against their sister slave states, four more southern states seceded and joined the young Confederacy: Virginia (April 17), Arkansas (May 6), Tennessee (May 7), and North Carolina (May 20). War had come. More celebrations erupted across the South. Men rushed to join the army, women began helping organize the homefront, and cautious storekeepers prepared their businesses for the inevitable disorder.\textsuperscript{5}

Few merchants or their families proved immune to the infectious war fever. One-time ambivalent businessmen now railed against the "fanatical aggressors" from the North who sought to take away southern rights. Once secession had become fact most


threw their support behind a strong new Confederacy but held out hope that war could be avoided. Merchant-farmer William Henry Wills and his son Richard Henry Wills both feared the consequences of war while emotionally preparing for its possibility. The Wills family, from Halifax County, North Carolina, prayed for peace and put their lives on hold when war erupted. For example, Richard Henry Wills wished to marry but concluded taking a wife in such "troublesome times" would be foolhardy. Along similar lines, the outbreak of war ended store clerk Robert A. Grannis's futile attempts to court his boss's daughter. While employed in the prestigious Richmond, Virginia, dry goods firm of Kent, Payne, & Company, Grannis had spent months attempting to win the heart of Miss Emma Kent, the daughter of one of the firm's partners Horace L. Kent. Once Virginia seceded from the Union and war appeared imminent, the Brooklyn, New York, native thought it best to return North rather than be forced to enlist in the Confederate army and fight his friends and family. Of course such instances of painful separations and shaken families occurred throughout the South during the spring of 1861. What distinguished southern merchants from their neighbors was their business activities immediately following the onset of war.6

Merchants and their families tirelessly worked to place their businesses on a war footing. For some this entailed a temporary pause in business until the economic and political excitement surrounding the collapse of the Union subsided. Most expected to continue in the mercantile trade either with their established creditors and suppliers in the North or perhaps new southern and European firms. Always the practical capitalists, when merchants saw their daily sales diminish during the excitement surrounding the new Confederate government and the possibility of war in the spring of 1861 they took the opportunity to collect the outstanding debts on their books. It seemed wise to settle old

6Richards Diary, 13 April 1861, Samuel P. Richards Diary, (AHC); Richard Henry Wills to William Henry Wills, 18 April 1861, William Henry Wills Papers, (SHC); Grannis Diary 13, 17, 18 April, 13 May 1861, Robert A. Grannis Diary, Virginia Historical Society (VHS), Richmond, Virginia.
accounts before customers joined the Confederate army, relocated, or spent what hard
currency they might have saved. As business declined to the point of "suspension" in
Cartersville, Georgia, storekeeper Heyman Herzberg collected bills, packed his remaining
stock of merchandise, sold his house and furniture, and shipped everything to his brother-
in-law in West Point, Georgia, for safekeeping. Some northern-born merchants had even
greater incentive to conclude their business operations as public-spirited neighbors
exercised their new-found Confederate patriotism by driving Yankees out of their
communities. When Lincoln called on volunteers to put down the southern rebellion
towns like Williamston, North Carolina, encouraged northern merchants and teachers to
return home with strong "recommendations" and written passports from the local
authorities. A more fundamental reason southern, now Confederate, merchants collected
bills and put their business in strict order had to do with their relations with northern
creditors and suppliers.7

Once war between the United States and the Confederacy seemed inevitable,
northern creditors attempted to collect on the loans they had made to southern
storekeepers. Wholesale firms from New York City, Philadelphia, and elsewhere wanted
to settle their open accounts while normal business operations seemed to exist between
the two regions. Novelist and pro-slavery editor John B. Jones described the remarkable
scale of this activity in Richmond, Virginia. During the last week of April, 1861, Jones
wrote in his diary:

Today I recognize Northern merchants and Jews in the streets, busy collecting the
debts due to them. The Convention [Virginia secession convention] has thrown
some impediments in the way; but I hear on every hand that Southern merchants, in

Society of America, 1956), 116. For an account of regional business depression attributed to the secession
 crisis see, David Williams, Rich Man's War: Class, Caste, and Confederate Defeat in the Lower
Chattahoochee Valley (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 50-2. Hassell Diary, 22 April 1861,
Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC).
Evidence supports Jones's observation that merchants continued to pay their debts to northern creditors despite secession and the threat of war. Before the Civil War interrupted its credit rating activities in the South, the R.G. Dun & Company continued to receive positive reports from the field regarding the financial dependability of firms in the seceded states. Almost five months after Louisiana had seceded from the Union a firm in New Orleans was deemed a "safe" and "perfectly good" risk for northern creditors. The same held true for merchants throughout the young Confederacy. The rationale behind such behavior on the part of so many Confederate businessmen can be found in their continuing relationships with northern capital.9

Pragmatic merchants were reluctant to sever all their financial ties with the North. Even those businessmen who counted themselves among the most fervent supporters of the Confederacy refused to entirely close the door to possible economic relationships with Yankee firms. Cultural and ideological bonds between southern and northern merchants remained strong and, after all, business was business. The case of Atlanta merchant and Confederate blockade-runner Sidney Root is instructive.

Born in Montague, Massachusetts, in 1824, Sidney Root moved to Lumpkin, Georgia, in 1844 where he worked as a clerk in his brother-in-law's store. Five years later the young entrepreneur had entered into a partnership with his in-law, E.E. Rawson, and the firm of "Rawson & Root" began making money in the dry goods business. By 1857 Root had amassed enough wealth to try his luck in the growing town of Atlanta where he

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9Louisiana, vol. 6, p. 176, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration (HGSB). Likewise, Eugene Petetin, a Frenchman who lived in Grand Coteau continued to receive a strong credit rating long after Louisiana had joined the Confederacy, see Louisiana, vol. 20, p. 7, R.G. Dun & Co. (HGSB). In my own informal examination of over one hundred credit reports submitted during late 1860 through 1861 I did not find a single instance where a firm repudiated a loan to a northern creditor for political or legal reasons.
formed a new mercantile firm with a local businessman named John N. Beach. When war erupted in 1861, the wealth and political influence Root enjoyed made him a leading businessman in Atlanta. An old "Union man," the turbulent events of the 1850s convinced the merchant that the two sections could no longer live in harmony and the South must secede in order to protect its interests against northern aggression. Conversely his partner John Beach remained a firm supporter of the Union and relocated to the North for the duration of the war. All the while the partnership of Beach & Root persevered as a vital financial enterprise. Before the Union blockade of southern ports took effect the firm had purchased and shipped $150,000 worth of goods from the North to the South. By the end of 1861 Beach had borrowed $10,000 from an Augusta, Georgia, bank to open cotton trading offices in Liverpool, England, and Le Havre, France, in addition to the branches they had already operated in New York City and Atlanta. Root, who counted President Jefferson Davis and other leading Confederate officials among his personal friends, apparently saw no conflict between his economic ties to Yankeedom and his political support for the Confederacy. The Civil War dictated how Root and Beach lived, the war tested their political convictions, the war killed their friends and neighbors, but initially the war did not change the nature of their business. Wealthy southern cotton factors and middling storekeepers did not discard their liberal capitalist values during the Civil War. Rather they supported the Confederacy while still keeping an eye out for the main chance.10

10Of course the cotton trade continued to be one of the most significant areas where small storekeepers and particularly larger merchant factors had economic ties with northern firms. Due to the large volume of the trade in 1860 and intermittently throughout the war it was in this trade that southern factors frequently attempted to avoid paying northern loans. When the war ended southerners owed northern merchants one hundred and fifty million dollars, see Harold D. Woodman, King Cotton & His Retainers: Financing & Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800-1925 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968), 205-10. Sidney Root, "Memorandum Of My Life, 1893," (AHC); Walter McElreath, "Sidney Root: Merchant Prince and Great Citizen," Atlanta Historical Bulletin 7 (October 1944), 174; Byrne, "Rebellion and Retail," 32-33.
Public Roles and Private Lives: Merchant Families in the New Confederacy

The public roles merchants and their families performed in the Confederacy resembled those they had traditionally performed during the antebellum period. Few businessmen obtained important positions in the Confederate government. Southern political leadership continued to be dominated by planters and lawyers. Merchants did, however, remain active in state and local government. Northern-born Texas merchant-farmer John Adriance, described once in a credit report as a "perfect Yankee Sharper," served as a deputy for the Confederate Commissary Department and Brazoria County commissioner during the war. Similarly, once Confederate authorities realized the business acumen of Tennessee storekeeper George O'Bryan, they transferred the private from his regiment to serve in the commissary department. North Carolinian Asa Biggs served as a Confederate judge. Another Tarheel merchant, Peter Mallett, directed the North Carolina Conscript Bureau. On a more local level, before fighting actually began Sidney Root joined the Minute Men of Fulton County [Georgia], an organization consisting of Atlanta's political and economic elite that promised to "stand ready" in support of the state's efforts "in asserting her independence." Root also belonged to an extralegal "committee of safety" whose goal was to rid Atlanta of individuals "hostile and dangerous to the rights and interests of the city or state." The Confederate merchants' public duties often arose from the expertise they learned during the antebellum period. Proficient bookkeepers, entrepreneurs, and community gadabouts, it is not surprising that merchants would be drawn to such wartime occupations as commissary agents, town quartermasters, and army recruiters. These jobs readily fit within the activities and liberal capitalist worldview these businessmen had embraced during the antebellum period. The
support merchant wives and daughters lent the Confederacy proceeded along similar lines.\textsuperscript{11}

The Civil War dramatically changed the lives of southern women. Empty vessels both legally and politically during the antebellum period, women were encouraged to view the family as the appropriate outlet for their affection and feminine influence. The dislocations of war undermined this paradigm. During the first two years of the conflict Confederate, state, and local leaders called upon women to support the war effort in ways that ultimately politicized their traditional activities. As historian George C. Rable has concluded, the new roles forced upon southern women led, at least temporarily, to a reign of "sexual confusion." The work women performed during the first two years of the war almost immediately began undercutting the established paternalistic order. Women in merchant families came to exemplify this trend.\textsuperscript{12}

Patriotic women from merchant families joined their neighbors, mainly those hailing from the planter class, in forming numerous institutions to aid the Confederate

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{Biographical cover sheet} Biographical cover sheet, John Adriance Papers, Center for American History (CAH), University of Texas, Austin, Texas. The "sharper" description, made in 1853, was intended, in this instance, as a compliment, see Texas, vol. 4, p. 140G, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, (HGSB). O'Bryan obituary, O'Bryan Family Collection, Tennessee State Library & Archives (TSLA), Nashville, Tennessee; Biographical cover sheet, Kader Biggs Papers, North Carolina State Archives (NCSA), Raleigh, North Carolina; Mallett biography, Peter Mallett Papers, (SHC); Walter G. Cooper, \textit{Official History of Fulton County} (c. 1934, reprint, Spartanburg, S.C., 1978), 94-99; Byrne, "Rebellion and Retail," 37.
\end{thebibliography}
war effort and sustain the homefront population. The ranks of the fundraising, nursing, supply, and other charitable organizations across the Confederacy, but particularly those in the region's towns and cities, included dozens of wives, daughters, and sisters of established southern merchants. These women employed the managerial skills they had gained in helping operate a store in their work with volunteer organizations. Hospitals had to be organized, donations of food and clothing collected and distributed, and money raised. These kinds of activities fit neatly within the purview of those women who had experience behind a store counter. For example, Catherine Barnes Rowland, the wife of Augusta, Georgia, cotton factor Charles Rowland, served in the local Ladies' Aid Society after her husband enlisted in the Confederate army. She also made a point of privately donating goods to needy families in and around Augusta during the war. Another wife of a merchant, this time in Columbus, Georgia, incurred the displeasure of her husband when she donated his shirts to a local hospital for use as bandages. Likewise women from the professional and planting classes in Mobile, Alabama, formed the Protestant Episcopal Church Employment Society to provide sewing jobs for poor women and war widows. The members of the society applied their entrepreneurial expertise by opening their own garment shop in order to sell goods directly to the public. Such charitable activities aided the war effort while simultaneously reinforcing the status of wealthy women from the planter and merchant elite. Of course public-spirited men from mercantile families lent their support to the Confederacy as well.13

Older merchants who wished to aid the Confederate cause and younger commercial men who did not serve in the army occasionally organized or labored alongside their wives and daughters in relief work. Charleston, South Carolina, merchant-banker George Walton Williams's wartime activities helped make him, according to his

13Whites, Crisis in Gender, 265 (n. 26), 50-52, 57-59, 70-71, 84-86, 90-92; Williams, Rich Man's War, 75; Wolfe, Daughters of Canaan, 89; Faust, Mothers of Invention, 24-25, 95-98, 211; Friedman, Enclosed Garden, 104-8.
biographer, the city's "outstanding philanthropist." The spry and influential forty year-old, he would live to 1903, did not join the ranks of the Confederate army but did create or join the Soldiers Board of Relief, the Charleston Subsistence Committee, the Free Market of Charleston, and the Committee for the Procurement of Wood for the Citizens. At the same time his wife was a member of the Ladies Clothing Association and the Ladies Auxiliary Christian Association. Like other southern elites, Williams and his wife supported the Confederacy by providing supplies to the victims of the war. Again, this work represented a natural extension of the family's peacetime activities. Typically well-known in their communities and proficient in obtaining goods for their own stores, coordinating relief work for widows and orphans proved to be relatively easy for Confederate merchants. From the perspective of one savvy merchant the fundamental difference between peace and war was that during the latter a businessman's work on behalf of the community seemed to be "all gratis."

The precise number of men and women from mercantile families who joined charitable organizations across the Confederacy is unknown but manuscript evidence from the period suggests that the level of their participation reflected their presence in the southern population. Larger towns with a relatively large commercial population saw greater charitable and relief activities on the part of merchants. Shopkeepers and factors in such cities as Charleston, Augusta, and Mobile, however, were exceptions to the general trend where wealthy planters and their families dominated relief work in the Confederacy. Men and women from merchant families employed many of their commercial skills while doing relief work but in the final analysis most did not volunteer for such duty. Once again, it seems they deferred to the leadership and zeal of the planter class. Furthermore, those men from the commercial ranks who wished to support their new government did so, like most southerners, by joining the army.

14Coulter, Williams, 8-11, 76-80; Hassell Diary, 23 December 1861, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC).
Commercial Men in the Confederate Army

Class privilege fundamentally influenced how men from mercantile families experienced life in the Confederate army. A majority of commercial men entered the infantry but their relative high status enabled them to receive a disproportionate number of commissions as officers compared with typical southerners, particularly those from the poorer nonslaveowning yeoman class. Individuals from the slim ranks of hot secessionist merchants were more likely to have the necessary wealth and influence to raise and eventually command military companies than average yeoman farmers. In the spring of 1861 commercial men like D.G. Cowand, a merchant in Plymouth, North Carolina, began recruiting men that he expected to command in the Confederate army. Over several weeks Cowand organized the second company from Plymouth and became its captain. In the same state Fayetteville wholesale merchant Peter Mallett parlayed his antebellum commercial and political experience to become colonel of a North Carolina battalion and "Commandant of Conspects" in his state. Of course the fortunes of war helped some individuals move rapidly up through the ranks. John Fite, the son of a merchant, captained Company B of the Seventh Tennessee Infantry. After his regiment withstood several bloody engagements in northern Virginia in 1862 the one-time captain found himself a colonel. Battlefield deaths and promotions made an impact on many commercial men. Despite such examples, the typical experience of men from commercial families conformed to that of most Confederate soldiers. They joined, fought, and often died as enlisted soldiers. 15

Called to protect their families and communities against the threat of Yankee barbarism, hundreds of clerks, small storekeepers, and even partners in larger commercial firms across the South joined their local regiments. Indeed, older merchants found themselves "bereft of all white male help" around the store. Men like Edward Murphy, a forty-two year-old widower with an eleven year-old son, who took a leave of absence from his partnership in the New Orleans firm of "John I. Adams & Co." and enlisted in Co. B of the Louisiana Guard. The Confederate private entrusted his share of the firm, the tidy sum of $35,000, to the care of his business partners. This pattern repeated itself across the South. In an examination of one hundred and seven company rolls representing 7 states, 28 regiments, and 9,000 private soldiers, historian Bell Irvin Wiley counted 472 clerks and 138 merchants. Clearly commercial men heard the call to arms. Merchant Heyman Herzberg described the war fever in Cartersville, Georgia, as "very great" and that "every young man was expected to join some military organization."

The enthusiasm in the town was such that all three of the merchant Herzberg brothers, though born and raised in Philadelphia, entered the Confederate ranks. Patriotism and the opportunity to achieve personal glory on the battlefield inspired these merchants, their brothers, and their sons, to join the Rebel army. Charles C. Blacknall exemplified this commitment in the extreme.16

A dry goods merchant and resort owner before the war, Major Blacknall of the Twenty-third North Carolina fervently embraced the Confederate cause and sought to make this passion his legacy to his young son Oscar, whom he affectionately called the "Captain." Writing from Virginia in March, 1862, Blacknall described his expectations

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16 Hassell Diary, 6 November 1861, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC); Murphy Family Papers, The Historic New Orleans Collection (HNOC), Williams Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana; Louisiana, vol. 6, p. 176, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, (HGSB); Bell Irvin Wiley, The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1943), 330; Marcus, American Jews, 116. Because the occupational title subsumed many kinds of business, clerical, and governmental positions, undoubtedly those men describing themselves as "clerks" on the company rolls included many individuals outside the mercantile profession. Not surprisingly, over half of the enlistees, 5,600, listed themselves as farmers.
for a spring of hard fighting to his family back home in western North Carolina. He hoped for success in the coming campaign but tried to prepare Oscar for the possibility that his father might die in battle. If he should be so "unfortunate" as to be killed, Blacknall wanted to leave the "best fortune" that he could hand down to his son, "that you must follow my footsteps in this respect and shoulder your musket as soon as you are large enough to carry one, and fight the Yankees to the last." Oscar was not yet a teenager. Few commercial men, civilian or military, openly expressed such devotion to the Confederacy, either to themselves or their sons. Perhaps they did not have to as their sons joined such units as the Washington Light Artillery, the First Mississippi Volunteers, and regiments from virtually every corner of the South. Early in the war men and boys like Oscar Blacknall often felt significant pressure to enlist. At least during the first few years of the war those belonging to merchant families, like most southerners, publicly condemned those men who shirked military duty. In their personal correspondence, however, these same commercial men rarely alluded to their own fears of risking life and limb in the army. Thus the manuscript evidence is scant in this regard but at least in one instance a member of a self-styled merchant "family," a slave, described how the patriarch's son deserted before the enemy.17

The forty-nine slaves who labored on the San Augustine County plantation of Texas merchant-planter Iredell D. Thomas witnessed the results of unsteady martial spirit first-hand. In an interview after the war Harrison Beckett described how combat revealed the character of his old master's two sons, Iredell Jr. and James. Soon after the war erupted both of the Thomas boys joined the Third Texas Cavalry. The regiment boasted over one thousand volunteers and served under the command of Brigadier General Benjamin McCulloch. Iredell and James seemed to have adjusted to the toil of drilling

and other military preparations but combat proved to be an overwhelming experience for at least one of the brothers. Beckett remembered the surprise he felt as a young boy upon hearing his fellow slaves and the Thomas family heatedly discussing "Little Ide's" desertion from his unit. The slaves remarked that when Iredell saw the first cannon "busted" [shot], most likely either at the battle of Wilson's Creek or later at Pea Ridge, he "start runnin' an' never stop 'til he git back home." Not long after his desertion a band of men swept through the plantation and Beckett saw them "git little Ide an' take him back" where he continued to serve with his unit. Unlike his brother, James Thomas "didn't break de ranks" and "stood his ground," an accomplishment that surprised Beckett in light of Little Ide's experience. Ultimately the Thomas brothers went on to serve in the Confederate army for the remainder of the war. Later both gained a measure of political notoriety in post-war Texas, James as a senatorial candidate in 1877 and Iredell as a leading organizer of the Ku Klux Klan in San Augustine County. There is no evidence to suggest that either the Thomas family or Iredell's superiors in the Third Texas publicly commented upon Iredell's hasty departure home. Furthermore, his temporary absence from the ranks seems to have had little if any negative impact for upon he and his family during or after the war. Iredell Thomas's stint in the Rebel army suggests the possible frailties of even the most patriotic commercial men when confronted with their own mortality on the battlefield.18

The actual combat experience merchants and their sons faced while serving in the Confederate army during the first three years of the war proved to be rather banal in its frenzy, violence, and horror. As fighting men, merchants typically did not distinguish themselves from their comrades in arms. When historian Bell Irvin Wiley described the

average Rebel private as everything from "lighthearted" to "war-weary," an occasional grumbler whose resilient "cheerfulness outweighed his dejection," he could have also been commenting upon the character of the merchant soldier. Once away from home many former commercial men, particularly those who saw combat, formed strong emotional bonds with other men in the ranks, be they farmers, mechanics, or planters. As Reid Mitchell has noted, once the initial excitement of the first few months of war died away and it became evident that the conflict would be a long and bloody one, men in the field forged closer bonds between each other. Their personal roles in this cataclysmic event and army life in general seems to have intrigued former storekeepers, factors, and peddlers. Letters the men from merchant families wrote home help suggest their perception of combat and the solidarity in the Confederate ranks between 1861 and 1863.19

Like many Confederate soldiers, the letters and diaries one-time commercial men wrote while in the army tended to focus upon a few broad topics, mainly the tedium of camp life, unit esprit de corps, and military engagements. Letters home often described the soldier's "monotonous life" of drilling and marching between battles. For some men from commercial backgrounds their service in the army presented them with the most fatiguing labor they had ever performed. Dry goods clerk Louis Leon, a private in the 53rd North Carolina serving in Virginia, had to endure ribbing from his comrades when his lieutenant made him carry water rather than cut wood since he performed the latter duty like a "clerk." The seeming interminable lulls between battles, aside from being wearisome, gave these soldiers time to judge the character of the men in their units. Most liked what they saw. While serving as an officer in the Army of the Tennessee during the winter of 1862, Memphis storekeeper Benedict J. Semmes repeatedly commented upon

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the honorable conduct and fighting spirit of Confederate soldiers. The Kentuckians in his unit had "fine manners, and a great deal of dash." The educated, bourgeois officer was particularly impressed by the fact that some of these refined men who played several musical instruments and sang fashionable arias in camp could also perform the "most daring & bloody deeds, and, keep a sort of diary of the number of Yanks they have individually slain" complete with the deceased's regiment and state. Despite the tremendous number of casualties the army suffered while campaigning in 1862, and notwithstanding the wound he received at the Battle of Shiloh that spring, Semmes emphasized the camaraderie and high morale found among the troops to his wife back in Memphis.20

As a member of the Louisiana Guard serving in Virginia, Edward Murphy also grew close to the men with whom he served. Initially stationed near Norfolk, Murphy had ample opportunity to admire the tenacity of the Virginia troops in particular, he found that they did not exaggerate their bravery. Relating the various martial qualities of southern troops to a friend back in New Orleans, the merchant praised the sons of Virginia for calmly going about the business of war while soldiers from other states "eternally" boasted of their ability to whip the enemy as though "God made them courageous and none others." Like many of the letters he wrote home in 1861, Murphy ended his account with an appeal to remember him to "all the folks at the store." The following year began auspiciously for the Irish-born merchant from Louisiana with his promotion to first lieutenant. As with so many others, Murphy's good fortune did not last. The one-time dry

goods dealer was killed on August 9, 1862, fighting beside his men at the Battle of Cedar Mountain [Virginia].

Those merchants who actually saw combat as members of the Rebel army exhibited the same virtues and limitations most soldiers, both North and South, shared during the Civil War. Eager to prove their courage and to defeat the Yankees, an enemy that seemed to threaten their homes and white racial hegemony, during the first half of the war merchant soldiers willingly risked their lives on the battlefield. So long as the southern cause seemed alive, these men expressed few regrets over the hardships they endured. Some even believed that the ordeal of war could fortify the individual and release his best qualities. This outlook could even extend to their families at home. Most would have agreed with the sentiments of one former storekeeper who wrote his mother "I cannot see why those at home should not be willing to make some sacrifice while we who are in the army, make all, both of comfort and ease and frequently life itself." Indeed, men from numerous mercantile families paid for their support to the Confederacy on the battlefield with their own lives.

There is no way to accurately calculate the number of merchants who died fighting in the Confederate army during the first three years of the war. There is nothing to suggest that the mortality rate for those that served in the infantry deviated from the extreme average for Confederate forces as a whole—about one in three men in uniform.

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21 Edward Murphy to Renaud, 18 July 1861, Murphy Family Papers, (HNOC); Daniel E. Sutherland, Seasons of War: The Ordeal of a Confederate Community, 1861-1865 (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 134-51.

By 1863 numerous mercantile families, like their neighbors, had been scarred by war. The military experience of the Howze brothers from Mississippi is instructive.23

During the late antebellum period Isham R. Howze and his wife Elizabeth raised seven children in Wall Hill, Mississippi, where Howze and his partner operated a dry goods store. Though he died in 1857, the thoughtful and self-conscious Howze, a man who once declared himself "too small to attract any notice," raised four boys who eventually served in the Rebel army. Soon after the war erupted the oldest son, George Adrian Howze, left his clerking position in a Memphis wholesale firm and enlisted in the 42nd Mississippi. The twenty-nine year-old left his wife at home as he and his regiment joined the Army of Northern Virginia in June, 1862. It seems George Adrian Howze made a fine soldier as he rose from the ranks of the enlisted to lieutenant in quick order. The young clerk also revealed himself to be a pious warrior. On May 17, 1863, shortly before the Confederate army invaded Pennsylvania, Lt. Howze was baptized and elected permanent secretary of his regiment's "Christian Association." Perhaps George Adrian Howze's anxiety regarding the upcoming campaign nourished his religious awakening. If so his worst fears became reality, the young lieutenant was killed on July 1, 1863, the first day of the Battle of Gettysburg. George's younger brother, William Duke Howze, served as a lieutenant in the 1st Mississippi. Taken prisoner when Fort Donelson fell to Union forces under General Ulysses S. Grant in 1862, twenty-three year-old William was eventually exchanged and managed to survive the war. The third Howze brother, James Wilson, did not have the same good fortune. Having enlisted in the 19th Mississippi at age sixteen, the young soldier lost his life on June 28, 1862, fighting in the Chickahominy Swamp during the Seven Days campaign. Finally the youngest brother to serve, Henry LeGrand Howze, joined his brother William's regiment, the 1st Mississippi, when it was reorganized in 1863. Again like his brother, Union forces captured Henry LeGrand when

they seized Port Hudson in 1863. Paroled and sent home, Henry was later arrested and imprisoned in Camp Chase for the duration of the war after being found with an armed party near his home in Mississippi. The young Howze claimed that he was only hunting squirrels. By 1863 two Howze brothers had died in battle while two others had been captured by the enemy. As will be seen in the following chapters, few commercial families willingly sacrificed as much for the Confederacy as the Howze family. As an example, however, of those merchant fathers and sons who actually braved combat, the suffering the Howze brothers and their families endured suggests their experience paralleled that of many southern families.24

Patriotic convictions motivated and sustained most of the commercial men who joined the Confederate army to serve the duration of the war. This said, the Confederacy's crippling setbacks in the summer of 1863 with their defeat at the Battle of Gettysburg and the loss of Vicksburg, Mississippi, undermined the confidence many of these soldiers. In this regard soldiers with a commercial background were no different than the mass of the Confederate army from the agricultural classes. Their letters home continued to resonant with patriotic and anti-Yankee sentiment but in many cases the professions of optimism increasingly rang hollow.

Only days after the Rebel collapse at Vicksburg Benedict Semmes, writing from his unit with the Army of Tennessee, told his wife "not to despair" that "I am just as sanguine as I ever was & indeed full of high hopes in spite of our recent Disaster." Semmes's confidence in the Confederacy's ultimate success offered dubious comfort to a wife and children made homeless by the war. Reuben Clark, a member of the 59th Tennessee, was a member of the Rebel garrison captured at Vicksburg and, not surprisingly, had a different assessment on the course of the war. Though he continued to

24Howze Journal, 10 October 1853, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), Jackson, Mississippi; Wilson, Confederate Soldier, 193, footnote #1, 196 footnote #2, 206, footnote #3; Hamm, Shades of Blue and Grey, 87-90. On the place of religion in the Confederate army see, McPherson, Cause and Comrades, 73-76; Mitchell, Civil War Soldiers, 173-75.
serve with his unit after his parole and exchange, Clark concluded that the "contrast was so great between their well fed and bountifully supplied army and our starved forces, that it disaffected many of our men." Months later he and other officers in the 59th found it "impossible" to get these men back into the army. Clark, Semmes, and other merchants who joined the Confederate army in the first months of war continued to support the Confederacy on the battlefield despite the setbacks of 1863. As southern losses continued to mount during the final two years of the war, however, they would increasingly seek out fellow businessmen at home and in the North who would assist their families once the war ended.25

The experience of those merchants who served in the Confederate army varied little from the average soldier who hailed from the ranks of the yeoman farmer. While their unique commercial worldview influenced their decision to enter upon or avoid military service, once in the ranks patriotism and unit loyalty typically overshadowed other considerations. The only two noteworthy exceptions to this conclusion appear to be the tendency by former merchants to seek positions in various quartermaster positions in Confederate armies and their proclivity to speculate and trade goods between battles. This second characteristic will be examined in the following chapter.

The quartermaster and commissary departments of Confederate armies tended to draw a disproportionate number of men with commercial experience. According to the Confederate War Department the quartermaster was to provide "quarters and transportation of the army; storage and transportation for all military supplies; army clothing; camp and garrison equipage; cavalry and artillery horses; fuel; forage; straw and stationery." Most quartermasters also had responsibilities relating to the paymaster's duties as well. Commissary agents simply obtained and distributed food to the army.

Regiments, brigades, military hospitals, and army headquarters typically each had quartermasters and commissary officers of various ranks. The diverse and unique duties required of these agents called for individuals who could be bonded, responsibly handle both public and private funds and property, function within an often inefficient Confederate bureaucracy, and obtain enough material to supply large military units in a war-torn South. Writing to his wife, farmer Edgeworth Bird described his duties as quartermaster with the 15th Georgia as issuing “sundry things” that were charged and invoiced to him “so I have them all to account for. Today, I believe it all right, so it is with money.” It is unlikely a merchant would have to explain the process to his wife. At the same time quartermasters and commissary agents performed these duties they also had to live with the widespread belief in the army that they exploited troops for their profits while serving well behind the lines. Men who had operated stores in the antebellum South possessed the necessary skill, ambition, and thick hide to thrive in these positions.26

As a matter of policy the Confederacy did not explicitly recruit merchants for quartermaster and commissary positions. Nor did the government or military record what their quartermasters and commissary officers had done before the war. What is clear from manuscript and newspaper records is that when merchants enlisted or were conscripted into the army they often pursued and frequently obtained these positions. Men like Lieutenant John Zirvas Leyendecker who served as a quartermaster with the 33rd Texas, Benedict Semmes who served as assistant quartermaster for the Army of Tennessee, and George O’Bryan who became a commissary agent for his Tennessee regiment. The reason why Confederate authorities would desire commercial men in these positions is self-

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evident. As one southerner later commented about O'Bryan's promotion to the commissary department, he joined as a private but his mercantile experience as a clerk in Nashville and his "keen business judgement" led the Confederate authorities to place him where he could do the most good for the southern cause. The impetus for merchants to join the quartermaster and commissary departments is less apparent. Though there is no direct evidence, perhaps a desire to remain out of harm's way led some men to seek positions removed from action.27

Conclusion

Though initially indecisive, merchants and their families supported the Confederacy once it became a reality. Older men adjusted their business practices to new circumstances while young men answered the call to arms. Women from commercial families joined their female neighbors from other ranks of society to support their men in the field any way they could. In most ways, the military experience of these men resembled that of any other soldier. Nevertheless, the merchant family did confront unique challenges during the war. As the war dragged on, the business habits and liberal capitalist worldview that helped define the merchant class proved to be of mixed value.

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27Confederate order, 1 December 1864, John Zirvas Leyendecker Papers, (CAH); Semmes Military Correspondence, 30 September 1863, Semmes Family Papers, (TSLA); Order from Adjutant and Inspector General's Office to George O'Bryan, 5 May 1864, George O'Bryan obituary, 1912, O'Bryan Family Collection, (TSLA).
CHAPTER 5

"SO WE GO ON,"

MERCHANTS AND THEIR FAMILIES IN THE CONFEDERACY, 1861-1863

The effect of the Civil War upon the southern commercial population transcended the number of merchants who served and died while fighting for the Confederacy. The war also changed the lives of the families, friends, and business associates who lived on the home front. Confederate citizens endured material deprivation, a loss of independence to a growing state bureaucracy, and all the personal hazards associated with warfare. The conflict stretched the ties of southern society to their breaking point. Within this maelstrom commercial families, like their white and black neighbors, confronted such hardships as obtaining food, forced relocation, and, of course, the death of loved ones. It was when confronting these challenges and burdens that merchant families revealed aspects of their bourgeois ethos that distinguished them from the larger white southern population.

Confederate Policies and the Merchant Family

Several policies of the Confederate government had a conspicuous impact upon merchant families. Conscription in particular troubled them and many of their white neighbors. Despite several notable military victories, by the spring of 1862 the South faced imminent disaster as the one-year enlistments of nearly half its troops were due to expire. Few of these soldiers seemed anxious to re-enlist. On April 16, 1862, the Confederate Congress attempted to forestall any critical manpower shortage by enacting
the first conscription law in United States history. It declared able-bodied white male
citizens between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five liable to service for three years. The
act also extended the terms of one-year volunteers another two years. Later supplementary
acts extended the age of those men liable for service from thirty-five to forty-five years.
These provisions also sought to curb abuses of several loopholes, the hiring of substitutes
in particular, from the first act. Ultimately Confederate officials hoped the apparent
shame of being a conscript combined with enlistment bonuses would boost the number of
volunteers for service. Nevertheless the Confederacy's continual struggle to keep men in
its armies, by force if necessary, alternately inspired expressions of fear, contempt, and
outrage among southern merchants and their families.¹

Older, more established merchants, like many civilians, responded to conscription
with obvious apprehension. Atlanta storekeeper Samuel Richards spoke for many of his
colleagues when he remarked, "I dont want to go to war if I can avoid it; for if I go I fear I
should be so little service and destroy my own self." Despite being an immigrant from
England with family in Massachusetts, Richards defended secession and the new
Confederacy as a just response to northern tyranny. This did not mean, however, that the
thirty-eight-year-old merchant abandoned his "loathing and horror" of war or his sense of
class privilege. He did everything in his power to avoid being thrown into the "company
of such men as form the greater part of our army" and to be "ordered about by
incompetent, drunken officers." While few merchants shared Richards's self-pitying and
elitist posture, more would have appreciated his reluctance to join the Confederate army.
An occasional storekeeper needed to be embarrassed by the gift of a petticoat or pistol-
whipped by a neighbor before he joined the ranks. Government conscription and

428-32, 603; Albert B. Moore, Conscription and Conflict in the Confederacy (New York, 1924; reprint,
the age for conscription to forty-five passed on September 17, 1862. The Confederacy repealed substitution
altogether in December 1863. This act made those individuals who had previously bought substitutes liable
to conscription.
community pressure to volunteer tested the patriotism of would-be soldiers like Samuel Richards. The steps he and other merchants took to avoid service reveals their conditional support for the Confederacy.²

Men from business families employed a variety of tactics to escape serving in the army. Respected merchant Cushing B. Hassell managed to obtain a medical exemption for his twenty-one-year-old son Sylvester on the grounds that he suffered from consumption. The ailment presumably prevented the young man from serving in the army but did not stop the family doctor from prescribing a vigorous regimen of horseback riding for treatment. If a medical excuse could not be had, it behooved the cautious businessman to purchase a substitute or find employment in one of the work categories exempted from the risk of conscription. Heyman Herzberg, a merchant in north Georgia, purchased a substitute after his discharge from the army though he still avoided the local provost marshal who apparently sent all able-bodied men to the army regardless of their exempt status. Family ties helped David Worth avoid conscription in North Carolina when his father Jonathan Worth, a wealthy merchant and post-war governor, managed to place the thirty-year-old in the position of state salt commissioner. The exemption that accompanied the job proved valuable when David's paid substitute no longer enabled him to avoid service when the government eliminated the practice in 1863. Likewise, a position in city government and an appointment to head soldier relief in his hometown of Charleston, South Carolina, provided an exemption for merchant George Walton Williams. A storekeeper and his son in Eagles Nest, Tennessee, procured exemption

papers from the Confederate Nitre and Mining Bureau because they manufactured gunpowder for the government. When these and other options were unavailable, storekeepers like Texan Bart DeWitt decided to escape the draft by joining a local militia unit. These units offered refuge for many young men, especially in states like Georgia where the governor refused his militia to be conscripted. These examples suggest that merchants more interested in business than fighting could avoid serving in the Confederate army. The wartime experience of Samuel Richards forcefully illustrates how a persistent storekeeper exploit his skill and connections to escape conscription.3

Following the passage of the Confederacy's first draft legislation in April 1862, Samuel Richards and his brother/business-partner Jabez utilized every means possible to avoid conscription. Both men joined the local militia so they would not be eligible for service in the Confederate army. Like fellow Georgian Heyman Herzberg, Richards was often reluctant to walk about Atlanta for fear of meeting officers who were "taking up the

3Hassell Diary, 24 February 1864, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, Southern Historical Collection (SFIC), University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Jacob Rader Marcus, ed., Memoirs of American Jews 1775-1865, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1956), 125; Richard L. Zuber, Jonathan Worth: A Biography of a Southern Unionist (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 173-74; Merton E. Coulter, George Walton Williams: The Life of a Southern Merchant and Banker 1820-1903 (Athens: The Hibriton Press, 1976), 64; G.W. McGee Papers, 13 October 1862, Manuscript Division, Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, Kentucky. It seems many merchants had contracts with the Office of Nitre & Mining Bureau, see Texas merchant John Twohig's contract of December 1863, 6 February 1864, John Twohig Papers, Center for American History (CAH), University of Texas, Austin, Texas. Bart DeWitt to John Zirvas Leyendecker, 10 January 1864, John Zirvas Leyendecker Papers, (CAH). For a list of those jobs exempted from conscription by the Confederate government see, Moore, Conscription and Conflict, 53-83, 122; George C. Rable, Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism, Women in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 76. By October of 1864 the state of Alabama had issued 4,497 exemptions to men suffering physical disabilities. This total was over four times larger than the next class of exemptions for state officers (1,164), see Montgomery Daily Advertiser, 28 October 1864. Ernest B. Furguson provides a description of the demand for medical exemptions in wartime Richmond in Ashes of Glory: Richmond at War (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 124-25. Like David Worth, many storekeepers employed multiple strategies to evade conscription. James Thomas Butler owned a store and farm in northern Virginia. When the substitute he purchased in 1862 no longer excused him from service in 1863 Confederate authorities ordered him to report for duty at Camp Lee in Richmond. Butler successfully regained his exempt status by entering into a contract with the government to supply tents to the same Confederate army that he worked so hard to avoid serving in. The exemption remained in effect until Butler fulfilled the terms of the contract, see Butler Diary, 26 October 1862, September 1863, James Thomas Butler Diary, Virginia Historical Society (VHS), Richmond, Virginia.
conscripts vigorously." By 1863 Samuel and Jabez had found part-time jobs at a local newspaper, ironically named The Soldiers Friend, because the current draft laws exempted newspaper publishers and editors. However, this plan also failed and the Richards brothers had to resort to obtaining substitutes to fill their positions in the army. When the government no longer accepted substitutes a disgusted Samuel spewed "this is what I call a grand Government Swindle." Despite the Richards's paranoia, the government never conscripted them into the army. Samuel and Jabez advocated the conflict if it did not harm their business and if they did not have to carry a rifle. Although Richards and his brother were not alone in their reluctance to join the army, their wealth and business skill allowed them to escape military service until Sherman ended the war for Atlanta.4

Numerous other government decrees besides conscription upset the lives of civilian merchants and their families. Like most of their white neighbors, merchants had to pay higher taxes during the war. In addition to their regular taxes, by 1863 retail, wholesale, and commission merchants annually paid between fifty and two hundred dollars in special "war taxes." A portion of this tax had been placed on inventory that merchants had in their stores and warehouses. Apart from raising desperately needed revenue, drafters of the tax bill also hoped it would discourage hoarding and speculation. A woman from South Carolina hailed the bill as a necessary measure to "make extortioners disgorge their accumulation for the benefit of the public." Predictably, some storekeepers complained that much of this stock proved impossible to sell during the war and hence should not be included under the war tax. Their protests went unheeded. When one Atlanta merchant refused to pay the war tax the local tax collector declared him disloyal, closed his store, and sold the businessman's stock to pay what he owed. A few

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4Richards Diary, 10 August 1861, 19 November 1862, 4 March, 8 August, 31 December 1863, (AHC); Moore, Conscription and Conflict, 53-57, 65-66, 73-83; Frank J. Byrne, "Rebellion and Retail: A Tale of Two Merchants in Confederate Atlanta," Georgia Historical Quarterly 79 (Spring 1995): 48-51.
merchants even objected over their business losses when the Confederate government ordered their stores closed during days of public thanksgiving and fasting. Samuel Richards made it a point to be found behind his store counter on such days "with the door closed but not fastened." Merchants on the southern homefront denounced certain Confederate regulations but these decrees did not fundamentally alter their commercial activity or the lives of their families. Indeed, most found storekeepers found adapting to wartime business conditions easier than negotiating the upheaval the conflict visited upon friends and family. It proved more difficult to assuage these wounds.  

Families Divided by War

The Civil War often generated ideological and physical rifts in commercial families. Like many of their white neighbors, some these of families found themselves split along sectional lines. The occasional storekeeper on the Confederate homefront lamented the fact that his father, mother, or siblings living in the North supported a bloody war upon southern rights. Conflicting allegiances within merchant families, though relatively infrequent, did weaken the ties of affection and obligation that had held them together before the war. Those business families who had no northern relatives or those households simply too pragmatic to be divided over politics faced a more familiar plight, separation. The vagaries of war—battles, Federal raids, personal displacement—frequently limited or interrupted the communication and personal contact between the members of southern merchant families.  

As the war dragged on, invading Federal armies and the peril of nearby battles destroyed any sense of order southern civilians may have had. Within this maelstrom

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5 Montgomery Daily Advertiser and Register, 1 October 1864; Emma Holmes, *The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes 1861-1866*, ed. John F. Marszalek (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 257; Richards Diary, 24 February, 30 October, 23 November 1861, 8 March 1862 (AHC); Thomas G. Dyer, *Secret Yankees: The Union Circle in Confederate Atlanta* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1999), 81; Hassell Diary, 8 May 1861, 18 September 1862, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC).  
6 Richards Diary, 1, 7 September 1861 (AHC).
commercial families suffered along with their neighbors. Living in eastern North Carolina [Martin County], Cushing Hassell and his family quickly realized how Federal raids eclipsed the rhythms of daily life in their hometown of Williamston. Personal contact between friends and family diminished as Union forces wreaked havoc in their county. Hassell weathered the first Union raid of Williamston in July 1862 rather well. None of the three hundred soldiers who had arrived on Federal gunboats robbed the merchant's home or store. Nevertheless, dozens of the family's neighbors fled their homes, many not to return for several years. The Hassell family lamented the disintegration of their southern community but thanked God for hearing their "prayers in behalf of Williamston & Martin County . . . that the enemy had as yet done the inhabitants very little damage." By November of 1862 the family's prayers were no longer answered.7

Once again Federal forces had entered Williamston, this time sacking the town and plundering the Hassell home. The commercial family lost an estimated $20,000 in property. More personally distressing, Cushing Hassell, fearing arrest for his mercantile and militia activities, left his wife Martha and children in Williamston to maintain their home while he stayed with friends in central North Carolina. The raid separated the Hassell family for several months in 1863 during which time there was apparently little communication between Cushing and Martha. By 1864 the family had reunited but repeated incursions by Union forces led the merchant to conclude "never were a premises put in worse plight by man & beast than these had been by the abolition forces." The Hassell's plight was repeated among commercial families across the Confederacy. The circumstances of war often tore merchant families apart. Husbands temporarily forced to live in tents, wives staying with distant relatives, children sent away to schools in a more protected setting. Such dislocation and separation within the Confederate homefront had severe consequences for merchant families. On a very basic level, the members of these

7Hassell Diary, 14, 31 July, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC).
families, like other southerners on the home front, directed more time and energy attempting to sustain their customary material needs.8

The level of material wealth and even opulence many commercial families had enjoyed in the antebellum South proved difficult to maintain during the Civil War. Warring armies, the Union naval blockade, and other factors, threatened even the wealthiest southern merchants with relative economic deprivation. Like their neighbors, commercial families found meat, salt, and cloth increasingly difficult to find in a war-torn Confederacy. When these staples were available, their inflated price often depleted family budgets. For example, the high cost of bread and its impact upon her family mortified New Orleans teenager Clara Solomon. As early as July 1861 her father Solomon Solomon, a merchant and later sutler for the Army of Northern Virginia, owed over fifty dollars to the local baker. The debt altered the natural behavior of the Solomon household as the family patriarch went to great lengths to duck the baker and his bill. At one point Solomon dared not eat dinner with his family lest the baker choose that time to call and seek payment. Apparently the baker threatened to take Solomon to court if he did not meet his financial obligations. Young Clara declared the entire affair "shameful" and hoped "Pa will be able to pacify him." Shortly after the embarrassing dinner episode Solomon paid the family's debt to the baker. Bills paid late, if at all, and obligations unmet, such was life on the Confederate homefront. This theme repeated itself across the South.9

Bart DeWitt and his family in San Antonio, Texas, certainly learned how the exigencies of war could rapidly change a household's material circumstances. The modest

8Hassell Diary, 14, 31 July, 4 November 1862, 12 November 1864, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC); Butler Diary, 21, 24 May 1864, James Thomas Butler Diary, (VHS).

but steady retail activity DeWitt conducted in the late 1850s floundered during the first year of war. Having a family to support, the merchant scrambled to find work as a bookkeeper with the mercantile firm of Sweet & Lacoste. DeWitt quickly realized that his forty dollar a month salary would not keep his "head above water." Though he supplemented his income with minor speculations in bacon and land and a "little store" of his own, the DeWitt family still found it necessary to restrain their bourgeois appetites. They let their servant go and curtailed family purchases. DeWitt's wife wore the same bonnet for three years and he went without a winter coat. As DeWitt wrote to a colleague in Laredo, while many of their friends continued to attend musical performances at the casino and fundraisers for Confederate soldiers "we can stay at home and my fiddle take the place of an Orchestra and my little family does the part of the Audience, so we go on." The merchant detailed the many small afflictions that his family had to bear so that his friend "may know extravagance has not been our motto." Like most struggling families, the DeWitt's managed to secure basic items to sustain their household. It proved more challenging, however, for them to obtain such luxury goods as bonnets, books, and wine. This said, it is important to note that many, perhaps most, storekeepers and their families were able to sustain their peacetime standard of living better than the average farm family in the Confederacy.¹⁰

The consumption of goods helped southern merchant families define themselves in the antebellum and Confederate periods. Like a growing number of their white neighbors, during the war their morale often rose and fell in relation to the availability of certain products. The primary difference between average white southerners and commercial families being the latter's greater ability to satisfy their material tastes. Not surprisingly, recent studies of the Chattahoochee Valley and elsewhere reveal that leisure and consumption rates remained much more stable for the upper classes than poorer

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¹⁰Bart DeWitt to John Zirvas Leyendecker, 13 February 1862, John Zirvas Leyendecker Papers, (CAH). 192
yeomen. The evidence merchant families on the Confederate homefront left behind generally supports this conclusion.11

Commercial households far removed from the ravages of the battlefield or, alternatively, those who found themselves quickly overrun by Federal troops, were most capable of preserving their customary standard of living. Indeed, one merchant wife wrote her husband in the Confederate army that "the enemy behaved so well in Memphis, that one can hardly realize their presence save when necessity going down to the neighborhood of their barracks." Thus the correspondence and diaries left behind by merchant families in such places as Memphis and New Orleans, two cities captured by Union forces in the spring of 1862, make relatively frequent allusions to luxury items. For instance only a few weeks after Confederate New Orleans fell young Clara Solomon had already begun adjusting to Federal occupation. True, her merchant family endured a more precarious financial existence in 1862, particularly with her sutler-father far removed from home in northern Virginia. Yet her mother, sister, and she still had resources to purchase fine cloth, expensive foods, and cocaine for their headaches. They continued to enjoy such simple pleasures as a neighbor's informal piano recital. More than offering a diversion from the war, the ability to purchase and surround themselves with certain luxuries reflected the enduring values of a self-styled southern bourgeoisie. As Clara described the Solomon's piano, these objects changed "the aspect of a house, & like a baby" they offered "a well-spring of joy." For struggling commercial families like the Solomons, the few luxuries they managed to bring into their homes offered solace during the trauma of war. Even small material comforts could remind them of the relative wealth

and standing they had enjoyed before the conflict. To this same end, merchant families attempted to maintain many of their social and cultural routines.¹²

Those activities that had helped define bourgeois civility for antebellum southerners, be they attending dinner parties and public lectures or reading about the latest European fashions, continued to capture the imagination of many shopkeepers and their families during the Civil War. At a time when increasing numbers of white southerners on the Confederate homefront questioned the benefits of the commercial market and even families with means struggled to survive, merchants generally remained true to their market values. Like their "social betters" in the planter class, they still could spend a good deal of time polishing their silver, purchasing calico dresses, drinking Catalanian wine, reading northern newspapers, and enjoying other luxuries when available. The history being made on distant battlefields governed the tenor of civilian life on the Confederate homefront. Nevertheless, many southerners, including members of merchant families, held fast to their nascent middle-class identities and kept attune to changing cultural trends in the North as well as across the Atlantic. By the autumn of 1863 a daily newspaper in a commercial port like Wilmington, North Carolina, ran stories bemoaning the Confederacy's military setbacks that summer at Gettysburg and Vicksburg alongside a lengthy article on the revolution in European ladies' fashions. At once the readership could learn about the consequences of Vicksburg and the fact that "no lady of ton [Fr. tone] will dare to promenade with trailing dresses or long petticoats" in the "fashionable centres" of Europe. While editor and subscriber could disagree over the relative merits of Jefferson Davis and his administration, it appeared certain that "hoops and skirts are quite exploded in Paris." These and other stories suggest that not only did some kind of a consumer ethic continue during the war, it also served as an invaluable

¹²Jorantha Semmes to Benedict Semmes, 13 June 1862, Benedict Joseph Semmes Papers, (SHC); Solomon, Civil War Diary, 255, 363.
distraction for a war-weary southern populace. This peculiar dichotomy between the material and psychological toll imposed by a bloody war and the relative persistence of bourgeois values is illustrated in the lives of merchant wives. It was them, after all, who assumed more responsibilities during the conflict all the while remaining grounded in the liberal capitalist worldview their families shared.13

Wives and mothers in commercial families, like their men, typically supported the Confederate cause as long as it appeared viable. The sacrifices they made during the war reflected the ideal of the "Spartan mother" held by many white women in South. The faithful expected a certain amount of suffering before their land would be redeemed from Yankee rule. This conviction was rooted in traditional Christian belief and predicated on an eventual Confederate victory. For these women the design for Confederate victory could be found in courage on the battlefield, patriotism on the homefront, and heartfelt prayer. Necessarily women left in southern stores cheered their brave boys in the field while directly lending their help to the Confederate cause at home. For example, the wife of South Carolina merchant George Walton Williams belonged to the Ladies Clothing Association and helped organize the Charleston Wayside Hospital and Soldiers' Depot. On the other side of the Confederacy Jorantha Semmes, raising five children while her merchant-husband served with the Army of Tennessee, belonged to the Ladies Relief Association of Canton, Mississippi. A refugee from her Memphis home, she and forty other ladies provided relief for sick and wounded Confederate soldiers. Kate Cumming, the daughter of a wealthy Mobile businessman, helped treat the wounded from the battle

of Shiloh in April 1862. By nursing and feeding wounded soldiers these women from merchant families, along with their peers from the planter class, created what Lee Ann Whites has described as a "new kind of public household." Through this type of volunteer work commercial women demonstrated their support for the men in the field and the wider Confederate cause.14

Most women from merchant families, even the most ardent Confederate patriots, discovered that the increasing responsibilities they had within their own households limited the amount of community work they could perform. With their husbands, sons, and brothers off serving in the army, they often had to manage children, slaves, and financial matters by themselves. Furthermore, older children from mercantile families often found themselves shouldering increased responsibilities with their fathers gone. Clearly such duties were not limited to women and children from the commercial classes. This dynamic, to varying degrees, repeated itself in white families across the South. Those features that did distinguish the experience of merchant women and children from their neighbors originated in their particular work and values.15

Merchant Women and Children on the Confederate Home Front, 1861-63

Like many wives and mothers of Confederate soldiers, women from merchant families found the separation from their men to be painful. Routine family activities took on a melancholy air while men were away at war. Catherine Barnes Rowland, the wife of an Augusta merchant serving in the army, described the first Sunday without her husband Charles's company to be a distressing revelation. During this wife's first time at church without her husband Rowland "saw the vacant place where he always sat, my heart was

14Rable, Civil Wars, 70-72, 145; Anne C. Rose, Victorian America and the Civil War (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 19, 59; D.R. Hundley, Social Relations in Our Southern States (New York: Henry B. Price, Publisher, 1860), 100; Faust, Mothers of Invention, 96-97, 181-85; Coulter, George Walton Williams, 76; Whites, Civil War as a Crisis in Gender, 57-9; Jorantha Semmes correspondence, Benedict Joseph Semmes Papers, (SHC); Suzanne Lebsock, The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 195-236.

15Burton, In My Father's House, 135-38; Whites, Civil War as a Crisis in Gender, 45-55.
very, very sad, and the tears fell thick and fast, I could not keep them back in spite of all my efforts to do so." Eventually she found company and support back home with her parents. Rowland's emotional reaction to her separation from her husband was not as unusual as her flight back to her parents. Most women could not or chose not to leave their homes. They maintained their positions within their families and communities as best they could through the crucible of war. 

In some respects the wartime existence of merchant women proved far less turbulent than that of their peers in the planter class. The plantation mistress had to supervise her family, house slaves, overseers, and perhaps even field slaves. Since few commercial families belonged to the ranks of the planter class their mothers and wives rarely faced problems with unruly male labor, such as overseers, or field hands. Indeed Cushing Hassell and his family saw little immediate need to remove their handful of slaves away from the North Carolina coast and the threat of Yankee raids. They believed themselves to be "as well off without them as with them." These women, however, did have to negotiate some customary relationships without the assistance of their husbands or fathers. Store clerks and white servants could prove difficult to govern in the absence of traditional male authority.

The Solomon family, for instance, found their Irish servant Ellen to be a regular source of trouble while the male head, Solomon Solomon, was away serving as a quartermaster with the Army of Northern Virginia. Ellen's unexcused absences and indolent behavior led Clara to remark that one should not "be too good and give too many liberties" for "like dogs, the better you are to them, the worse they are to you." In this instance the derogatory "them" seems to embody both an ethnic and class component. Outside New Orleans, and certainly in more rural areas, the latter theme seems to have

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16 Whites, Crisis in Gender, 33.
17 Hassell Diary, 15 November 1862, Hassell Papers, (SHC).
repeated itself with some frequency while the former did not. As George Rable and other historians have noted, a South ravaged by war betrayed an economic chasm between rich and poor that stretched the "conservative vision of an organic society to the breaking point." The same responsibilities that could strain relations between maid and matron also forced these merchant women to assume public roles traditionally associated with their husbands and fathers.\(^1^8\)

The responsibilities wives, mothers, and daughters assumed in business as well as within the confines of the home itself highlights the changing nature of the merchant family during the Civil War. This upheaval is particularly evident in the shifting marriage roles from the period. Over time merchant wives increasingly assumed the public roles their husbands once held within the community. In particular they needed to possess a unique combination of business skills and personal flexibility in order for their families to survive the turmoil of war. Their expanded roles within both the family and community at least temporarily limited the antebellum patriarchal order.

Merchant soldiers were able to supervise closely their business affairs back home during the first months of the war. Before the war, Charles C. Blacknall and his brother established a store in Franklinton, North Carolina, and later operated a resort named Kittrell Springs. While serving as a captain in the 23rd North Carolina, Blacknall frequently wrote his wife and brother concerning his business ventures. His letters in 1861 relate tales of military hardships, but also find him lamenting over the state of his business. Blacknall asked specific questions about the condition of stock and the general business trends within the community during the "excitement" of war.\(^1^9\) Less than a year


\(^1^9\)C.C. Blacknall to George Blacknall, 14 September 1861, Oscar W. Blacknall Papers, (NCSA).
later, Blacknall's control over events at home had clearly waned, as he told his wife Jinny, who by then had joined his brother in running the family business, "you must consult your own notions about hiring... get who you want and don't let price be any consideration."\(^{20}\)

While Blacknall continued to ask occasionally about financial affairs in North Carolina, his interests soon became absorbed with the rigors of war and tobacco speculation within the Army of Northern Virginia. Between promises to fight the Yankees to the last, Blacknall's letters described his various tobacco transactions with the regimental surgeon in which he hoped to realize several thousand dollars profit. This activity proved a poor substitute for his absence from home, as his wife grappled with the challenges of running Kittrell Springs. This realization seemed to affect Blacknall's conscience as he rationalized to Jinny, "I do not desire to speculate at all, nor will I do so upon any article of necessity, but tobacco not being such, I consider it right & proper to trade on it if I choose to do so." He sought to assuage his guilt and perhaps reinvigorate his diminishing place within the community by donating a portion of his profits for the benefit of the county's poor. Before he could accomplish this patriarchal act, Blacknall received two serious wounds that eventually led to his death in 1864. Blacknall did fulfill the expectations of southern manhood, but this dedication to the Confederate cause forced Jinny Blacknall to assume significant responsibility for the daily operation of her husband's business. For the Blacknalls, the war fundamentally altered and eventually destroyed antebellum gender roles within their marriage.\(^{21}\)

The marriage of Benedict and Jorantha Semmes best exemplifies how the Civil War transformed the manner in which men and women understood their respective positions in the merchant family. Their correspondence reveals the growing power of Jorantha Semmes within the relationship, as she assumed responsibilities outside her

\(^{20}\) C.C. Blacknall to Jinny (at times spelled Jinnie as well) Blacknall, 5 January 1862, Ibid.

\(^{21}\) C.C. Blacknall to Jinny Blacknall, 3 April 1863, Ibid.
traditional sphere as well as the personal impact the war had upon her and her husband. The Semmes enjoyed an unusually close relationship before the war. After first meeting in Washington, D.C., in 1848, Benedict and Jorantha underwent a lengthy courtship [18 months] before they married. The delay was primarily due to Jorantha's initial reluctance to convert to Benedict's religious faith—Roman Catholicism. Once married Benedict supported his family by clerking in a local store while Jorantha quickly embraced the church and the expected domestic role. The Semmes had lived in Washington, D.C., for several years when Benedict decided to explore promising business opportunities in the West by relocating his family to Memphis, Tennessee. After a friend secured a line of credit for $3,000, in 1859 Benedict opened a dry goods store in the fast-growing community on the Mississippi River. While he prepared the store for business, a task that included among other things getting the building blessed by the local priest, back in Washington Jorantha readied the children for the move. Benedict outlined the risks of establishing a store in an unfamiliar environment as he wrote his wife that business is always slow at first "especially in a place where all are comparatively new men and therefore more or less distrustful of each other." Despite his allusion to credit concerns, the Memphis merchant community seems to have embraced the Semmes family. Memphis offered Benedict and Jorantha Semmes the opportunity for financial success, yet before the store could yield significant profits the war erupted.22

Upon the outbreak of hostilities, Benedict Semmes did not hesitate to come to the defense of the Confederacy. He initially joined the 154th Regiment, Tennessee Volunteers, and served most the war in the chief depot commissary of General Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee. Although separated from his family, Benedict attempted to keep a close eye on the activities of his wife and children. In her letters, Jorantha described the academic progress of their daughter Julia who attended an Ursuline

22Benedict Semmes to Jorantha Semmes, 1, 4 September 1859, Benedict Joseph Semmes Papers, (SHC).
academy in South Carolina. More frequently the correspondence dwelled upon the family's growing financial problems. By 1862 it seems Jorantha operated their Memphis store on a limited basis. Rather than selling its stock, Benedict was most concerned that his wares not fall into the hands of Federal forces. In April of that year, Jorantha wrote Benedict that she thought it wise to transport their stock southward to Canton, Mississippi. Only days before he saw his first significant action in the Battle of Shiloh, Benedict, who had faith that Confederate forces could protect the city, wrote back advising against the removal. Jorantha remained in Memphis. Wounded in the battle, Benedict returned to Memphis long enough to sell most of the store stock and property while his family sought temporary refuge in Missouri. In June of 1862 he rejoined his unit, and Jorantha and their children returned to a then Federal-occupied Memphis. It would be under these new ambiguous circumstances that Jorantha Semmes assumed increasing financial responsibility for the survival of the family.23

Yankee occupation in Memphis proved lucrative to both southern and northern traders. Commercial transactions, both licit and illicit, flourished between merchants, speculators, and planters whose sympathies resided with the opposing combatants on the battlefield. Within this unrestrained financial environment Jorantha Semmes struggled to support her family. In early June 1862 she wrote her husband that while several established businesses had yet to resume their normal flow of trade, the boatloads of provisions that arrived daily in the Mississippi River port sold "like lightning for specie." The money Jorantha made selling what stock remained from the store, combined with the rent she collected from boarders, led her to inquire whether her husband might need $500 sent to him. This reversal in gender roles was made even more explicit when she advised Benedict that they should invest the remainder of their income in land rather than letting

23Jorantha Semmes to Benedict Semmes, 6 March 1862; Benedict to Jorantha, 2 April 1862; Letter from Jorantha to her mother, 30 May 1862; Ibid; 201
it remain idle. Jorantha supplied Benedict with detailed information about her financial
deals. Yet whether they related Mr. Magenary’s purchase of champagne or noted Colonel
Polk’s payment for a demijohn of whiskey, Jorantha’s letters to her husband rarely
manifested a vacillating or supplicatory tone. She clearly lamented the emotional void
Benedict’s absence created, but she continued to manage many of the family’s commercial
transactions.24

In 1863 the survival of the Semmes family became more complicated when
Jorantha and the children left Memphis to stay with her husband’s relations in Canton,
Mississippi. Between 1863-65 Benedict continued to write his family despite the
increasing likelihood of the mail falling into Yankee hands. Here again one can detect
Jorantha’s practical mind as she occasionally responded in coded messages. Amidst
descriptions of camp life and queries about the children, Benedict frequently asked his
wife about the financial condition of the family. Thus when he wanted to know the status
[case, number, signatures, and year payable] of the war bonds he had purchased early in
the war he had to write his wife. By 1864 the correspondence between husband and wife
suggests that the degree to which Benedict deferred to his wife’s judgment in financial
affairs reached new heights. Once upon asking his wife not to accept the "miserable Trash
which they Yankees call Money" for debt payments, Benedict concluded the letter by
adding "I am sure you will agree with me on reflection, but I would like to have your own
views, for you sometimes see things clearer than I." Indeed, the financial ventures
Jorantha initiated during these years reveals her clear head for business.25

During the summer of 1863, Jorantha supplemented the income of the Semmes
women by bottling brandy and whiskey for sale. In one transaction alone she earned a
profit of $150. As the war dragged on and Confederate losses on the battlefield mounted,

24Jorantha Semmes to her mother, 30 May 1862; Letters from Jorantha Semmes to Benedict Semmes, 13,
Jorantha, who complained of being a "positive incumbrance" upon Benedict's relations, moved her family into a separate house. She estimated the cost for her family's living arrangements would be $4,800 [CSA] a year. In order for her family to stay within this budget Jorantha instituted a strict regimen of cost-cutting. She made light of her efforts to Benedict with the observation that "my economy is making 'old clothes look almost as well as new." Though the funds Benedict sent home to support his family would prove insufficient, Jorantha expected to make up the difference by making a hat every week and selling it for $50. Through this hastily arranged home manufacturing system she hoped to earn $2,000 a year. The plan also redounded to the benefit of the children who would learn valuable work habits and merchant skills as Jorantha planned to have her young boys "plait" and later sell the hats so as they could "have the credit of the transaction."

Unfortunately only a few letters remain from the Semmes's 1865 correspondence. Thus while the changing roles within this merchant marriage are readily apparent, the ultimate success of Jorantha's business plan is difficult to determine.26

During the first year of the Civil War, Benedict Semmes, like most merchants in the Confederate army, attempted to supervise the financial life of his family. Over time the imperatives of war forced Jorantha Semmes to assume increasing responsibility for the family's economic survival. By 1865, she was much more than a simple intermediary between her husband and his business associates. Rather, Jorantha Semmes and other merchant wives across the Confederate South became providers, decision-makers, and financial protectors within their families. Driven by necessity and perhaps encouraged by opportunity, merchant wives adopted many "masculine" privileges traditionally held by their husbands.

The evidence suggests that the very socio-economic foundation upon which the gender constructions of antebellum merchant marriages rested experienced profound

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26Jorantha Semmes to Benedict Semmes, 15, 20 July 1863; 23 January 1865, Ibid.
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disruption during the Civil War. Those merchants who avoided serving in the Confederate army enjoyed significant economic opportunities and maintained many of their patriarchal rights. Quite often the price for this control was community condemnation against profiteering merchants who shirked their military duty. Likewise, merchants who entered the ranks of the Confederate forces found their traditional male roles transformed. Their inability both to fight for their families on the battlefield and provide for their needs at home forced merchants to surrender increasing financial responsibility to their wives. The changes southern merchant marriages experienced during the Civil War at least temporarily renegotiated the power nexus between these men and women.

At the same time that some authority over the channels of power shifted from husbands to wives in mercantile families, both parents had to work together in order to raise their children in an embattled Confederacy. The limited record these families left behind suggests, not surprisingly, that parental oversight weakened over time. Customary responsibilities and the natural order proved difficult, if not impossible, to maintain during the trials of war. Nevertheless, these parents worked hard to keep their children's lives as normal as possible. One area in particular where these bourgeois parents sought to preserve a measure of stability for their children was in the realm of education.

Separation, economic distress, sickness, and even death did not prevent these merchant fathers and mothers from maintaining the unwavering devotion to their children's education that they had exhibited during the antebellum period. Be it at the primary or university level; business, mechanical or classical instruction, merchant families had the desire and often the means to continue their children's education. Parents continued to expect that study would impart the knowledge and values to help their children succeed in a growing commercial economy. This, ironically, at the same time that new textbooks printed in an independent South promoted the stereotype of "money-
loving and money-making" as uniquely Yankee traits. Nevertheless, storekeepers like Cushing Hassell and his wife Martha expressed few reservations about any possible conflict between their southern nationalism and their children's education.27

A conscientious business family and old Whigs who had embraced secession only after their home state of North Carolina had left the Union, the principal factor that distinguished the Hassells from most members of the commercial trade was Cushing's second vocation as a minister in a Primitive Baptist Church. A conservative religious leader in his community, the fact that the Williamston storekeeper raged against the Roman Catholic Church and all "Protestant Jesuits" who espoused an Arminian theological position clearly suggests that Cushing Hassell fell well short of embracing a uniform liberal capitalist ethic. This said, Hassell and his wife Martha also cultivated a healthy respect for learning and trade in their nine children.28

Like many in their line of work, when the war erupted the Hassells foresaw no conflict between their patriotism and a strong commitment to their children's education. Indeed, during the first year of war they had the ability to promote both ends. While two of their sons, seventeen year-old Benjamin and twenty-one year-old Theodore, joined the army in the summer of 1861, their middle son, eighteen year-old Sylvester, returned to Chapel Hill where he expected to earn his degree from the University of North Carolina. Cushing viewed Sylvester's five month absence at the university as a trial now that his brothers were off serving in the army. Alone with his wife and daughters, the merchant faced the very real threat Federal forces posed to his eastern North Carolina home without the comfort and assistance of his sons. In August 1861 this burden grew more severe when Federal forces captured Theodore and Benjamin in eastern North Carolina and sent them to a military prison on Governor's Island, New York. It took only a few months for

28Hassell Diary, introduction, Hassell Papers, (SHC).
Cushing and Martha Hassell to realize the futility of their efforts to keep their sons nearby, be they in the army or in school. The machinery of war and its impact on southerners had circumscribed the life the Hassell's had once known. Nevertheless, the family's efforts to maintain some form of stability during the conflict, in this case Sylvester's education, suggests the strong continuity between their antebellum and wartime cultural values.29

The letters merchant-soldiers wrote home revealed a high regard for their children's education. While serving as an officer in the 23rd North Carolina, part of the Army of Northern Virginia, Charles Blacknall made repeated inquiries to his wife Jinny concerning the status of their children's scholarship. Despite his wartime obligations and the distance between he and his family, Blacknall devoted serious thought to his children's academic performance. In addition to the usual advice fathers wrote their children from the front, Blacknall wanted to learn about their instructors and personally make arrangements for teaching fees. Blacknall expressed few reservations concerning his wife and brother's management of the family store and resort but the merchant-soldier, the family's "fine accountant," demanded responsibility for his children's education. This attention represented more than the random inquiries of an officer passing time between military operations. Even after being captured by Federal forces during the Chancellorsville campaign and sent to a prison for Confederate officers located on Johnson's Island in Lake Erie, Blacknall did his best to monitor his children's education. In the autumn of 1863 the lieutenant instructed his wife from his wind-swept prison in Sandusky Bay to send their son Oscar away from home to study with a Mr. Homer because the boy "should be afforded all opportunities for getting an education which I fear the neighborhood cannot afford." Unable to personally supervise young Oscar's intellectual growth, the choice of instructor seemed to weigh upon Blacknall. The advice

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29 Hassell Diary, 17 July 1861, Hassell Papers (SHC); U.S. Census, Martin County, North Carolina, 1850. 206
and declarations of concern he expressed for his children and their schooling suggest much about the changing nature of the merchant family during the Civil War. Like many merchant-soldiers, Blacknall sought to preserve his traditional rights and responsibilities within the family, in this instance by championing his children's education, at the same time the war made the practical links between he and his family in North Carolina were becoming quite tenuous. Indeed Blacknall's recognition of this trend may have heightened his concern for the emotional and material welfare of his family. Despite his best efforts, ultimately the one-time merchant, soldier, and prisoner of war found whatever continuity existed between the antebellum and wartime educations his children received increasingly depended not upon his effort but those of his wife. The Blacknalls were far from alone.

The letters passed between Benedict Semmes, an officer in the Army of Tennessee, and his wife Jorantha disclose how the responsibilities for training children of the merchant classes increasingly fell to mothers. While Semmes fought, his wife raised their growing family, six children by war's end, in Memphis, Tennessee, and later Corinth, Mississippi. In particular their two eldest children, eleven year-old Mary and nine year-old Joseph, needed to enter upon proper educations—suitable for the children of a successful merchant. Much of this responsibility fell upon Jorantha Semmes. As revealed in the family's correspondence, Jorantha controlled the flow of information within the family immediately after Benedict joined the 154th Tennessee. She had to send news of young Julia's progress at the Ursuline Academy in South Carolina to her

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30 C.C. Blacknall to Jinny Blacknall, 18 January, 28 October 1863, Oscar W. Blacknall Papers, (NCSA); War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (hereafter cited as O.R.), ser. 1, vol. 25, 947; ser. 1, vol. 29, 399. Blacknall was exchanged in March 1864 and returned to duty where, for at least a time, he enjoyed the rank of colonel commanding the 23rd North Carolina. Planters as well expressed concern about the status of their children's education. James B. Griffin, an officer in Wade Hampton's Legion and the South Carolina Reserves, directed his son Willie to be "diligent and studious" or "go to work" in the fields. See, Judith N. McArthur and Orville Vernon Burton, "A Gentleman and an Officer": A Military and Social History of James B. Griffin's Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 151, 301-3.
husband. The merchant-soldier learned that his daughter had won all the tickets, except in grammar, in her class from his wife for it seems he received few letters from his children while he served in the Confederate army. Later in the war Benedict could pay the $2777 tuition and board for his daughter's education but continued to depend upon his wife for information. Julia, now almost fourteen years old, must have inherited at least some of her parent's enterprise for the sisters described her as "a child of grace" whose "precocious" mind and ambition "may lead her to study too assiduously for the strength of her body." Distance obviously prevented either parent from personally shaping their daughter's academic habits. Nevertheless following the dynamic of most merchant families during the war, fathers and husbands, in this instance serving with the Army of Tennessee, found themselves far removed from routine decisions regarding their children's education.  

There is little evidence to suggest, at least within southern commercial families, that the letters passing between school and home found their way to the battlefield. Letters and academic reports tended to follow traditional channels. Thus one-time merchants like Benedict Semmes who wished to continue influencing their children's education found themselves having to resort to anxious demands. When young Malcolm Semmes, for example, apparently stopped attending school late in the war his father, now a major in the commissary department of the Army of Tennessee, implored his wife to change the boy's behavior and enroll him in classes. The absent father wanted his wife to "tell him I am very much afraid he is losing valuable time and that when he does go back to school after the war he will be so far behind other boys that it will mortify him." This is not the commanding voice of a soldier called away from the hearth but still in charge.

Rather Benedict Semmes offered suggestions, even pleas, regarding a subject near to his

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heart, his children's education. Like most white southern families caught in the war, commercial families did their best to sustain those habits they had embraced during peacetime. Providing their children with a strong education represented an important way parents like Benedict and Jorantha Semmes attempted to inculcate their children with their southern bourgeois values. A measure of continuity existed between the antebellum and wartime educations of the Blacknall and Semmes children. Notwithstanding the trauma of war, many children continued to attend school. The circumstances, however, did require that their mothers assume more responsibility for the nature of this wartime education.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Merchant Families and Slavery in the Confederacy}

Battles won and lost, the death of loved ones, and the loss of property did not appear as discrete events to the members of southern mercantile class. What happened on the battlefields in Virginia, Tennessee, and elsewhere shaped the mood of the southern homefront. Likewise, the quality of life on the homefront could temper the adulation or disappointment many felt over the outcome of battle. When merchants and their families pondered the "complexion of the strife" they usually considered the entire sweep of the war. When the conflict began to drag on with no foreseeable end storekeepers and their customers debated whether the South had to be "brought low" and "acknowledge the hand of God" before she could achieve victory over the North. Others speculated about what motivated the apparent northern drive to "exterminate" the South. Setbacks on the battlefield or turmoil at home drove both the fire-eating Confederate and politically moderate variety of merchant to prayer meetings across the South. Business as usual, in and out of the home, proved extremely difficult to maintain. The dissonance of war and

\textsuperscript{32}Benedict Semmes to Jorantha Semmes, 21 August 1864, Semmes Papers, (SHC).
the effect it had upon commercial families is readily apparent in their relationship with their region's preeminent institution, slavery.\textsuperscript{33}

That portion of the mercantile community who owned slaves learned quickly how war undermined their peculiar institution. Specifically those storekeepers who lived where the battles raged or near the seacoast found that the threat of Federal raids weakened their authority over their slaves. Any working relationship between owner and slave, much less stronger ties of paternalism, proved difficult to sustain when the former moved his "white and black" family in order to avoid Yankee troops. Merchant Cushing Hassell sent his "chattels" to live with his friends in the "country," mainly central North Carolina, rather than run the risk they would escape or be liberated by Union troops who were then active in eastern North Carolina. Those commercial families who lived with their house slaves and merchant-soldiers who could bring a slave attendant with them to the front were best able to preserve their conventional assumptions regarding slavery. The widespread, and occasionally apocryphal, stories of faithful servants that seemed so reassuring to the members of the planter class had their parallel within the merchant community. The wartime experience and battlefield death of Lieutenant George Adrian Howze provides one such example.\textsuperscript{34}

The son of a merchant and a store clerk himself before the war, George Adrian Howze served as a second lieutenant in the 42nd Mississippi. Part of a regiment recruited from counties in northern Mississippi, Howze's company was enlisted in Confederate service on May 14, 1861 in the town of Grenada. By the summer of 1863 the regiment was part of Brigadier General Joseph R. Davis's "Mississippi Brigade" (Henry Heth's division of A.P. Hill's corps). Before the summer of 1863 George Howze, like the rest of

\textsuperscript{33}Hassell Diary, 12 May 1862, Hassell Papers, (SHC); Richard Henry Wills to William Henry Wills, 19 May 1862, William Henry Wills Papers, (SHC); Richards Diary, 11 July 1862, 5 December 1863, Richards Papers, (AHC).

\textsuperscript{34}Hassell Diary, 10 December 1862, Hassell Papers (SHC).
his unit, had yet to experience significant combat. It was not until the Battle of Gettysburg that the 42nd Mississippi received its first lesson in warfare. It was just outside the small Pennsylvania town, shortly before dawn, on July 1 where the 42nd Mississippi along with the rest of their division clashed with Brigadier General John Buford's two brigades of Union cavalry. The days preceding the conflict Howze's health had been failing and at least one of his fellow officers believed him too "feeble to have been in the field." Nevertheless, it being his first fight and determined to do nothing that "might tarnish his honorable reputation," Howze led his men in an advance upon Buford's troops. The fighting grew more intense over the course of the morning, both sides sustaining high casualties, and appeared quite fluid to the participants. Regiments slammed into each other but gradually the Confederates started to drive the Yankees through Gettysburg and ultimately to the surrounding heights outside town. During this day long action, probably in late morning, the advance of the forty-second stalled against reinforced Federal positions. Just at the moment when the resolve of these Mississippi soldiers seemed to weaken and some men fall back, a mi\"n\"e ball killed George Howze. His body was left on the battlefield. In a ritual familiar to soldiers and historians alike, it fell to Howze's slave Stephen to search the battlefield, find his master, and see that his remains received a proper burial.\textsuperscript{35}

The account of Lieutenant George Howze's death and burial, as related years after the war by his uncle LeGrand J. Wilson who served as assistant surgeon in the forty-second, highlights the role of Stephen the "faithful servant." When the first day of fighting at Gettysburg drew to a close the slave found his master's body and carried it

back to the hospital. There Stephen apparently made a "rude" coffin for Howze and buried him in the Pennsylvania soil. Later the remains were exhumed and moved to Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond, Virginia. According to Wilson, his nephew lived an honorable life and died a noble death. The devotion Stephen betrayed toward Howze is crucial to this account. For Wilson it reveals the strong emotion and paternalism that invested the relationship between a southern gentleman, be he a planter or merchant, and his slave. A more detached interpreter of this account might reach different conclusions than Wilson but nevertheless come away impressed with the measure of affection that seems to have existed between George Howze and Stephen. The nature of the connection between the two men, whether paternalistic or something yet more affected, may have been indicative of a strong current in merchant-slave relations during the Civil War. The dearth of relevant evidence on this point necessarily makes this conclusion quite tentative. Indeed in many respects the example of Howze and Stephen is exceptional. Discord and anger rather than any enduring paternalistic ethos increasingly characterized the merchant family's relationship with the institution of slavery.  

The men and women from commercial families saw their hold over their slaves fade as the Civil War continued into a second and third year. Most concluded that their personal troubles were part of a broader instability in slave property spreading across the Confederacy. Suddenly two or more slaves conversing in a store or "whiskey shop" could assume the proportions of a conspiracy in white minds when in more peaceful times the delinquent slaves might have been ignored. Clara Solomon noted in her diary how some slaves in her New Orleans's neighborhood proved increasingly obstinate as the threat of Federal invasion loomed large in early 1862. Once New Orleans fell to Union forces the "problem" of slave management for southerners like Solomon did not disappear. Young Clara and her merchant family worried that Union General Benjamin Butler, the

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36Wilson, Confederate Soldier, 119, 207.
commander of the occupation troops, would open the prison releasing its largely black population. "It is this fear which alarms me," wrote Solomon, "I fear more from the negroes than Yankees & an insurrection is my continual horror." Such expressions of fear, disgust, and even anger directed at particular slaves or the institution in general regularly appear in the papers left by merchant families. Atlanta merchant Samuel Richards spoke for many when he declared "I am disgusted with negroes and feel inclined to sell what I have." Never the paternalistic slaveholder, Richards concluded but for slavery there would be no war between the states. This said, he, like other merchant slaveholders, weighed carefully his personal antipathy toward slavery against his financial welfare and decided to remain invested in the institution. Significantly, Richards and his brother Jabez increased their speculations in slaves despite Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the apparent standoff on the battlefield.^1

White southerners with means traded numerous commodities and assets, including cotton, tobacco, Confederate bonds, and land, during the war. Not surprisingly, slaves proved to be a tempting investment for many. After major Confederate victories the price of slaves rose across the South as speculators purchased more slaves with the expectation of southern independence. Between 1863 and 1864 the top price for a slave at auction in Columbus, Georgia, rose from $3,500 to $4,700. Early in the war soldiers from the front wrote letters home advising their families to purchase slaves. The colonel of the 26th North Carolina advised his father to invest all the family's money in slaves. The young officer wrote "I would buy boys & girls from 15 to 20 years old & take care to have a majority of girls . . . I would not be surprised to see negroes in 6 mos. after peace worth from 2 to 3000 dollars." Such thinking remained widespread even after the war turned against the Confederacy. South Carolina entrepreneur George Walton Williams

[^1]: Williams, Rich Man's War, 160; Solomon, Civil War Diary, 298-99, 355; Richards Diary, 13 December 1863, Richards Papers, (AHC); see also, Faust, Mothers of Invention, 56-61, 70.
purchased one hundred slaves during the war. With the collapse of the Confederacy
Williams lost an estimated $500,000 (US) investment. Bourgeois merchants, both in and
outside the army, with money and on the lookout for the main chance joined this frenzy
of speculation.\textsuperscript{38}

Two storekeepers who thought they could strike it rich in slave speculation were
Samuel and Jabez Richards. The brothers operated a book and "fancy good" store in
wartime Atlanta. Jabez bought their first slave in July 1862 for $1,000. Noting the
purchase in his diary an excited Samuel declared, "I expect the Yankees would say that
this was the worst possible investment under existing circumstances seeing that their
Congress has declared the slaves of all rebels to be free!" A month later Samuel bought
two more slaves for the inflated price of $9,250. The important point in the Richards's
slave purchases is that while their slaves did work, they were viewed as purely a
transitory investment. A number of southerners purchased slaves late in the war as a
public display of their support for the institution of slavery and the Confederacy. Samuel
Richards possessed no such patriotic motives when he bought his slaves. In his own
words, he wished the South victory so that "when we come to a successful end to this war
negroes will command high prices as there will be so much demand for labor to raise
cotton and a great many will have been taken away by the Yankees." While Confederate
arms continued to triumph and slaves in the upper South escaped to Union lines the
brothers expressed few misgivings about spending over $11,300 for slaves in May 1863.
Of course by this time storekeepers living in regions threatened by Federal armies found
it advisable to sell or rent out their slave investments before they "went off to the

\textsuperscript{38}Williams, Rich Man's War, 151; James M. McPherson, For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in
the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 108; Coulter, George Walton Williams, 75.
Yankees." Sherman and his troops would be marching on Atlanta before the Richards brothers followed the example set by their colleagues in the upper South.39

The nature of the typical merchant family's relationship to their slaves and the wider institution of slavery seems to have stayed relatively unchanged during the first half of the Civil War. Of course most commercial families did not own slaves thus it should not come as a surprise that they as a group would be less impressed by the changes in slavery than the planter class. As the war stretched on a number of storekeepers did voice their frustration with slavery and its impact upon the South while many other merchants, including some critics of the institution, speculated in slaves enthusiastically. The significant point is that neither response was peculiar to the wartime South. Over the course of the antebellum period all kinds of merchants had engaged in similar conduct. Slavery troubled the liberal capitalist assumptions held by some antebellum merchants while virtually any enterprising storekeeper, when the opportunity arose, bought and sold slaves for financial gain. The dangers and possibilities the Civil War offered merely increased the criticism and money southern merchants directed towards slavery. These new circumstances presented more opportunities for business families to invest in slaves but did not fundamentally change their unease with the peculiar institution.

Merchant Business Activities during the Civil War, 1861-63

As important as slaves were for southern merchants, the institution rarely played a significant factor in their daily business activities. Fundamentally, these individuals viewed themselves as traders not masters or would-be agrarians. Selling goods defined their economy and sustained their culture. Sales figures were the one subject that Confederate merchants followed with more interest than the reports from the battlefield. Storekeepers on the homefront recorded, calculated, pondered, and refigured their sales

39 Richards Diary, 27 July 1862, 2, 16 May 1863, Richards Papers, (AHC); Hassell Diary, 1 October 1862, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC); Richard Wills slave rental contract, 27 February 1863, William Henry Wills Papers, (SHC).
during the war. Those in the Confederate army wrote letters home asking their families to do likewise. Trade profoundly dictated how storekeepers viewed the war and, conversely, how southern whites perceived their merchant neighbors.

Like the letters and journals they kept during the antebellum period, the records civilian storekeepers produced while trading in the Confederate states frequently remarked upon sales trends. Merchants analyzed their sales for signs of the war's impact upon their business. The particularly industrious would compare their daily, weekly, and monthly sales to the totals from previous years. Location, poor weather, inflation, and troop movements, all could impact the storekeeper's bottom line. Notwithstanding the dislocation of war, during the summer of 1861 merchants typically described their sales as "pretty good" or "favorable." In Richmond gunsmiths, hardware merchants, and saddlers carried on a brisk trade with its growing population of soldiers and government officials. Yet for every "giddy" outburst by a bullish storekeeper there were those like Charles Blacknall who remained "quite uneasy" over the future of his family's business. In general storekeepers tried to keep their composure during the initial excitement. Some individuals determined that their monthly sales barely exceeded or even dipped below those from the previous year. Indeed early in the war, the language and tone with which Confederate merchants characterized their sales had changed little from the antebellum period. Some days were "dull" others "slow" most "fair." The same held true for those southern merchants, mainly in the border states and later New Orleans, who continued to be tracked by the commercial credit reporting agency of R.G. Dun & Company. The company's agents described mercantile operations, even those not far removed from the front, in their customary terms: doing well, esteemed, tolerable business, a strong house. This is confident language. During the first year of war most merchants could carry on their business activities as usual. Though they had fears about the future, storekeepers prided themselves on their ability to adapt and survive. The changes war brought in 1862
challenged this identity as some merchants found it difficult to keep their businesses afloat while the trade of others, those usually more removed from the fighting, thrived.40

By 1862 the growing presence of Federal armies and an erratic flow of supplies began to take a toll on mercantile activity in the upper South. In those locales threatened by Federal raids storekeepers curtailed business or closed their doors altogether. Trade dwindled in Culpeper County, Virginia, as the vast majority of merchants stopped advertising and trading as it became more difficult to ship goods to their embattled community. In late May, 1862, merchant-soldier Benedict Semmes adopted a similar course for his family's store in Memphis, Tennessee. While recovering from a wound he received at the Battle of Shiloh, Semmes returned to the store his wife had been running in his absence and sold all the stock. Approximately one week later Union troops occupied Memphis while the Semmes family temporarily relocated to Missouri. Early on storekeepers like Benedict Semmes and others living in Virginia, Tennessee, and other areas where Confederate and Union armies clashed had to rely upon their business savvy and personal connections in order to economically survive the war. Conversely, their colleagues throughout much of the deep South found that living in the heart of the Confederacy gave them the security, for a time, to financially prosper during the war.41

Opportunities abounded for enterprising merchants with capital in the deep South. One way merchants could earn profits while supporting the Confederate cause was to contract with the government to manufacture supplies. For example, after Columbus, Georgia, jeweler A.H. DeWitt obtained contracts with state and Confederate officials he converted his shop into a sword factory. In the same town Eldridge S. Greenwood and

40 Richards Diary, 20 March 1861, Richards Papers, (AHC); Hassell Diary, 20 September 1861, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC); Furgurson, *Ashes of Glory*, 45; Sutherland, *Seasons of War*, 47; C.C. Blacknall to George Blacknall, 14 September 1861, Oscar W. Blacknall Papers, (NCSA); Thomas Jefferson, Kentucky, vol. 24, p. 177, Edward Murphy, Louisiana, vol. 6, p. 176, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration (HGSB), Boston, Massachusetts.
41 Sutherland, *Seasons of War*, 89; Jorantha Semmes to Mary Ann Jordan, 30 May 1862, Semmes Papers, (SHC).
William C. Gray, who before the war had been cotton factors, hired gunsmiths and mechanics to establish a rifle factory. The large number of government contracts they held combined with the relative safety of the south Georgia community enabled them to enlarge their operation and eventually employ over 150 workers. Down the street from this factory the Prussian-born brothers Louis and Elias Haiman supervised the manufacture of mess kits, cups, and bayonets in their Muscogee Iron Works. Clearly the experience they had acquired in their antebellum hardware store served them well during the war. Finally the Columbus dry goods firm of Manly and Hodges utilized their business skills by purchasing several sewing machines, hiring workers, and making tents for the Confederate army and the Georgia militia. When the circumstances for manufacturing appeared favorable, like they did in Columbus, merchants across the deep South adopted a similar course. In short they directed their liberal capitalist ethic toward its natural goal—making profits. Most storekeepers in the deep South attempted to realize this end through the traditional practice of selling goods.42

Since few southern merchants left complete financial records that still exist it is difficult to place a dollar amount on their sales during the Civil War. It is clear, however, that storekeepers in deep South cities like Atlanta, Mobile, and Charleston had significant opportunities to sell a large quantity of goods at extremely high prices before Federal forces occupied their communities. The Union blockade made it difficult for merchants to obtain goods for sale but also meant that those items they did sell often fetched outrageously inflated, and hence profitable, prices. By the fall of 1862 many southerners began to feel the effects of the Union blockade. Citizens in Richmond now paid $25 for a pair of blankets that sold for $6 before the war, sheets that had cost $4 per pair in 1861 could not be had for less than $15 by September 1862. By 1863 ten pounds of bacon cost $10 and four pounds of coffee exceeded $20. That same year residents in Camden, South

42Williams, Rich Man’s War, 67.
Carolina, had to spend $30 for a sack of flour. Such prices left storekeepers scrambling to buy, sell, and make their fortune.43

Heyman Herzberg did his best to earn a fortune in the wartime marketplace. The Georgia merchant-soldier obtained a general discharge from the Confederate army after serving only a few months with his unit. Apparently he smoothed the way for his hasty departure by obtaining a substitute, a man Herzberg estimated to be sixty years-old, and giving his first lieutenant a lovely gold watch as a "souvenir." Days after leaving the army Herzberg returned to his Cartersville, Georgia, home where he scoured the countryside for goods to buy and later, after a considerable mark-up, resell. Jostling about in his buggy, the merchant traveled throughout northern Georgia and Alabama looking for goods. Upon finding suitable items for sale, Herzberg usually shipped the stock to Atlanta where goods obtained "fabulous" prices though payment consisted mainly of depreciated state bank and Confederate notes. This lucrative trade continued throughout late 1861 and apparently into 1862. Finally sometime that year a scrape with the Confederate authorities convinced Herzberg to conclude his purchasing trips. He described a business trip to Dadeville, Alabama, where Herzberg and his brother-in-law ran into a "burly" recruiting officer who asked them for their exemption or discharge papers. When it became obvious that neither of the merchants had their papers with them the officer decided to escort them to a military camp some twenty-five miles away where the could have been released, or possibly, enrolled in the army. Not willing to risk the latter, the two men jumped in their buggy and made their escape while the officer ran, fired upon, and undoubtedly cursed at the young businessmen. Aside from this violent run-in with the military authority, Heyman Herzberg's roving economic activities were not unusual. Merchants with capital

43Jones, Rebel War Clerk's Diary, 99, 159; Holmes, Diary, 257.
and standing did try to keep their store a permanent fixture in their community. Once again the example of Samuel Richards and his brother Jabez is illustrative.44

Like all southern merchants the Richards brothers complained over the impossibility of acquiring supplies at their prewar quantity and price. At the same time they reveled in the high prices they charged in their Atlanta "Book, Music, and Fancy Store." Samuel in particular, described by one family friend as "the absolute antithesis of the old Southern type," exalted over the store's profits. When in 1862 the prices of coffee, salt, and bacon began skyrocketing, Richards wrote in his diary that "if we had our whole stock in these articles our fortune would be made." In February 1863 the Richards brothers sold pens that had originally cost 75 cents for $28 a piece. It is not coincidental that the entries in Richards's diary that describe shortages and inflation are juxtaposed with accounts of record sales and profits. On February 8, 1862, he wrote that "all kinds of foreign goods and supplies are getting scarce and selling high" and just two weeks later he enthusiastically proclaimed "we have sold more [$210] than we ever did in one day." Samuel estimated their yearly sales for 1862 to be $45,250 of which $1,750 was on credit but nearly paid. The following year the brothers totaled income separately at $38,646 in cash to Samuel and $18,506 to Jabez. Samuel did not exaggerate when he wrote "some of our profits are enormous truly." The inflation created by the Union blockade proved to be a boon for the Richards brothers and many other storekeepers in the deep South.45

The sales tallies in their ledgers held great promise for southern merchants between 1861 and 1863. The figures in those columns and the tidy sums found after each customer's name, however, are deceiving. For a sales transaction in the Confederate South consisted of much more than merely handing an item to a customer and getting a cash

44Marcus, American Jews, 117-18.
45Ella Mae Thornton, "Mrs. S.P. Richards," Atlanta Historical Bulletin 3 (December 1937), 77-78; Richards Diary, 24 May 1862, 3 November 1861, 23 February 1863, 8, 22 February 1862, 4 January 1864, Richards Papers, (AHC); Byrne, "Rebellion and Retail," 45.
payment in return. Storekeepers had to contend with numerous obstacles that tested their commercial skills. The growing presence of counterfeit money, produced by the United States government with the intention of bankrupting the Confederate economy or private individuals for personal gain, represented a threat to the merchant's bottom line. On occasion southern banks found they had unwittingly accepted and disseminated thousands of counterfeit dollars. Collecting outstanding bills debt proved to be an even more significant problem.46

Debt had always been part of the landscape in southern mercantile life but during the war the volume of debt become, according to merchant-soldier Edward Murphy, "formidable." Indeed Murphy even contemplated requesting a furlough and returning home to Louisiana in order to collect bills from certain wealthy planters who had fallen in arrears to his firm. Samuel Richards expressed the frustrations many storekeepers felt when he concluded, after a week of attempting to collect old debts, that "it don't pay to sell on credit and have to run and run about a dozen times for a dollar or two and perhaps get nothing at last but curses." As a last resort, merchants across the Confederacy took customers to court in order to collect past debts. Legal action occasionally produced ill will within the community against the merchant but it also gave him the needed leverage to obtain payment. Confederate storekeepers exhausted great energy complaining about the economic impact of counterfeit currency and unpaid bills. Certainly their effect could be dramatic. Nevertheless, the merchants's complaints represent the lament of those who were generally making money and had assets on their books. The use credit could serve them well in a cash-poor Confederacy. The had met the initial challenges of the wartime economy and had survived, even profited. The economic changes introduced by the war between 1861 and 1863, or "problems" according to the merchants themselves, had the

46Holmes, Diary, 194.
potential to destroy or reinvigorate southern businesses. This was certainly true of the southern storekeeper’s greatest affliction and opportunity, the Federal blockade.47

Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation of blockade against Confederate ports on April 19, 1861. The blockade required several months of operation before it could show any results and even then it remained porous. In 1863 the dollar value of Charleston’s foreign trade exceeded that the total the city had reached during the last year of peace. As late as 1865 one out of two blockade runners got past the Union ships patrolling outside Charleston and Wilmington, North Carolina. Yet as shown above, most southerners began to feel the effects of the blockade during the spring of 1862. According to one historian, by March 1863 inflation had so diminished the Confederate dollar that it required ten dollars to purchase what two dollars had bought in 1861. The suffering inflation and scarcity brought most white southerners presented their neighbors in the mercantile classes with opportunities. Those merchants like Heyman Herzberg who shipped goods from the country into towns and those like Samuel Richards who had ties with the owners of blockade-running ships stood to make their fortunes from the Union blockade. Their business skill and experience gave them the wherewithal to obtain scarce goods while the blockade furnished them with a ready excuse to raise their prices to incredible levels. Beyond this merchants with sufficient capital and mettle did much more than sell goods at inflated prices, they purchased the ships that brought those goods into the Confederacy.48

For merchants, captains, and even crews, blockade-running offered great risks and rewards at the same. Carrying their cargoes of guns, ammunition, clothing, medicines, salt, and numerous luxury goods from bases in Nassau, Bermuda, and Havana to such

47Edward Murphy to W.H. Renaud, 22 October 1861, Murphy Family Papers, Historic New Orleans Collection (HNOCC), Williams Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana; Richards Diary, 14 September 1861, Richards Papers, (AHC); Sutherland, Seasons of War, 77.
48Coulter, George Walton Williams, 66; McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, 313-14, 380-82.
southern ports as Wilmington, Charleston, and Mobile, the Federal government had an average of 150 ships patrolling for blockade runners. Once safely through, the goods on these ships would typically be placed at auction and while southern cotton was loaded aboard for the return run. A successful trip could net an owner tens of thousands of dollars or anywhere from 500-1000% return on their initial investment. It was not unheard of for a blockade-runner to make $250,000 in a single passage. Offering the potential for such large profits it is hardly surprising that smaller storekeepers like Samuel Richards purchased a thousand dollars of stock in the blockade running firm of Wyly-Markham Company in Atlanta or that a far richer merchant like George Walton Williams would become a director/investor in three different a blockade-running firms: the Consolidated Steam Ship Company (capitalized at $2,015,000), the Sumter Steam Ship Company, and the Calhoun Trading Company. The lure of profit and apparent patriotism drove these men into blockade-running. In Atlanta alone the capital investment in shipping almost tripled from $25,000 in 1862 to $73,000 in 1864. The example of yet another merchant from this city, Sidney Root, reveals the process through which southerners entered the business.  

Sidney Root was a partner in the Atlanta cotton/banking/dry goods firm of Beach & Root before the war. Once the conflict erupted Root embraced the Confederate cause with a passion, an emotional commitment that distinguished him from most of his southern colleagues. For the Atlanta businessman, blockade running represented the most logical, and profitable way to support the Confederacy. A personal friend of Jefferson Davis and a key member of the Atlanta business elite, he anticipated his blockade-running enterprise to be a primary ingredient in his plan to increase his city and country's

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European trade. John Beach, Root's partner, made the effort possible when he opened an office in Liverpool, England. After the Confederate government hired the firm to serve as a cotton agent in Europe, Beach & Root opened a second office in Le Havre, France. The two men eventually brought in a third partner, E.W. Marshall, who served as the firm's connection in Charleston. The firm had access to over $150,000 worth of goods in the North because Beach was a "Union man," a circumstance that seems not to have bothered Root in the least. To further expedite their operations during the war, Beach became a British subject. Beach & Root owned more than nineteen ocean steamers worth in Root's estimation between $30,000-$150,000 each. While on the surface Root's claims seem exaggerated, there is little doubting the large scale of his firm's blockade-running activities.

Conclusions

Most southern merchants lacked the wealth to embark upon blockade-running activities like Sidney Root. As will be seen in the following chapter, the profits Root and others gained from blockade-running not only paid dividends but created great tension across the Confederacy as well. Indeed, the perceived wealth and speculative practices of all merchants large and small created a backlash against them as a class that would profoundly effect their lives as the war turned against the Confederacy in 1864. While Dixie collapsed the traditional liberal capitalist practices southern merchants had long embraced, mainly speculation and haggling, looked increasingly unpatriotic to many white southerners. At the same time invading Federal armies devastated merchant families and brought most of their business activity to an end. The southern identity and bourgeois worldview of the merchant family endured their greatest challenges in the final two years of the Civil War.  

CHAPTER 6

THE MERCHANT FAMILY AND
THE FALL OF THE CONFEDERACY, 1864-65

The perils confronting white southerners mounted as Confederate armies suffered reverses on the battlefield. By late 1863 what little had remained of normal existence on the southern homefront had come to an end as casualties, material deprivation, and invading Federal armies challenged the faith of even the most stalwart Confederate partisan. During the travails of the final two years survival, often even more than military success, consumed the lives of southern men and women. Merchants and their families endured many of the same hardships that afflicted their white neighbors. Their men died in battle, their homes and stores were ransacked, and those who owned slaves lost them eventually. Merchants, however, carried an additional burden. For those storekeepers who still operated during the last two years of the war faced a population that viewed them with distrust if not outright hostility. The business connections, personal backgrounds, and commercial activities that earned antebellum merchants success and, on occasion, disfavor proved even more volatile during the Civil War. The bourgeois worldview and liberal capitalist practices of the southern merchant made him the ultimate outsider in an embattled Confederacy.

Colonel George Washington Lee, provost marshal for Atlanta, viewed his city's merchant community as a very real threat to the Confederate cause. He wrote the secretary of war that domestic enemies and other "debris" found a safe haven amongst the
men and women of the commercial classes. Lee requested permission to raise more
troops in order to quash the many "traitors-Swindlers-extortioners-and counterfeiters" that
operated in Atlanta. The community was also plagued by what Lee characterized as a
dangerous population of "Jews, New England Yankees, and refugees shirking military
duties." The colonel's caustic remarks lacked decorum but many white southerners would
have concurred with him. Several reasons accounted for this sentiment. Inflation,
shortages, and speculation, among other factors, indicated to many that the economy was
spiraling out of control. As during most wars, certainly the American Revolution being
one, southerners believed those people who seemed to derive unwarranted benefits from
the wartime economy, mainly the commercial classes, needed to be singled out and
punished for their unpatriotic behavior. Furthermore the stereotype of the speculative
merchant, albeit exaggerated, had some basis in reality. As one Savannah resident
perceptively noted in 1863, loyalty to either side had little bearing on business
motivations for "anyone who is willing to buy, keep, and resell at a profit can now grow
rich; the recipe is simple—the practice successful."

Merchant Speculation in the Confederacy

The high prices storekeepers could demand for their goods on the southern
homefront proved a mixed blessing. Obviously inflated prices resulted in greater incomes,
often in depreciated Confederate dollars, for savvy businessmen. As we have seen,
wealthy merchants like Georgian Sidney Root could afford to purchase stock from around

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1Thomas G. Dyer, Secret Yankees: The Union Circle in Confederate Atlanta (Baltimore: The Johns
Hopkins Press, 1999), 98, 101; Thomas A. Doerflinger, A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and
Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia, Published for the Institute of Early American
History and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 197; Mary A. DeCredico,
Patriotism for Profit: Georgia's Urban Entrepreneurs and the Confederate War Effort, The Fred W.
merchants were not the only class of southerners who speculated in goods during the Civil War. Historian
Steven Elliott Tripp finds that in wartime Lynchburg, Virginia, "speculating became an especially popular
sideline for virtually all citizens of property." Merchants, however, had more free capital and thus were
disproportionally involved in the practice. See, Steven Elliott Tripp, Yankee Town, Southern City: Race,
the South and overseas for resell in Atlanta at a large profit. When the effectiveness of the Union blockade improved in 1863 the prices for food, clothing, and especially medicine became prohibitive. For example, by the end of 1863 one ounce of quinine, if it could be found at all, cost between $400 and $600. Both the Confederate, state, and local governments passed legislation that sought to eliminate the "unpatriotic and wicked" consequences of speculation but weak law enforcement in the war-torn South made these laws, according to Georgia Governor Joseph Brown, a "dead letter." Threats of fines or confinement—the authorities in Salisbury, North Carolina, placed speculators in a caboose for ten days—did little to change the dynamic of supply and demand. With some storekeepers earning over $30,000 (CSA) in 1864 and selling goods up to a 500% mark-up Root's neighbor and fellow-merchant Samuel Richards's spoke for many when he exclaimed that money "comes in so fast that we hardly know how to dispose of it to advantage." Those storekeepers with the skill, capital, and luck to survive into the second half of the war found themselves with profits to invest. At the same time, the fashion in which they acquired these profits did not endear them to their fellow southerners.¹

At the same time that the war brought growing devastation to the South, money-making opportunities continued to exist for merchants with capital. The high price for food encouraged some to purchase livestock and perishable foods for quick resale. By 1863 corn could be bought, stored, and later sold for double its initial price. The dislocation caused by war could also result in profits. Merchants with larger homes and stores supplemented their income by taking in war refugees as boarders. At a cost of five dollars per day, just a few boarders could add hundreds of dollars to a storekeeper's yearly income. Of course those merchants who had converted their operations in order to make war supplies for the war effort continued to operate as long as the flow of

¹Sidney Root, "Memorandum Of My Life, 1893," Special Collections, Atlanta History Center (AHC); David Williams, Rich Man's War: Class, Caste, and Confederate Defeat in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 86-87; Weekly Conservative (Raleigh, NC), 26 October 1864; Richards Diary, 23 February, 21 March 1863, 4 January 1864, Samuel P. Richards Diary, (AHC).
government orders and the raw materials lasted. Unfortunately for the historian, the same
dislocation that created such financial opportunities for the merchant class also make it
impossible to determine how many individuals actually participated in these business
activities. What is clear from the surviving records is that land, staple crops, bonds, and
slaves were the primary areas of investment for Confederate merchants.  

As the relative value of most goods fluctuated with the fortunes of the war, land
appeared as a very stable investment. No matter how the war ended, the expectation was
that land would continue to demand a respectable price. In the meantime, storekeepers
could use their investment to raise food and other more lucrative crops like cotton and
tobacco. Furthermore southern merchants, like the planter class, enjoyed the prestige
landownership carried with it. Clerk and storekeeper William Burke worked in the firm of
Dillon & Briggs in Prince Edward County, Virginia, but also owned a farm in
neighboring Nottoway County. There he raised potatoes, corn, and other crops with the
help of at least five hired hands. On a much larger scale, wealthy South Carolina
merchant George Walton Williams purchased 100,000 acres of Georgia timber land at $1
an acre and another $500,000 in Charleston property. Of course Williams made these
investments with depreciated Confederate dollars. Likewise merchant and blockade-
runner Sydney Root invested his profits in real estate, purchasing an abandoned race track
outside Atlanta for $75,000. This trend continued through 1864 when Root attempted to
transfer much of his wealth from slaves and cotton and into land once he became
“alarmed about the safety of Atlanta.” Elsewhere in the city bookseller Samuel Richards
spent over $8,500 for nine separate properties in 1862. He and his brother Jabez would
spend their Sundays attending church and looking for available real estate around Atlanta.
Many of these lots had houses on them or were partially improved. Over the course of the

3Richards Diary, 27 June, 28 November 1863, Samuel P. Richards Diary, (AHC); Williams, Rich Man's
War, 83-84; DeCredico, Patriotism for Profit, 50.
following year Richards bought three more pieces of property, including a 202-acre farm, for $15,250. Most of these purchases were made for the purpose of future resale. Aside from these land deals, Richards, like Burke, anticipated that his family would raise commercial produce on the farm. Even an apparently cautious investment like land, however, carried significant risk for southern capitalists. By 1864 Samuel and Jabez Richards's farm venture proved to be a "losing speculation." The Richards brothers failed efforts to operate their own farm was unusual in that they typically bought city lots with little agricultural potential. They certainly enjoyed more success with these speculations. Nevertheless unlike the Richards brothers, some merchants invested in land primarily so they could facilitate their speculation in tobacco and cotton.4

A brief examination into the business activities of Richmond merchant James Thomas Butler reveals the close relationship between commercial agriculture and commodity speculation on the Confederate homefront. A partner in the antebellum grocery firm of James T. Butler & Co., he was described as a man of "character and standing" in his credit report despite the fact that he and his partners incurred a number of bad debts. After the war broke out the merchant did not close shop but left his home on West Marshall Street in Richmond and concentrated more energy on operating his plantation in nearby Caroline County. Butler's activities exemplified the neat fit that existed between agriculture and commerce in the Confederacy. He directed his slaves and hired hands to raise tobacco, wheat, and corn for the purpose of speculation. Throughout at least the first half of the war Butler produced large crops on his Virginia farm. If the price was right, the merchant-planter sent his crops directly to market. When he judged prices to be low, Butler would not hesitate to hold 2,000 bushels of wheat or 27,000 pounds of corn in storage until supplies dwindled and prices rose. The wealth he derived

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4Burke Diary, 7 May 1863, William Floyd Burke Diary, Virginia Historical Society (VHS), Richmond, Virginia; Merton E. Coulter, George Walton Williams: The Life of a Southern Merchant and Banker 1820-1903 (Athens: The Hibriton Press, 1976), 71-73; Sidney Root, "Memorandum" (AHC); Richards Diary, 16, 24 May 1862, 21 March, 20 April 1863, 19 March 1864, Samuel P. Richards Diary, (AHC). 229
from commercial farming provided the basis for Butler’s numerous other speculative deals. In 1861 he purchased 90,000 lbs. of tobacco, a year later he and W.L. Early, a Virginia state senator, purchased another $10,000 of the valuable leaf. One year later Butler invested over $41,000 in at least nineteen tobacco deals with nine different individuals. This trend continued into 1863 when he purchased 220,000 lbs. of “Carolina Sun Cured” tobacco. At a time when the Confederate government expected tobacco and cotton farmers to switch to food crops merchant-planters like James Butler continued to grow, and indeed speculate in tobacco. As the experience of Reuben Clark reveals, canny merchants did not require access to a farm, or even freedom, in order to venture into commodity trading during the Civil War.\(^5\)

Confederate officer Reuben Clark conducted business under the most trying circumstances. A successful young merchant in Knoxville, Tennessee, before the war, Clark entered Confederate military service as a first lieutenant in the 3rd Tennessee. During the war he saw action during the Vicksburg campaign where he was eventually taken prisoner as a captain in the 59th Tennessee. After being exchanged in September 1863, Clark fought with his unit in eastern Tennessee and in the Shenandoah Valley. During the fall of 1864 Union forces once again captured Clark. This time, however, the Federal Army turned Clark over to the Union provost-marshal of Knoxville after William “Parsons” Brownlow, a Methodist preacher, ardent Unionist, and editor of The Knoxville Whig and Rebel Ventilator convinced local leaders that the former merchant had murdered a Union officer. The charge had no foundation in truth but Clark spent the remainder of the war in an eight foot square iron cage located in the Knoxville County

\(^5\)Like most southern merchants during the antebellum period, James Butler changed partners fairly often thus the name and make-up of his antebellum firms appeared in various forms: Butler & Tinsley, James T. Butler and Brother, etc., see Virginia, vol. 43, p. 73, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate school of Business Administration (HGSB); Butler Diary, 1861, February, October, 1862, 22 January 1863, James Thomas Butler Diary, (VHS); Tripp, Yankee Town, 135-36.
Jail. Two tasks consumed Clark’s time while in jail, gaining his release and protecting the profits he made during the war speculating in land and tobacco.\(^6\)

Soon after his confinement in the Knoxville jail, U.S. Treasury authorities issued a warrant confiscating all of Clark’s property. The beleaguered prisoner managed to send a letter warning his business partner George Mayo to “protect” their mutually-held assets. Before Mayo could place their property solely under his name the Federal government and hungry creditors captured the tobacco they had stored in Lynchburg, Virginia. Likewise the two lots of land they had purchased in December 1862 were confiscated by the government. A sullen Clark blamed his careless partner and a malevolent government for leaving him “practically penniless.” Cold, hungry, and in danger of being executed for a crime he did not commit, the merchant-soldier’s financial reverses seemed to add insult to injury. Nevertheless Clark recognized the financial risks of wartime speculation. The imprisoned merchant-soldier found himself in a precarious situation but the trade in staple crops he transacted from behind bars was not unusual. Charles Blacknall, another merchant who conducted business while in the Confederate army, revealed the expectations of Clark and the rest of his colleagues when wrote his brother “I am sure that Tobacco will continue to rise, and if the war should close it will bring the gold immediately, which makes it a safe speculation.” This temperament and the behavior it inspired repeatedly appears in the historical record the merchant class left during the war.\(^7\)


\(^7\)Ibid., 56-58, 79-81. It is impossible to determine with any confidence how many merchants conducted private business while in Confederate service. Not surprisingly anecdotal evidence suggests that a fair number of those businessmen who had positions in various quartermaster’s departments participated in personal trade on the side. For example in 1863 Philip Whitlock, a private in the Richmond Grays, purchased a tobacco shop in Richmond while still holding his quartermaster job. He and his wife ran the store for the rest of the war; see, Ernest B. Furgurson, *Ashes of Glory: Richmond at War* (New York: Aldred A. Knopf, 1996), 185; Charles Blacknall to George Blacknall, 23 March 1862, Oscar W. Blacknall Papers, North Carolina State Archives (NCSA), Raleigh, North Carolina.
In addition to tobacco, merchants in and out of the army, like their counterparts in the planter class, speculated in the South's main cash crop—cotton. Many sought their fortune buying, storing, and eventually selling cotton to customers in Europe and the North. The Confederate government attempted to limit the trade with only mixed success. The lure of enormous profits attracted too many people willing to ignore the law and financial prudence for the main chance. The activities of the Petersburg, Virginia, merchant John William Bradbury and his cotton agent, the Columbus, Georgia firm Charles Rogers & Company, are instructive. From 1862 to early 1864 Bradbury supplemented the income he earned selling hardware with regular speculations in cotton. The Virginia merchant traveled to states like Georgia where he invested profits he and his partners made selling hardware. Charles Rogers & Company would locate, purchase, and occasionally store the cotton for Bradbury. Surviving records indicate that Rogers & Company spent $35,489 dollars procuring 420 bales of cotton for the Petersburg merchant and his associates. The Columbus cotton factors made their money from the purchase and storage fees they charged while Bradbury hoped to profit from future sales in a tight cotton market. This process seems to have repeated itself in other regions of the cotton-growing South. North Carolina merchant and future Reconstruction governor Jonathan Worth made most of his money during the war in cotton manufacturing and speculation. While recruiting for the Confederate army, serving as a state senator, and later employed as the county salt commissioner for Randolph County, Worth found time to accumulate a nice profit from the cotton trade. Even in those states divided by the contending armies early in the war, clever merchants speculated in cotton. Though his dry goods store was located in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, Eugene Petetin seems to have purchased cotton throughout his home state and Mississippi. Unfortunately for the Creole businessmen, Union forces under Generals Nathaniel Banks and William Franklin confiscated thirty-two bales of his cotton in 1863. The dislocation, scarcity, and
subsequent inflation that made staple crops such an attractive investment for entrepreneurial southerners during the Civil War heightened interest in other financial ventures as well.\(^8\)

Merchants and other southerners with the inclination and means to speculate typically had a number of investment options. At different times during the war Confederate bonds, Treasury notes, corporate stock, and gold all held out the promise of significant financial returns. Early in the war hard-nosed storekeeper Samuel Richards purchased $1000 of stock in the Confederate Insurance Company. One year later he bought $6000 in government bonds at 8\% interest. As late as 1864 North Carolina merchant Cushing Hassell and his business associates demonstrated their commitment to the cause by spending over $8000 on government bonds. Obviously the appeal of the government bonds and notes waned among all but the most patriotic citizens as the war turned against the Confederacy. The slave trade offered yet another alternative for investors.\(^9\)

Victories in the field and the expectation of ultimate Confederate independence drove an active wartime trade in slaves. Naturally with their wealth and experience the planter class took the lead in this commercial enterprise. As noted in the previous chapter, surging prices in the first half of the war encouraged many planter families to purchase


\(^9\)By 1864 merchants hastened to sell their Treasury notes and Confederate bonds for what they could get; see, William Wills to Richard Wills, 26 February 1864, William Henry Wills Papers, Southern Historical Collection (SHC), Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Richards Diary, March 1862, 20 April 1863, Samuel P. Richards Diary, (AHC); Hassell Diary, 1 February 1864, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC). For a description of the counterfeiting of Confederate Treasury notes see, Mobile Advertiser & Register (Mobile, AL), 12 September 1862.
more slaves. A son serving in the army recommended that his father “buy boys & girls from 15 to 20 years old & take care to have a majority of girls . . . the increase in the number of negroes by this means would repay the difference in the amount of available labor . . . I would not be surprised to see negroes in 6 mos. After peace worth from 2 to 3000 dollars.” Even a middling farmer like Virginian Daniel Cobb, who worked eleven slaves on his Southampton County, spent $2,480 for a slave boy in 1863. When afforded the opportunity, both merchants who had owned slaves prior to the war and those whom had not participated in this trade purchased slaves. Experienced merchant slaveholders like Cushing Hassell invested money in slaves early in the war only to later sell them before they “went off to the Yankees.” Regarding the value of his family’s assets, Charles Blacknall concluded that the high “prices of negroes is more surprising than anything else.” The mercenary quality of this particular wartime speculation can be seen in the designs of the Samuel and Jabez Richards.10

During the antebellum period the Richards brothers did not own slaves and generally regretted the institution’s harmful influence upon the South. Their position quickly changed during the war however, once Samuel and Jabez became convinced that they could strike it rich through slave speculation. Jabez bought their first slave in July 1862 for $1,000. On this rather historic occasion for the family Samuel remarked, “I expect the Yankees would say that this was the worst possible investment under existing circumstances seeing that their Congress has declared the slaves of all rebels to be free!” A month later Samuel purchased two more slaves for the inflated price of $9,250. The important point in the Richardses’ slave purchases is that while their slaves did work,

they were viewed as purely a transitory investment. According to Samuel, he wished the South victory, among other reasons, so that “when we come to a successful end to this war negroes will command high prices as there will be so much demand for labor to raise cotton and a great many will have been taken away by the Yankees.” Richards’s lust for profits outweighed his personal disgust “with negroes” and his regret that “this cruel war should be waged for them!” Like so many other participants in the this wartime trade, by late 1864 the Atlanta storekeeper wished he had “the value of our [he and Jabez’s] city lots and negroes in gold at this juncture.” Nevertheless, that Richards and his brother overcame this repugnance and speculated in slaves demonstrates the perseverance of their calculating business mentality during the war.11

The broader economic context within which these speculations occurred, be they in land, staple crops, bonds, or slaves, must not be forgotten. The widespread issuance of Treasury and state notes, counterfeiting, and an increasingly effective Union blockade created unprecedented inflation across the Confederacy. One historian has estimated that by early 1864 it required $46 to buy what $1 had bought three years earlier. This inflation rate more than doubled again during the last year of the war. Thus by 1864 many southerners paid $30 for a pair of shoes—when available, $4 for a pound of butter while a dozen eggs commanded $2. Shad from a river in eastern North Carolina cost locals $4 each. Working behind a store counter in such a tumultuous environment, especially during the final two years of the war, proved to be a mixed blessing. The minority of storekeepers who could keep their stores open and stocked made great profits, albeit in inflated currency. Merchants accustomed to modest business before the war saw their sales exceed five hundred dollars a day or tens of thousands a year. Merchants who owned blockade runners, individuals like Sydney Root in Atlanta and James H. Taylor in

11 Richards Diary, 27 July 1862, 2 May, 13 December 1863, 9 September 1864, Samuel P. Richards Diary, (AHC).
Augusta, faced even greater financial risks and rewards. These entrepreneurs continued to subscribe to a worldview and exhibit habits they had learned in the antebellum commercial economy. This constancy of these values is hardly surprising nor were the practices of the mercantile class unique. At least when it came to cotton and other staple crops a segment of the planter class matched and even surpassed the southern merchants’ zeal for speculation. Nevertheless, southern newspapers, politicians, and public opinion perceived the commercial activities of the merchant class to be of a different order from others. This verdict and its political, moral, and financial ramifications of speculation assumed dimensions that surprised even the most experienced storekeepers.\footnote{James M. McPherson, Ordeal By Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 199-200; DeCredico, Patriotism for Profit, 63; Hassell Diary, 10 March 1864, Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC); George C. Rable, Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 103; Reid Mitchell, Civil War Soldiers (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1988), 164; Richards Diary, 25 December 1863, 4 January 1864, Samuel P. Richards Diary, (AHC); Augusta Constitutionalist, 6 August 1864.}

The “Moneyed Wolf”: Perceptions of the Merchant Class within the Confederacy

The destruction the white population endured during the final two years of the Civil War weakened the mercantile class’s already uncertain position in southern society [see chapter two]. Some individuals publicly acknowledged the important contribution merchants made to the Confederate war effort. After all, those that remained in operation still provided goods to consumers, shipped supplies through the Union blockade and, on occasion, invested their wealth in government bonds. Despite these activities, most white southerners viewed their merchant neighbors with a mixture of horror and contempt. As the war continued, the flow of abuse wealthy storekeepers received, from both soldier and civilian alike, deepened the familiar channels made during the antebellum period. With few exceptions the merchant class was judged to be rapacious, unpatriotic, and alien. As the war turned against the Confederacy, the liberal capitalist values the merchant class embraced increasingly seemed traitorous and, predictably, Jewish to a population looking for scapegoats.
The strained relationship between white southerners and their local merchants emerged from the very onset of the war. In 1861 R.H. May, mayor of Augusta, spoke for many leaders across the Confederacy when he put the commercial population on notice with his ominous declaration that “all our citizens should make sacrifices for the common good, and not that advantage should be taken of those least able to suffer, I sincerely trust that while these troublesome time shall exist, our merchants and traders will be satisfied (as they were before) with living wages.” The clergy echoed the pleas and veiled threats made by Confederate political leaders. Aside from being personally debasing, zealous ministers preached that “extortion” threatened to bring God’s wrath down on the Confederacy. In addition to the influence exerted by the state and clergy, the press added its own weighty voice.  

Published criticism of the mercantile community grew during the war but, at least initially, did not always attempt to draw blood. Indeed, the occasional newspaper printed moral tales with messages apparently calculated to restrain the commercial excesses of the merchant classes. One particularly didactic story in an 1862 edition of the Wilmington Daily Journal entitled “More Blessed to Give than Receive” depicted a noble, Christian merchant who forgives the $1000 debt of a poor widow and her daughter. Aside from the eternal reward the businessman’s act merits, the author had the poor but upright mother and daughter proclaim “how much we love and reverence him whenever we think or speak of him, or ever hear him spoken of! . . . He has bound two hearts to him forever.” At the end of the day the mother’s every thought “was a prayer calling down blessings upon the good rich man.” That same night, surrounded by his bronze statuary, marble floors, and luxurious carpet, the merchant rests, strengthened in reputation and closer to salvation. The article’s tone mirrored that of the community at large for early in the war.

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much of the public criticism leveled against storekeepers was rather mild. Those storekeepers who found their activities publicly challenged, men like Oliver Chappel, a storekeeper in Macon, Georgia whom was accused of sharing sympathy with the enemy, could dismiss such gossip as the jealous grumblings of disagreeable neighbors. In 1861, when social relations on the Confederate home front were still relatively composed, a businessman could afford to remain indifferent to such reprimands. As the war dragged on, the defensive posture of the merchant classes increased proportionately to the public censure they received.14

Rising prices and material shortages invited a wide range of white southerners to attack retail operators as a class. By 1863 newspaper editorials attacked "big merchants' for employing the "laws of trade" as a mere pretense to gouge the last nickel from the soldier's family. A letter from William Poole to the editor of the Montgomery Daily Advertiser & Register deserves to be quoted at length because it articulates forcefully themes found in many southern newspapers by 1863. Poole wrote:

I think it the duty of every patriot in the land, especially those gallant spirits that constitute our armies, to discountenance and frown upon the obnoxious and most contemptible of all our enemies—the extortioner [sic]. He is, undoubtedly, our most dangerous foe, far surpassing the Yankee in unmitigated deeds of villainy. Living, as he does, in our midst, extending the hand of welcome to those that he is depriving of the actual necessaries of life, and feigning good wishes and friendly feelings for the success of the good cause in which we are engaged, he is straining every nerve, is using every means in his power to effect contrary results. . . . it behooves all—more especially the soldier—to guard against the moneyed wolf, the man without patriotism, without principle, nay destitute of the slightest feeling. . . . instead of buying his goods, or recognising

14Daily Journal (Wilmington, NC), 31 July 1862; Richards Diary, 28 July 1861, Samuel P. Richards Diary, (AHC). See also, Tripp, Yankee Town, 134. Accusations of speculations and, obviously, Unionist sympathy could place a merchant in a dangerous position. Neighbors accused Atlanta dry goods merchant Michael Myers of Unionist leanings for contributing money towards the relief of Federal prisoners and, in particular, for refusing to accept Confederate money in his store. Myers eventually issued a public statement confirming his loyalty to the Confederacy and maintained that he owned ten thousand dollars in Treasury Notes. This action appeased many of his critics but Myers remained obnoxious in the eyes of several southern patriots in Atlanta; see Dyer, Secret Yankees, 103.
[sic] him in any way that one friend would another, we must totally deb him from society.\textsuperscript{15}

Many white southerners shared William Poole’s anger. Those living in towns saw food supplies dwindle and costs rise as Union armies destroyed supply lines and occupied more Confederate territory. When the civilian population gained only minimal relief from the activities of blockade-runners or Confederate authorities it is not surprising that many, like Poole, began equating speculators with the larger Yankee threat. Stories of greedy merchants, undoubtedly some exaggerated for effect, spread across the South. For example, reportedly after a women asked her storekeeper how possibly she could afford to feed her seven children when flour cost seventy dollars a barrel the callous merchant answered “I don’t know, madam, unless you eat your children.” Whether an illustration of malevolence or an unfortunate attempt at Swiftian humor such comments once again bolstered the conclusion that storekeepers held values alien to the southern people and their cause. Furthermore, a vocal minority of the southern population concluded that the most egregious agents of extortion were an alien race entirely—Jews.\textsuperscript{16}

Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of the southern merchant population hailed from the South, it had often been characterized as being disproportionately Jewish during the antebellum period [see chapter two]. The anti-Semitic implications of this stereotype climaxed during the last half of the Civil War. The

\textsuperscript{15}Mobile Register & Advertiser, 23 September 1863.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 1 April 1863; Daily Journal, 31 August 1863; Catherine Clinton, Tara Revisited: Women, War, & The Plantation Legend (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 152-3. See also, Tripp, Yankee Town, 119. The childhood experience of Lucy Hall Baldwin illustrated how inflation could effect relationships within families. On one particular occasion in the fall of 1864 the young girl imagined what she would do with $100 her frustrated father handed her a Confederate $100 bill and exclaimed “There! Take it down the
Jewish storekeeper, an outsider in South, offered a convenient scapegoat for the economic collapse on the homefront. Editors raged against “heartless Shylocks” whose brutal commercial practices have “coined their fortunes out of the blood of the brave and the sufferings of penury.” Newspapers debated whether Jews were responsible for the “deepening horrors” of war and the likelihood that the public would be forced to “take the remedy in its own hands.” In the Congress the irascible Henry Foote stated that in Richmond Jews accounted for “four out of five of the tradesmen in our principal thoroughfares.” A prominent Virginian told the congressman that if the present state of affairs continued that the end of the war would “find nearly all the property of the Confederacy in the hands of Jewish Shylocks.” This public debate mirrored the personal views of many white southerners. Emma Holmes complained to her diary about the exorbitant prices of auctioned goods in Charleston. She blamed the Jews for “outbidding all others” and setting up their “little shops” and leaving her unable to obtain a toothbrush for less than two dollars. War Department clerk John B. Jones frequently vented his anger against Jewish merchants in his diary. The occasional novelist and editor denounced the race that had “no nationality” for depleting the Confederacy declaring “all wars are harvests for them. It has been so from the day of their dispersion.” Most southerners did not approach the passion of Jones’s antipathy for Jews specifically or merchants in general. Nevertheless, a small number of people did lash out against the dire
circumstances in which they found themselves and the merchant class, Jew and gentile alike, provided a ready target.\textsuperscript{17}

Bands of white southerners, and the anomalous individual, attempted to end what they judged to be the oppressive commercial activities of the merchant classes by direct action. After planters engaged in speculation during the war they rarely if ever confronted an angry mob while enough storekeepers faced such treatment as to provide an example for the rest of their colleagues in the Confederacy. These unlawful actions could be planned or relatively spontaneous, conducted with the support of the community or socially illegitimate. In any case, when mobs forcible removed a storekeeper, broke-in to a shop, or had other skirmishes with merchants it highlighted the growing desperation of the former and the marginal position of the latter.\textsuperscript{18}

Gangs defended their attacks upon local shopkeepers on the basis that they were defending the community. Early in the war Isaac Harman, a Jewish merchant in Greene County, Georgia, raised his prices only to have ten Mercer University students beat him outside his store. Harman deserved the punishment, according to the students, for exploiting his neighbors. The merchant and his Jewish partners filed assault charges against the students and theft charges against yet another. These acts failed to win the support of their community, where they had operated for years. By 1862 Harman and his partners lost most of their business and eventually left the area. Assaults like this one and


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simple break-ins increased during the war. After three robberies on one October evening in 1862 the editor of the Wilmington Daily Journal admonished his readers “this is a very wrong proceeding . . . if it is necessary to resort to such measures for food, it must be done legally.” The editor implied that the government or, at the very least, community leaders should confiscate necessary goods from storekeepers. That same month a store in Richmond lost over $8000 in goods during a robbery. From his government office Jones observed “the prejudice is very strong against the extortionists, and I apprehend there will be many scenes of violence this winter.” The war clerk’s assessment proved correct. From 1863 until the end of the war food riots erupted in cities across the South, including: Macon, Atlanta, Augusta, and Savannah, Georgia; Salisbury and High Point, North Carolina; Mobile, Alabama; and Richmond, Virginia. Remarking upon the participation of 150 Savannah women in a bread riot the Raleigh Weekly Conservative noted, “that riots of this nature are becoming very common in many sections of the Confederacy—entirely too much so for the good of our cause.” If angry letters to the editor and the occasional public insult failed to remind storekeepers of their tenuous place in the Confederacy a hungry, angry mob of hatchet-wielding women tended to drive the point home. Merchants would retaliate against specific violations of their person or property by filing criminal or civil charges. There is little to suggest, however, that they believed it wise to respond to the steady vitriol they received during the Civil War. When they did reply, merchants attributed high prices and scarcity as products of the market.19

Commercial businessmen large and small blamed the Federal blockade for creating the scarcity of goods that raised inflation within the Confederacy. Men like George Walton Williams tried to appease public outrage by describing the great expense merchants confronted when acquiring their stock. Along the same lines, an Augusta merchant argued that higher prices were merely the “natural workings” of the marketplace. Storekeepers supported this contention by pointing to the southern farmer’s disposition to “speculate” (i.e., hoard) his own crops when the market did not offer him a satisfactory price. Though they minimized the scale of their wartime profits and investments, those merchants who made this argument were fundamentally correct.

Upheavals in the supply of goods did shrink the market. By 1864 the particulars of economic theory, no matter how rational, did not win over distressed soldiers and their families. When all else failed storekeepers with any wit emphasized their support for the fading Confederate cause. Sympathizing with veterans or, better yet, being one could create good-will with neighbors. Veteran William Perry returned to Montgomery, Alabama, and began selling confectioneries in January, 1865. A historian of Civil War Montgomery found that his boast of “service on the field since the war commenced” won him great customer loyalty. Another storekeeper in the Alabama town, Samuel Wreford, operated “The One-Armed Man’s Dry Goods Store.” Even as Union forces closed upon the city the one-armed man, feeling “cool and collected,” kept his store open for business.

72; Daily Journal, 4 October 1862. As an entrepot for blockade-runners until the last months of the war, the editor of the Daily Journal devoted a great deal of ink to lambasting the transgressions of several merchants. He singled out Atlanta merchant Sidney Root and his blockade-runner the “Kate” for special mention when it apparently carried Yellow Fever from an infected West Indian port to Wilmington, see Daily Journal, 3 October 1862; Jones, War Clerk’s Diary, 104; Williams, Rich Man’s War, 115; Furgurson, Ashes of Glory, 194, 327; Weekly Conservative (Raleigh, NC), 4 May 1864; Rable, Civil Wars, 110.
All merchants needed the one-armed storekeeper's composure in order successfully to buy, sell, speculate, and then defend their reputation in an embattled Confederacy.  

Merchants Under Arms, their Families, and the Fall of the Confederacy

The military experience of those commercial men who served in the Confederate army fundamentally mirrored that of their white neighbors, regardless of class or occupation (see chapter four). This remained true throughout the conflict. Hard fighting, mounting causalities, and eventual despair framed the last eighteen months of the war. Business activity and the liberal capitalist values that defined so many of these merchant-soldiers waned as the realm of what was possible to accomplish in a splintering Confederacy diminished. It was left to their families on the home front and the ranks of the civilian businessmen to maintain the commercial ties that would enable the southern business community to rebuild after the war.

The surviving diaries and letters merchant-soldiers wrote during the last two years of the war suggest their increasingly desperate plight. Indeed their very paucity reveals how death and imprisonment had thinned their ranks since the beginning of the war. By early 1864 only sixteen of the original company of sixty men Louis Leon had served with in the 53rd North Carolina remained. The lonely soldier, whose brother Morris fought with the 44th Georgia, had to exchanged letters with a Union picket to learn about the circumstances of his parents who lived in New York. A one-time clerk serving in the Army of Northern Virginia, hoping for a respite from the carnage he faced, asked for the

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20Coulter, George Walton Williams, 71; Lee Ann Whites, The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia 1860-1890 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 68; Daily Journal, 29 July 1862; William Warren Rogers, Jr., Confederate Home Front: Montgomery during the Civil War (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 131-32; Montgomery Daily Advertiser (Montgomery, AL), 14 June 1864, 18 April 1865. 244
hand of his sweetheart back in Tennessee. He described his love in poetic terms then declared, "I wish to go home—and it is in your power to give Me [sic] a furlough, alone."
The letter failed in its mission. As large sections of the Confederacy fell to Union forces the government called upon reservists and wounded soldiers to fill the depleted ranks. On May 21, 1864, Virginia reservist James Thomas Butler received orders to march to Richmond. At the same time Confederate and Federal armies clashed near his Caroline County farm during the Battle of North Anna. Soldiers that still fought during the last months of the war suffered, nevertheless they considered themselves fortunate to be free and alive.21

Like their comrades in arms, southern soldiers from commercial backgrounds ran an increased risk of capture during the final two years of the Civil War. Over the course of the war Union armies captured well over 214,000 southern prisoners of war. By 1865 approximately 12 percent of that population would die while in northern prisons.

Merchants who fought in the Confederate army and later found themselves in one of these prisons described a wide variety of conditions to their families back home. An officer in the 23rd North Carolina, when Federal forces captured Charles Blacknall at the battle of Gettysburg they sent him to a prison specifically designated for Confederate officers on Johnson's Island in Lake Erie. Blacknall found conditions there quite decent. He wrote his wife Jinnie that the "reports that have been circulated in the South in regard to 'Yankee Cruelty' to prisoners &c&c. are all false" Blacknall added "we receive quite as much kindness as we show to prisoners ourselves." Of course the letter might have been

21L. Leon, Diary of a Confederate Soldier (Charlotte, NC: Stone Publishing Company, 1913), 36, 59; Letter to Fannie Aiton, 6 March 1864, Thomas Aiton Papers, South Caroliniana Library (SCL), University of
calculated to ease the mind of his troubled wife. Six months later the one-time merchant and resort proprietor was exchanged and returned to command with his unit near Petersburg, Virginia. Unfortunately, most prisoners of war did not write letters home or keep a diary while in prison. Louis Leon’s and his brother Morris’s feelings on being captured at the Wilderness in May, 1864, must remain a mystery. It is probably safe to assume, however, that the six months he spent in the infamous Union prison in Elmira, New York, proved difficult. Leon took the oath of allegiance to the Federal government and was released in April, 1865. As already noted, Confederate Reuben Clark endured an extraordinary imprisonment in a Knoxville cage that he later characterized as “bitter and vindictive beyond measure.” Clark lived to tell of his experience, others did not.  

The case of Charles Blacknall exhibits the relative danger of fighting compared with continued imprisonment. His confinement was onerous but ultimately less fatal than serving in the Army of Northern Virginia. Months after his exchange and return to command Blacknall suffered an ankle wound at the battle of Winchester in September, 1864. Amputation did not save the North Carolinian from dying of gangrene. His wife and children joined the ranks of merchant families devastated by the war. William Henry Wills, a one-time merchant in Halifax, North Carolina, and active Methodist preacher, lost his son George, a member of the 43rd North Carolina, in the same campaign where Blacknall fell. An army chaplain informed the elderly merchant-farmer of his loss and counseled that the “decided Christian character and piety of George assures us that Your

South Carolina, Columbia; Butler Diary, 21 May 1864, James Thomas Butler Diary, (VHS).
22McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, 802; Charles Blacknall to Jinnie Blacknall, 10 October 1863, Oscar W. Blacknall Papers, (NCSA); Leon, Diary of a Confederate Soldier, 63, 69-70; Clark, Valleys of the Shadow, 53-4.
loss is his eternal gain.” Reflecting upon the death of his son, Wills wrote in his diary
“Thy Will Be done.” In a less sublime exchange of tidings, Reuben Clark, secure in his
Knoxville cage, first heard of his brother’s death from a terse note passed to him by a
prison guard. Most people, like William Wills, learned of a family member’s death at
home. Mississippian Elizabeth Wilson Howze, widow of a storekeeper and a mother of
another merchant, lost two sons by 1864. Cushing Hassell received the news of his son
Theodore’s death at home in North Carolina. The twenty-five year old was killed in
fighting near Goldsboro, not far from his home. He died only days before the war ended.
The causalities of war forever transformed families like the Hassells, Howzes, and
Blacknalls.23

The last two years of the Civil War did prove to be great equalizer for those
Confederate soldiers who saw action on the battlefield. The experience of most soldiers
from commercial backgrounds mirrored that of the any other southern man. Merchant-
soldiers may have been making post-war business plans but they did not have the desire
or time to describe them while giving their last measure warding off invading Yankees.
By this stage of the war the center of mercantile activity shifted away from the decreasing
number of active blockade runners and storekeepers behind Confederate lines toward
merchants and soldiers’ wives living under Union occupation. The latter two groups
traded goods between the Union and Confederacy, reestablished economic ties with

23Blacknall bio/introduction, Oscar W. Blacknall Papers, (NCSA); John Davis to William Henry Wills, 20,
29 September 1864, William Henry Wills Papers, (SHC); Clark, Valleys of the Shadow, 69-70; Howze
bio/introduction, Howze (Isham Robertson) and Family Papers, (MDAH); Hassell Diary, 9 March 1864,
Cushing B. Hassell Papers, (SHC).
northern mercantile houses, and began laying the foundation for a post-war commercial economy in the South.

The commercial activities of those southern storekeepers who managed to survive the first three years of the war largely collapsed by late 1864. Civilians either could no longer profitably stock their stores or were, at least temporarily, forced out of business by invading Union armies. Atlanta merchants Sidney Root and Samuel Richards saw their business operations close once Federal troops under William T. Sherman captured their city in September, 1864. Though both men had made tremendous profits during the first three years of the war, the former as a blockade runner and the latter as a book and paper merchant, by 1865 they had suffered large financial losses. Root and his partners lost their investments in over nineteen blockade-running ships, thirteen buildings in Atlanta, and a net loss in cotton holdings estimated at the rather incredible figure of $1,700,000 in greenbacks. Desperate Confederate soldiers sacked Richards's store on July 22, 1864, while later in the year Yankees and the local populace plundered the store a second time. Samuel described the second break-in as a "scene that would have required he pencil of Hogarth to Portray." The bookseller was most distressed by the fact that the robbery erupted "before our eyes by men who looked like gentlemen!" Richards added, "Of course their looks belied their character." Following the destruction of Atlanta both men journeyed North and lived in temporary exile in New York City until the end of the war. This story of ruin, temporary evacuation, and eventual revival played itself out across the South.24

24Root, Memorandum," 18-19, (AHC); Richards Diary, 2 September 1864, Samuel P. Richards Diary (AHC).
Commercial families endured a multitude of losses, financial and emotional, during the last days of the war. Aside from the destruction wrought by battles and invading armies, institutions that merchants had long known, if not always embraced, disintegrated. Slavery's demise, for example, disturbed a number of merchants. Like their planter neighbors, merchant families lost their slaves with the arrival of Union troops. As Federal forces neared their home in Mississippi Benjamin Semmes acknowledged the breakdown of paternalism when he implored his wife Jorantha to "trust nothing whatever to any of the Negroes." Slave Mary Angady, slave to a general merchant in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, remembered that Yankees troops looked for her master's hidden silver, plundered his store, and gave her father a portion of the merchant's food. She and her family were free to go though they remained with the "white folks" for a time. Cushing Hassell's account of his slaves conduct at war's end resembles the descriptions written by the planter class. The merchant claimed to have kept his slaves well fed, clothed, and together. At the commencement of hostilities Hassell promised them that if they would "stick" to him they would be supported and "happy." Despite this paternal interest, several months before the war ended three of his male slaves had left to join the Union army in east North Carolina and a female slave was sold before she had an opportunity to flee. The fact that Hassell both owned slaves and fancied himself a paternal master made him rather unique compared with the majority of his fellow retail businessmen. The shock and disappointment he expressed at his slaves' behavior is less peculiar. Storekeepers like Samuel Richards frequently heaped scorn upon the African-American population, both slave and free, whom they blamed for causing the white South's woes.25

25Benjamin Semmes to Jorantha Semmes, 7 June 1863; Benedict Joseph Semmes Papers, (SHC); George P.
The material and psychological ruin Cushing Hassell and so many white southerners sustained between 1861 and 1865 forever transformed the region. The once dominant planter class had to redefine themselves in an attempt to regain political and economic control. White farmers regrouped and toiled for a measure of economic security in the post-war South. Freedmen tested their new political rights. Change appeared to be the order of the day. Amid this turbulence thousands of southerners barely managed to eke out an existence. As historians of the New South have noted, the mercantile class was one group that not only adapted to the post-war economy, but helped create it.

Storekeepers with business experience from the antebellum and Confederate South laid the foundation for this success. Indeed, young merchants, both in and out of the Confederate army, and their families began planning for their post-war careers during the final months of the war.

Southern merchants living in communities behind Union lines revived their business operations at the earliest possible moment. Louisiana merchant Jean Baptiste Bres, for example, resumed his speculations in cotton, whiskey, and other goods once he took a loyalty oath to the United States on June 8, 1864. During the final year of the war the entrepreneurial Bres obtained passes from the Provost Marshal General to conduct business in St. Louis, Missouri; Cairo, Illinois; and New York City. Following the war Bres drew upon his wartime business experience to obtain a position as a cotton agent for the firm of Allen Greene & Son. Two weeks after the fall of Charleston and one month

before Lee’s surrender George Walton Williams took the oath of allegiance and later received a personal pardon from the President because his worth exceeded $20,000. During the process Williams, arguing for a rejuvenated South, wrote, “we shall have no more use for nullification or secession in this day and generation.” Along similar lines after the Union army occupied Atlanta both Samuel Richards and Sidney Root temporarily relocated to New York City where they began their economic recovery. As they reestablished ties with their northern suppliers, Richards did regret that he and his brother did not have “the value of our city lots and Negroes in gold.” Having obtained a line of credit in New York City, Richards returned to Atlanta in August 1865 where he reopened his book store. In 1866, a local R.G. Dun agent reported Richards’s firm as coming through the war “without sustaining much loss” and having “considerable means left.” The storekeeper thrived in the New South. The destruction of the Confederacy left Sidney Root much more disillusioned. For several years after the war the old blockade runner avoided a permanent homecoming to Atlanta. By 1878, however, Root moved back home to take a position as general superintendent with Chamberlain, Boynton & Company. Merchants who did not have the desire or opportunity to travel North often looked to their families for business assistance.26

John S. West, a partner in a Buckingham County, Virginia, dry goods firm, made sure that his family would maintain a foothold in commercial trade following the war.


26Loyalty certificate, Jean Baptiste Bres to father, 2 July 1864, Bres Family Papers, (HTML); Coulter, George Walton Williams, 96; Richards Diary, 9 September 1864, Samuel P. Richards Diary (AHC); Georgia, vol. 71, 3 February 1866, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, (HGSB); Root, Memorandum,” 18-20, (AHC). Apparently Bres did not mourn the fall of the Confederacy. In July of 1864 the Louisiana merchant wrote he was “glad” that his son received a school holiday to celebrate the Fourth of July.

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Despite numerous obstacles, West managed to keep his firm open throughout most of the war. More important, as one of his sons served in the Confederate army he sent another to serve as a clerk with the Richmond tobacco firm of Neal Brothers & Company. There the young man learned the habits that would sustain the family firm in the coming years. The apprentice-clerk wrote his family in February 1865 about his efforts to “do my duty in every respect both to my maker & employers” while “trying too to save all the money I can.” Following the war he returned to the family firm and employed the skill and values that had been handed down to him to sustain, as one observer noted, “one of the most thriving firms in the Co.” As we have observed, Benedict Semmes depended upon his wife, Jorantha, to help maintain the family through retail activity while he served as a soldier in the commissary department (see chapter five). The economic role she assumed continued until Benedict joined his family in 1865. In a matter of weeks the Semmes returned to Memphis where Benedict reopened Semmes & Company, a wine and liquor firm. Like West’s firm, the early success of Semmes & Company after the war rested, in part, upon the wartime activities of Benedict’s family, particularly the labor of his wife. 

Conclusion

The destruction wrought by the final two years of the Civil War forced hundreds of merchants and their families to suspend business, relocate, and bury their dead. The business so many storekeepers had conducted during the first half of the war disappeared under this weight. Merchants who did continue to sell goods came under increased attack by a white southern population exhausted by war and speculation. The commercial

27 John Edmund West to Sarah Agee West, 20 February 1865, West Family Papers, (VHS); Virginia, vol. 7, p. 607, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, (HGSB); Business Directory of the Principal Southern Cities (New York, 1864).
population, with their liberal capitalist practices habits and bourgeois mien, suffered greatly but ultimately survived the collapse of Old South. Their staying power can be, in part, attributed to the same tenacious spirit they shared with their southern neighbors. On a much more practical level, the business ties that the vast majority of these storekeepers had enjoyed with commercial wholesalers in the North during the antebellum period were critical in their effort to reestablish themselves after the war. That northern and southern merchants held so many views in common also helped facilitate this transition. Perhaps more fundamental, merchant families financially and psychologically recovered in the New South because they had never enjoyed a conventional home in an antebellum South dominated by the planter class.

York: Ducky & Woodman, Co., 1866-67), 421.
EPILOGUE:

MERCHANT CULTURE IN THE SLAVE SOUTH

AND BEYOND

It is sad to think how things are changing. In another generation or two, this beautiful country of ours will have lost its distinctive civilization and become no better than a nation of Yankee shopkeepers.

- Eliza Frances Andrews
  July 27, 1865

... the appearance of a purely trading class will have of itself no revolutionary significance; that its rise will exert a much less fundamental influence on the economic pattern of society than will the appearance of a class of capitalists whose fortunes are intimately linked with industry; and that, while a ruling class, whether of slave-owners or feudal lords, may take to trading or enter into a close alliance with traders, a merchant class... is unlikely to strive to become a dominant class in quite that radical and exclusive sense of which we were speaking a moment ago.

- Maurice Dobb
  Studies in the Development of Capitalism

This study has investigated two related questions in the history of the antebellum and Confederate South. First, what identities and roles did merchants embrace in that particular society? Second, what do the activities and popular images of the merchant class reveal about the nature of southern society as a whole? Answering the first question required piecing together the disparate fragments these overlooked men and women left behind. What emerges from the historical record are the stories of a people who shared a

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relatively cosmopolitan worldview that emphasized a strong commitment to liberal
capitalism, Whig politics, close family ties, a Protestant work ethic, and white supremacy.
These findings suggest areas for further investigation. Additionally, examining merchant
culture and how that culture was perceived by outsiders helps advance our understanding
of the nineteenth-century South. The complex nature of the slave South and its political
economy, the essence of my second question, has been one area in particular where
historians have offered conflicting interpretations.

The image of an agrarian, economically underdeveloped, even anti-capitalist
South, has long been a staple in American thought. John Taylor of Caroline celebrated it,
Hinton Rowan Helper deplored it, and H.L. Mencken jeered it. Historians as well have
long debated the degree to which capitalism penetrated the slave South. During the past
forty years the historian who has had the most to say on this point has been Eugene
Genovese. Beginning with his first study, The Political Economy of Slavery (1965), and
further developed in several other influential works, Genovese has maintained that the
hegemonic class in the antebellum South, the slaveholders, were fundamentally
acommercial, rarely interested in money for its own sake, and participated in a slave
system that proved unprofitable for individual owners and for the southern economy as a
whole. Furthermore, the paternalism that he saw as defining the master-slave relationship
assaulted the slave’s personality while allowing an overlooked measure of cultural
breathing-space for many slaves. Based in part upon the theoretical work of Karl Marx,
Antonio Gramsci, Maurice Dobb, and others, Genovese’s interpretation of the slave
South won over many within the historical profession. Others found his argument less
convincing. A number of historians and economists, Robert Fogel, Stanley Engerman, and James Oakes being among the most vocal, found slaveholders to be profit-driven capitalists much like any businessman in Europe or the northern United States. Over the years numerous academics, many bringing fresh perspectives, have weighed in on this question. The vast number of these studies on the planter class, however, has deflected scholarly attention from those other segments of the white population that also influenced the southern economy.³

Examining the political economy of the slave South through the historical prism of the planter class makes sense. After all, they more than anyone else ruled the “Cotton Kingdom.” Nevertheless as this study has attempted illustrate, the merchant class proved to be critical “retainers” in this imagined realm. Their retail operations, connections to northern wholesale firms, and business savvy helped build a relatively sophisticated, viable southern economy. Most historians have overlooked their cultural and economic influence within the Old South because they have implicitly accepted significant aspects of the Marxist historical paradigm developed by Eugene Genovese. It is on this point that Maurice Dobb is instructive for his work fundamentally influenced Genovese. According to Dobb merchant capital in Europe represented a “parasite on the old order” before manufacturing and commercial interests produced a “mature” capitalism by changing the mode of production thus creating a large class of wage laborers. Building and improving upon this theoretical assumption, Genovese concluded that George Fitzhugh and other defenders of the slave South created a “world in which the fundamental social relations

³For a thorough overview of this debate see, Mark M. Smith, Debating Slavery: Economy and Society in the Antebellum American South, Prepared for the Economic History Society (Cambridge: Cambridge
remained nonbourgeois." Those scholars who have taken exception to this conclusion have responded to Genovese by delineating the bourgeois characteristics of the planter class rather than investigating the element within southern society that most fervently embraced the bourgeois culture of the North and Western Europe, that being merchant class.4

Exploring the historical experience of the merchant class in the slave South suggests the opposing interpretations of the "South-as-non-capitalist" and "South-as-capitalist" schools may be too overdrawn to adequately explain the complex economic and cultural habits of most white southerners. As we have seen, in many ways merchants and their families best exemplified the divide between liberal capitalist and conservative agrarian values because they, more than most of their neighbors, had the ability to participate in an increasingly commercial, bourgeois United States. Given the opportunity after the Civil War, many other southerners, white and black, followed their example.5

Over the course of the late nineteenth century the South, like much of the United States, underwent significant physical and economic changes. Between 1880 and 1910 the number of southerners living in villages and towns increased by 5 million. During this period the number of stores in the South rose dramatically, exceeding 150,000, or 144 stores per county by 1900. Retail commercialism, particularly advertising, loomed ever

5Smith, Debating Slavery, 12-13. The past few years have witnessed a number of thoughtful studies that have attempted reconcile and bridge significant gaps in the historiography of the Old South. See: Mark M. Smith, Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press) and Jeffrey Robert Young, Domesticating Slavery: The Master Class in Georgia and South Carolina, 1670-1837 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
larger in the world of average folk. Storekeepers expanded their mercantile operations to include basic manufacturing, advertising, and retail. For example, Nashville storekeeper George O’Bryan and his brothers established the “Duckhead” brand of clothing, still sold across the South, in 1866. After obtaining stock from his business connections in New York City, Cushing Hassell sold over $10,000 in goods during the summer of 1865. Four years after the war, as Atlanta rose from the ashes, Samuel Richards found his bookstore “overrun with trade” after he utilized expanded advertising and ruthless business methods against his competitors. Reuben Clark built a large estate named “Bell Vue” in suburban Rome, Georgia, after making a small fortune in the dry goods business. While the merchant class expanded its commercial activity they became sizable landlords as well. Such growth obviously changed the South. By the 1890s successful merchants had the fortune to openly boast “I could make money rapidly” and the hubris to assert “I never loved money for its own sake” The extent of such rhetoric and the economic activity that supported it was unprecedented but not qualitatively different from the past.\textsuperscript{6}

Americans who lived to see the war end, along with the historians who followed them, have often described it, with great justification, as a conflict between two competing systems. A conservative, slaveholding, agrarian South fought and lost to a

liberal, free labor, capitalist North. As a bitter Eliza Andrews remarked in the summer of 1865, it would be only a matter of time before her South became a “nation of Yankee shopkeepers.” Clearly this “Georgia Girl” viewed merchant capital as a threat to her beloved South’s traditional culture and economy. One can only speculate as to what Andrews would have made of Dobb’s conclusions on this issue. Important features that had made the South distinctive, such as the control of the planter class and African slavery, had undergone a revolution. Nevertheless, white southerners in 1865 as well as much of the scholarship on the war and the South since then have underestimated the economic continuity that bound the antebellum, Confederate, and post-war South into a commercial whole. The business activity of southern merchants and their families before and during the Civil War did not represent something new nor did it end with Appomattox. Their influence and commercial habits reveal that the South of George Fitzhugh and young Eliza Andrews was on its way to becoming a nation of shopkeepers well before its cause was lost.
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