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White Trash.

**The 400-Year
Untold History
of Class
in America.**

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CHAPTER SIX

Pedigree and Poor White Trash

Bad Blood, Half-Breeds, and Clay-Eaters

Everywhere they are just alike, possess pretty much the same characteristics, the same vernacular, the same boorishness, and the same habits . . . everywhere, Poor White Trash.

—Daniel Hundley, "Poor White Trash" in
Social Relations in Our Southern States (1860)

The sectional crisis that led to America's Civil War dramatically reconfigured the democratic language of class identity. The lowly squatter remained the focus of attention, but his habitat had changed: he was now, singularly, a creature of the slave states. The terminology for poor southern whites changed too. Neither squatter nor cracker was the label of choice anymore. Dirt-poor southerners living on the margins of plantation society became even more repugnant as "sandhillers" and pathetic, self-destructive "clay-eaters." It was at this moment that they acquired the most enduring insult of all: "poor white trash." The southern poor were not just lazy vagrants; now they were odd specimens in a collector's cabinet of curiosities, a diseased breed, and the degenerate spawn of a "notorious race." A new nomenclature placed the lowly where they would become familiar objects of ridicule in the modern age.

Though "white trash" appeared in print as early as 1821, the designation gained widespread popularity in the 1850s. The shift seemed evident in 1845 when a newspaper reported on Andrew Jackson's funeral procession in Washington City. As the poor crowded along the street, it was neither crackers nor squatters lining up to see the last hurrah of Old Hickory. Instead, it was "poor white trash" who pushed the poor colored folk out of the way to get a glimpse of the fallen president.¹

What made the ridiculed breed so distinctive? Its ingrained physical defects. In descriptions of the mid-nineteenth century, ragged, emaciated sandhillers and clay-eaters were clinical subjects, the children prematurely aged and deformed with distended bellies. Observers looked

beyond dirty faces and feet and highlighted the ghostly, yellowish white tinge to the poor white's skin—a color they called “tallow.” Barely acknowledged as members of the human race, these oddities with cotton-white hair and waxy pigmentation were classed with albinos. Highly inbred, they ruined themselves through their dual addiction to alcohol and dirt. In the 1853 account of her travels in the South, Swedish writer Fredrika Bremer remarked that in consuming the “unctuous earth,” clay-eaters were literally eating themselves to death.²

White trash southerners were classified as a “race” that passed on horrific traits, eliminating any possibility of improvement or social mobility. If these *Night of the Living Dead* qualities were not enough, critics charged that poor whites had fallen below African slaves on the scale of humanity. They marked an evolutionary decline, and they foretold a dire future for the Old South. If free whites produced feeble children, how could a robust democracy thrive? If whiteness was not an automatic badge of superiority, a guarantee of the homogeneous population of independent, educable freemen, as Jefferson imagined, then the ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were unobtainable.

Jefferson's language of upward mobility had lost ground in the antebellum South. Jacksonian celebrations of the intrepid backwoodsman faded from view as well. By the 1850s, in the midst of fierce debates over slavery and its expansion into the West, poor whites assumed a symbolic role in sectional arguments. Northerners, especially those who joined the Free Soil Party (1848) and its successor, the Republican Party (1854), declared that poor whites were proof positive of the debilitating effects of slavery on free labor. A slave economy monopolized the soil, while closing off opportunities for nonslaveholding white men to support their families and advance in a free-market economy. Slavery crushed individual ambition, inviting decay and death, and draining vitality from the land and its vulnerable inhabitants. Poor whites were the hapless victims of class tyranny and a failed democratic inheritance. As George Weston wrote in his famous pamphlet *The Poor Whites of the South* (1856), they were “sinking deeper and more hopelessly into barbarism with every succeeding generation.”³

Proslavery southerners took a different ideological turn, defending class station as natural. Conservative southern intellectuals became increasingly comfortable with the notion that biology was class destiny.

In his 1860 *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, Alabamian Daniel Hundley denied slavery's responsibility for the phenomenon of poverty, insisting that poor whites suffered from a corrupt pedigree and cursed lineage. Class was congenital, he believed, and he used the clever analogies of "runtish forefathers" and "consumptive parents" to explain away the plight of impoverished rural whites. For Hundley and many others, it was bloodline that made poor whites a "notorious race." Bad blood and vulgar breeding told the real story of white trash.⁴

Hundley's ideology appealed broadly. Many northerners, even those who opposed slavery, saw white trash southerners as a dangerous breed. No less an antislavery symbol than Harriet Beecher Stowe agreed with the portrait penned by the Harvard-educated future Confederate Hundley. Though she became famous (and infamous) for her bestselling anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Stowe's second work told a different story. In *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), she described poor whites as a degenerate class, prone to crime, immorality, and ignorance. North Carolinian Hinton Rowan Helper published *The Impending Crisis of the South* (1857), which many consider the most important book of the nineteenth century. He sold over 140,000 copies, making his the most popular exposé of slavery's oppression of poor whites. Helper's South was a "cesspool of degradation and ignorance," and poor white trash a dwarfed, duped, and sterile population bound for extinction. In this and other ways, the unambiguous language of class crossed the Mason-Dixon Line and bound political opponents in surprising ways. We are taught that the Civil War was principally a contest about the sustainability of a world predicated on black enslavement. We are not told the whole story, then, because social insecurities and ongoing class tensions preoccupied the politicized population too, and exerted a real and demonstrable impact on the fractured nation—before, during, and after those four concentrated years of unprecedented bloodletting.⁵

Poor whites were not simply a danger to the integrity of the Old South. The unloved class conjured a special fear, that they would spread their unique contagion into the vast domain of the West. In a remarkably short period of time, the United States swelled by 800 million acres. Nearly 250 million acres alone came in 1845 with the Texas annexation. That year, the "dark horse" Democrat James K. Polk captured the presidency, mainly

because he embraced an overtly aggressive course of expansion. Besides welcoming Texas, Polk promised he would provoke hostilities if Great Britain did not concede to America its claim on the Oregon Territory. Polk averted war with Britain, grudgingly accepting partition of Oregon along the forty-ninth parallel, where it stands today.

As if this acquisition of land was insufficient for "Young Hickory," the second president from Tennessee reverted to his mentor's successful rationale: Andrew Jackson had used a border skirmish in Spanish Florida as a pretext to launch a war of conquest; now Polk employed the same method to invade Mexico. When the ink dried on the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Polk had acquired what would become the states of California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, plus portions of Colorado and Wyoming. Democratic president Franklin Pierce added to Polk's booty in 1854, when he secured the so-called Gadsden Purchase, a strip of land tacked on to the southern edge of the New Mexico Territory. This latest investment had been vigorously urged on by the alluring gamble of building a transcontinental railroad to advance southern cotton interests.⁶

Intellectual currents were affected by transcontinentalism, as a new idiom captured the public's imagination. Advancing beyond Jefferson's concept of a nation with no inherited aristocracy, Americans embraced an imperial destiny grounded in biological determinism. The new imperative held that as much as the Anglo-Saxon American's racial stock was of superior characteristics, all that was left to do was outbreed all other races. According to the political arithmetic of 1851, the United States would surpass Europe in importance by 1870, "numbering 100,000,000 of free and energetic men of our own race and blood." Those of "Anglo-Saxon descent, impregnated with its sturdy qualities of heart and brain," would put Great Britain and the United States on a course of global dominance, "as representatives of this advancing stock."⁷

Sheer demographic superiority was reinforced by the second ruling premise of the new thinking: national greatness rested on the laws of bloodlines and hereditary transmission. Learned traits such as a love of liberty, and racial exclusivity, were now assumed to be passed from one generation to the next. In the essay entitled "The Education of the Blood" (1837), one advocate asserted that the knowledge of one generation was

literally retained in the atmosphere, and that the aptitude for learning entered the bloodstream and became "part of our physical constitution and is transmitted to our descendants." Simply taking the savage from his mother in the forest and placing him in civilization would fail to convert him; his "blood must be trained and educated, generation after generation must accumulate receptivity as the Anglo-Saxon race has done." The same author compared the phenomenon to the less attractive inheritance of insanity, passed on through the father's line and "imbibed with our mother's milk." Bloodlines revealed everything: a nation was only as great as its pedigree. America's destiny was determined by large land acquisitions and infused in its people's blood.⁸

This fascination with blood was pervasive in antebellum literature. Southerners were enamored with horse breeding as reflected in the periodical *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*. In 1834, it recorded that "American blood" (i.e., "American thoroughbreds") had achieved a quality of blood as excellent as any in the world. Avid readers knew the pedigree of the most celebrated American horses, learned the long list of sires, while breeders kept and published the records of the "American stud book" to avoid a spurious issue.⁹

Horses and humans were identical in this regard. Scottish physiologist Alexander Walker revived the debate between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson over whether human beings should breed to "improve the race." In *Intermarriage* (1838), he strongly encouraged the practice of choosing spouses according to the same natural laws that applied to horse breeding. American health reformers such as Orson Squire Fowler, in *Hereditary Descent* (1848), recommended the breeding of children with desirable qualities. He emphasized the golden rule of animal breeders: attending to pedigree. No longer measured by wealth or family name, the only pedigree that mattered was long-lived ancestors and a sound physical constitution untainted with hereditary disease or "bad blood." The rallying cry in this new advice literature extended to "hygienic" marriages: the selection of sexual partners with healthy skin, good teeth, well-formed and vigorous bodies. One had to steer clear of the "ill-born," who produced nothing but "poor and feeble stock." Could America's future be derailed through the infusion of bad blood? A would-be wit put it this way: "Noble sires, we fondly think, only to be

surpassed by us, their noble sons. With what reverence we revert to our parent stock! With what pride we talk of blood! With what jealousy we guard against its contamination!"¹⁰

Race and healthful inheritance were part of a single discussion. In 1843, the Alabama surgeon Josiah Nott declared that the mulatto, as a hybrid, was the "offspring of two distinct species—as a mule from the horse and ass." Mulattoes were "faulty stock," a "degenerate, unnatural offspring, doomed by nature to work out its own destruction." They were doomed because, like mules, they were prone to sterility. (It was a ridiculous theory, of course.) He compared mulattoes to consumptive parents, assuming that they had inherited a defective internal organization. Not content to confine his remarks to a mixture of Anglo-Saxon and Negro, he echoed the words of the leading English authority on the subject, Sir William Lawrence, that "the intellectual and moral character of the European is deteriorated by the mixture of black or red blood."¹¹

A similar doctrine of hereditary suicide had already been applied to American Indians. Jefferson's paternalistic projection of acculturated Natives was no longer endorsed by most Americans by the 1840s. A starker and dogmatic ideology took hold, arrogantly nationalistic. Native American tribes, a biologically degraded race, could no longer coexist with their Saxon superiors. In 1844, with a cold nonchalance, one writer captured the mood: "They retire before the axe and plough like the forests they once inhabited. The atmosphere of the white man is their poison. They cannot exist among us." The "red man was doomed to utter and entire extinction." This belief was not new, just more publically accepted. Henry Clay had privately voiced the same conclusion twenty years before as secretary of state.¹²

Both Texas and California loomed large in fashioning the Anglo-Saxon fantasy. Jackson subaltern Sam Houston, the first elected president of Texas, was a charismatic promoter of the region's freedom fighters. White Texans were, in his words, the embodiment of "Anglo-Saxon chivalry." Though the real force behind independence came from a filibuster, a private army of young men directed by their greed for land, Houston saw victory in racial terms. Every Texan had "imbibed the principles from his ancestry," his "kindred in blood," and was spurred on by his "superior intelligence and unsubduable courage." For many others like Houston,

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Texas independence was an epochal achievement; it symbolized the passage of the "scepter" from the Old to the New World, the purest flowering of the Anglo-Saxon race.¹³

Houston was actually a strange choice to carry this banner of racial pride. Between 1829 and 1833, before he became president, he lived with the Cherokees, took two Indian wives, and sat for a portrait in full Indian garb. His presidential successor had few qualms about cleansing Texas of Indians. In 1839, the aptly named Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar, known for his flowery poetry, pursued what he called "an exterminating war" against the Cherokees and Comanches. The Texas national constitution explicitly denied citizenship to those of African or Indian descent. The Texas legislature passed its first antimiscegenation law in 1837. It was similar to laws in force in southern states prohibiting marriage between persons of European blood and those of African ancestry.¹⁴

Texas could lay claim to another dubious "first." In 1849, Dr. Gideon Lincecum introduced a memorial before the Texas legislature hoping to ensure "good breeders." His solution was to castrate criminals in the manner of gelding bulls, thus literally cutting off the bloodline in order to prevent inferior people from reproducing. "Like breeds like" was the basic rule of animal breeding, and degraded stocks of animals were no different than humans. Lincecum offered a folksy analogy to make his case: "When the horse and the mare both trot, the colt seldom paces." His plan was rejected, but he was merely ahead of his time. Future eugenic policies built upon his blueprint for filtering out bad seeds from America's human breeding stock.¹⁵

But as Jefferson and Adams had concluded decades earlier, humans were never very careful in choosing mates. Racial mixing was consequently quite common in Texas. The American settlers who had arrived before independence were encouraged by the Mexican government to marry local Tejano women; men were granted an extra land bonus if they did. White male settlers routinely took Indian and Tejano women as concubines, and mixed-race children populated the nation and later the state. The Mexicans subscribed to a racial class and caste system, but were accustomed to racial mixing. At the top were the descendants of the old Spanish families, those claiming to have pure Castilian blood in their veins; next came the *criollos* (creoles), the locally born colonists of

Spanish heritage, who could possess up to one-eighth Indian blood; the lower castes were composed of mestizos (of mixed Spanish and Indian background), Indians, and Africans. American men who married well-born women were warmly embraced by Mexican society. As a consequence, after 1836, Texans retained the Mexican distinction between noble Castilians and inferior racially mixed classes.¹⁶

By the time of annexation, Anglo-Texans routinely ridiculed the dark-skinned, lower-class Tejanos as a sign of degradation among the native population. Here again, common language underscored the degradation of bloodlines. Increasingly, Mexicans were thrown together with blacks and Indians and contemptuously dismissed by Americans in general as a "mongrel race." "Mongrel" was just another word for "half-breeds" or "mulattoes," those of a "polluted" lineage. In 1844, Pennsylvania senator and future president James Buchanan crudely described an "imbecile and indolent Mexican race," insistent that no Anglo-Saxon should ever be under the political thumb of his inferior. His colleague from New Hampshire, former treasury secretary Levi Woodbury, elevated the Texas Revolution into a racial war of liberation: "Saxon blood had been humiliated, and enslaved to Moors, Indians, and mongrels." Such rhetoric had appeal far beyond the bloviated oratory of politicians. One Texas woman confidently wrote to her mother, "You feel the irresistible necessity that one race must subdue the other," and "they, of the superior race, can easily learn to look upon themselves as men of Destiny."¹⁷

Supporters of Texas annexation dramatized the urgent need to preserve a safely Anglo-Saxon society—continent-wide. Anglo-Texas would protect all Americans from the "semi-barbarous hordes," whose "poisonous compound of blood and color" flowed through the arteries of the mixed races in Mexico. That is what Senator Robert Walker of Mississippi argued in Congress, and reinforced with his widely influential 1844 *Letter on the Annexation of Texas*. Though a withered shell of a man, barely five feet tall and only a hundred pounds, Walker had become the most powerful Democrat in Washington. As ludicrous as it now sounds, he proclaimed that Texas would magically drain free blacks, mulattoes, and other African "mongrels" from the United States, siphoning off the dangerous dregs of slavery's past into South America. It was a racist theory with a familiar ring to it: Benjamin Rush's migratory model of 1798, in which Pennsylvania would filter out the weaker squatters by

dispatching them to the lazy, cracker-filled South. Walker simply added another piece of pseudoscientific evidence to make his case: a high number of free blacks in the northern states suffered from insanity. Here was another example of political arithmetic gone awry, since the southern senator intentionally misused the U.S. census data (as Alabama's Josiah Nott had done) on black inmates in northern asylums. His main point was that free blacks were congenitally weaker in mind and body, and ill-suited for freedom, in contrast to the supposedly healthy and contented slaves in the South who did not have to aspire to liberty.¹⁸

The heavy-handed rhetoric cut both ways. Texas was to be rescued to strengthen America's pedigree, but the admission of too many Mexicans into an expanded Union could undermine America's racial stock. Georgia representative Alexander Hamilton Stephens, future vice president of the Confederacy, asserted that the great majority of Texans were from good stock—the right kind of people, worthy of breeding and mixing with other Americans. He employed a familiar marital metaphor from the book of Genesis to make his point: as heirs of the “Americo-Anglo-Saxon race,” Texans were “from us and of us; bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh.” Opponents of the Mexican-American War used the same race-specific language in an effort to limit the amount of territory to be taken into the United States.¹⁹

Breeding was expected to be an increasingly important weapon in America's imperial arsenal during the one-sided war. Yankee soldiers were expected to settle in occupied territory, marry “beautiful señoritas,” and achieve a new kind of “annexation.” This was what had happened in California, as illustrated by the remarkable career of a young Tennessee officer, Cave Johnson Couets, a close friend of President Polk. He married a daughter of a wealthy Mexican rancher, received a large tract of land from his brother-in-law, and built a grandiose home, which he filled with his ten children. By the 1860s he owned over twenty-three thousand acres and had established himself as one of the ruling patriarchs of the new state.²⁰

Yet California's early history had been as grim as that of Texas. Both of these extensive territories were overrun with runaway debtors, criminal outcasts, rogue gamblers, and ruthless adventurers who thrived in the chaotic atmosphere of western sprawl. The California gold rush attracted not only grizzled gold diggers but also prostitutes, fortune

hunters, and con men selling fraudulent land titles. Among the Texas and California cutthroats who captured the American imagination was the "half-breed Mexican and white." He was known for his "mongrel dandyism," loud jewelry, and flamboyant clothing.²¹

In a certain sense, California reverted to older British colonial patterns. Though it entered the Union as a free state, prohibiting slavery, the legislature soon passed a series of byzantine laws permitting the indentured servitude of Native Americans. Between 1850 and 1854, nearly twenty thousand Indian men, women, and children were exploited as bound servants. It was John Smith's Jamestown all over again, even to its out-of-balance male-to-female ratio. The popular presses back east appealed for white women to move out west. Some of these were earnest requests, while others satirized Californians' desperate pleas for good breeders. A popular 1850 French caricature featured women packed in crates like everyday commodities, ready for export to female-starved "Californie." The *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* prophesied that if prospective wives were shipped off to California at the rate they were needed, the institution of spinsterhood would become extinct in America.²²

The gold rush attracted more than restless white Americans looking for easy riches. Adventurers came from as far away as Australia, Chile, Hawaii, and France. Large numbers of Chinese began arriving in 1852. San Francisco quickly became the most cosmopolitan hub in all of North America. North Carolinian Hinton Rowan Helper was one of the many educated travelers to write on the racial "menagerie"—and utter degeneration of whites—that he discovered in California. His book *Land of Gold* (1855) laid the groundwork for his far more controversial polemic on poor whites, *The Impending Crisis of the South* (1857).²³

Built tall and rail thin, Helper must have stood out among the motley assortment of émigrés. He spent three long years in California and came away hating the state. Despite all the harsh things he had to say about almost everyone he met, he was obliged to admit that most imported women had little choice but prostitution if they wished to survive in the unruly town of San Francisco.²⁴

For Helper, the Digger Indians were "filthy and abominable," living like "carnivorous animals," and far worse than either "niggers" or "dogs." White men in the Golden State killed off Indians as if dispatching

squirrels. The Nicaraguans Helper encountered on his return voyage to North Carolina were "feeble" and "dwarfed"—accordingly, one Kentuckian was the equal of four or five of these "hybrid denizens of the torrid zone." Free blacks likewise lived in "filth and degradation." Helper echoed Walker's racist migration theory: someday blacks would be drawn toward the equator and deposited (like waste) in the "receptacles" of South American countries.²⁵

Helper complained about Californians, drawing on animal analogies whenever possible. Americans, English, French, Chinese, Indians, Negroes, and "half-breeds" could never find common cause over a gold mine any more than a panther, lion, tiger, or bear could in hovering over the body of a fresh-slain deer. The Chinese provoked contempt, for they had the gall to imagine that they were superior to Anglo-Saxons. These "semi-barbarians" shared the fate of the southern Negro: both the "copper of the Pacific" and the "ebony of the Atlantic" were destined to be permanently enslaved.²⁶

As much as he was a passionate proponent of racial purity, Helper imagined himself something of a sociologist-anthropologist too. He compared the gold craze to the cotton South's single-crop economy. The conclusions drawn from his study on California reemerged in his 1857 critique of southern society. From his description of elite Californios (residents of Spanish descent), he found a western version of the cruel and self-satisfied aristocratic southern planter. The Spanish indulgence in the horror show of the bullfight struck Helper as cousin to the southern planter's wielding of his lash. The barbarous matador was akin to the "august knight" planter who lorded over slaves and poor white men. By 1857, poor white trash had taken on the traits of slain bulls, defeated beings, wallowing without hope in a state of "illiteracy and degradation" that was "purposely and fiendishly perpetuated" by callous planters.²⁷

Helper easily transferred his perspective on California miners to the southern poor. The gold diggers were an updated version of squatters: they lived in squalid tents, wearing their hair long and donning scraggly beards. The majority of white men who swarmed into California became "poverty-stricken dupes." They were no different, in this way, from southern poor whites, "so basely duped, so adroitly swindled, and so damnably outraged." For Helper, economies dependent on one source of wealth created extreme class conditions. California mining was worshipped in

the same way that cotton and slavery had become the false deities of the South.²⁸

In *Land of Gold*, Helper actually defended slavery. But less than two years later, in *The Impending Crisis* (1857), he called for its abolition—in the same form that Abraham Lincoln and a slew of purportedly “liberal” politicians preferred: emancipation and colonization. Freed slaves would have to be expelled from the United States. The rise of the Free Soil Party in 1848, and the Republican Party in 1854, did not imply that an antislavery position was devoid of anxiety over pedigree, unnatural mixtures, and degenerate breeds. The first Republican presidential candidate was Colonel John Frémont, a man born and raised in the South who made his reputation crossing the Rockies. Like Helper, he converted to abolition in the interest of protecting the white race.²⁹

Free Soil rhetoric fed the belief that freemen could not coexist with slaves—just as Anglo-Saxons could not live side by side with Indians. Slavery was a dangerous contagion spreading death and decay, and feeding a class/demographic war by “depopulating” the nation of its white inhabitants. As one clever essayist pointed out as early as 1843, poor southern whites were being forced from their homes, and pushed into exile like refugees, because they were unable to compete with those Helper called slaveowning “land-sharks.” It was unfair to divest them of their land and rob them of their posterity’s rightful inheritance. With “haggard features” and “emaciated forms,” the poor southern families that headed west represented a new class of poverty, worse than any seen before. By “banishing her sons,” the essayist of 1843 concluded, slaveowners were “warring against the vital interest of the entire non-slaveholding population in the South.”³⁰

Free Soilers imagined three possible scenarios in eliminating slavery. First, if the West was to remain uncontaminated, slavery had to be kept out of all new territories. Second, by prohibiting the migration of slavery into western territories and states, it seemed plausible to some that the institution would gradually die off in the Old South. Third, as in Helper’s case, ending slavery would require exporting slaves elsewhere, recolonizing them in Africa, the Caribbean islands, or South America.

The Free Soil banner moved to the center of national politics in 1846.

That year, Pennsylvania Democrat David Wilmot introduced a proviso in Congress, which stipulated that all territory gained from the Mexican War must remain free soil—slavery prohibited. The wording was taken verbatim from Jefferson's 1784 draft banning slavery from the Northwest Territory. It went hand in hand with the Homestead Bill, which would have granted all men a free homestead of 160 acres. Freedom—which of course meant freedom for all whites—was only ensured through land ownership and the ability to reap sustenance from the soil. Unlike previous land policies that granted squatters preemption rights (the right to buy land they had staked out and cultivated), the new campaign turned the squatter into an entitled freeman. To be a homesteader was to be of the American people—who collectively owned as their inalienable "birthright" all the public land in the territories. Unfortunately, blocked by southern votes in Congress, the "inalienable homestead" would not become law until 1862, after secession.³¹

Free Soil politics served to underscore a class-inflected theme: southern planters were spreading slavery to the detriment of freemen. Former Kentucky congressman Benjamin Hardin captured the theme of class warfare in 1841, when he claimed that slavery was depopulating his state of the sons of its early pioneers. Recalling Daniel Boone, the most benign symbol of the old pioneer-squatter, he observed that the great man could never have imagined that his descendants were to be "driven into exile and poverty." All across Kentucky, the proud homes of freemen were being replaced by plantations and cattle. On the "turf where once sported freeborn children," "unsightly stocks" of domesticated animals and slaves now existed. Free soil revived the fight between squatters and speculators, and converted squatters into honest freemen of a "landed democracy" who stood proud against a slaveholding oligarchy.³²

Once again, the Free Soil pledge was about saving the white man. As the Republican presidential nominee in 1856, Frémont made the crisis of the honest freeman his central platform. In barring slaveholders from the territories, he would prevent northern white laborers from being reduced to virtual slaves in the West. For nonslaveholders in the South, he offered a kind of emancipation, a promise of real independence denied to them since 1776. Still, the Free Soil doctrine raised questions over whether white trash really could ever be rescued. A Massachusetts orator put it simply: "I am a freeman, and the son of a freeman, born and reared

on free soil." Poor southern whites were born in slave states, reared on unfree soil, and, according to a growing number of public commentators, they suffered from a degenerate pedigree. They did not act like freemen. In Helper's view, their ignorance and docility had made them worse than Russian serfs, when they compliantly voted the "slaveocrats" into office time and again.³³

The new Republicans revived the old critique of Washington and Jefferson: southern agriculture depleted the soil and turned the land into waste. Helper published tables proving the North's greater productivity over the South. George Weston quoted prominent southern men in his influential pamphlet *The Poor Whites of the South* to make the case that the South was doomed to remain economically backward.³⁴

All knew that poor whites were cursed because they were routinely consigned to the worst land: sandy, scrubby pine, and swampy soil. This was how they became known in the mid-nineteenth century as "sandhillers" and "pineys." Forced to the margins, often squatting on land they did not own, they were regularly identified with the decaying soil. The poor whites of "Hard-scratch" were, in the words of one, as "stony, stumpy, and shrubby, as the land they lived on." In a throwback to Buffon, Helper insisted that the "degenerate population" produced men and animals that were "dwarfed into shabby objects." In 1854, Henry David Thoreau took the same theme to its darkest corner of the imagination: the slave South was a rotting corpse, he wrote, and should at best be used to "manure" the colonizing West. Equating poor whites with human detritus, he described a people whose only function was to act as fertilizer for the territories.³⁵

In her novel *Dred*, Harriet Beecher Stowe was no less harsh. Her planters dismissed the "whole race" of poor whites, "this tribe of creatures"; or as one of her characters ruefully declared, "There ought to be hunting parties got up to chase them down, and exterminate 'em, just as we do rats." The author depicted a white trash woman and her children as wounded animals hiding in the forest:

Crouched on a pile of dirty straw, sat a miserable haggard woman, with large, wild eyes, sunken cheeks, disheveled matted hair, and long, lean hands, like bird's claws. At her skinny breast an emaciated

infant was hanging, pushing, with its little skeleton hands, as if to force nourishment which nature no longer gave; and two scared-looking children, with features wasted and pinched blue with famine, were clinging to her gown. The whole group huddled together, drawing as far as possible away from the new comer, looking up with large, frightened eyes, like hunted wild animals.³⁶

Stowe's point was that poor southern whites were already exiles, whose only hope was to be lifted up by others. But would that happen? The contempt she put into the mouths of southern planters was not solely of her invention. Many planters loathed poor whites for their criminal activity, and especially the role they played alongside slaves in the trafficking of stolen goods. In the 1850s, as the poor white population swelled in numbers, a Charleston district grand jury recommended disenfranchising the poor white men who were so "degraded" that they traded alcohol with blacks.³⁷

Suffrage could be stripped away from any freeman by the planter-controlled courts. In the 1840s and 1850s, North Carolina, South Carolina, Louisiana, and Virginia kept poor whites at bay by retaining property qualifications for holding office. Social ostracism was an even greater mark of shame, as planters forced poor whites to use the back door when entering the master's house. Slaves called them "stray goats" when they came begging for food or supplies. Southern reformers were just as disparaging. In a speech before the South Carolina Institute in 1851, industrial advocate and cotton mill owner William Gregg underscored the evolutionary argument in saying that "our poor white people . . . are suffered to while away an existence in a state but one step in advance of the Indian of the forest." Gregg exclusively hired poor whites to work in his factory, hoping to elevate them into a more civilized—though still a menial—station, providing steady work and granting access to schools.³⁸

Few white trash squatters had any access to free soil or to homesteads. They lived instead like scavengers, vagrants, and thieves—at least according to reports by wealthy southerners. But the truth is more complicated. Many worked as tenants and day laborers alongside slaves; during harvesttime, poor men and women worked day and night for paltry wages.

In cities such as Baltimore and New Orleans, some of the most back-breaking labor—working on the railroads, paving streets, dray driving, ditch building—was chiefly performed by underpaid white laborers.³⁹

By the 1850s, poor whites had become a permanent class. As non-slaveholders, they described themselves as “farmers without farms.” Small-scale slaveholders tended to be related to large planters, a reminder of how much pedigree and kinship mattered. Slaveowners had unusual financial instruments that situated them above nonslaveholders: they raised slave children as an investment, as an invaluable source of collateral and credit when they sought to obtain loans.

Whether they stayed put or moved west, poor whites occupied poor land. Nearly half left the Atlantic South for Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, and elsewhere, and still poor whites as a percentage in the original slave states remained fairly constant. The safety-valve theory did not work.⁴⁰

The label “southern white trash” was not, as some would argue, a northern creation alone. While the “po” in “po’ white trash” may have been derived from slave vocabulary, it clearly resonated among southern elites who dismissed the poor (as Jefferson did) as “rubbish.” The unlikely duo of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Daniel Hundley endorsed “good blood” to describe inherited class virtues—“veined and crossed” was the quasi-scientific description that underscored the power of intergenerational resemblance.⁴¹

Alabama’s Hundley was never as famous as the Connecticut-born Stowe, but he was not a typical southerner either. After receiving his law degree from Harvard in 1853, he married his Virginia cousin (in the southern fashion), and was sent to Chicago by his father-in-law to manage the family’s real estate. Before he wrote about poor whites, he witnessed the Panic of 1857, which flooded Chicago with the unemployed. After Lincoln was elected, he returned to Alabama, remaking himself into an ardent defender of secession and the southern way of life.⁴²

Hundley claimed that genuine southern gentlemen were of Cavalier blood, an invented royal lineage superior to ordinary Anglo-Saxons. He even reduced Jefferson to a half-breed of sorts: royal Cavalier on his mother’s side, hearty Anglo-Saxon on his father’s. Hundley’s archetypal southern gentleman was akin to an Arabian horse: six feet tall, strong and athletic, at home hunting and roaming the countryside. In his taxonomy,

the white classes were divided into a descending order of bloodlines: Cavalier gentry sat at the top, Anglo-Saxons filled the middle and yeoman classes, and those he called "southern bullies" and "white trash" sat feebly at the bottom. These lowest forms traced their lineage only to the convicts and indentured servants of Jamestown; they were the befouled heirs of poor vagrants, or those from the back alleys of old London.⁴³

For her part, in the plot of her novel *Dred*, Stowe divided poor southern whites into three classes. Vicious (mean) whites, like Hundley's southern bullies, were licentious beings, wallowing in a continual drunken stupor while dreaming of possessing a slave to order around. Beneath the vicious were the white trash who lived as scared animals, objects of disgust. But the most interesting class in Stowe's book were her half-breeds. The character Miss Sue was one of the Virginia Peytons ("good blood"), whose family "degenerated" as a consequence of losing its wealth. Impetuously, Sue married John Cripps, a poor white, but thanks to pedigree, their children could be saved: they were "pretty" and wore their biological inheritance on their faces, with "none of the pronunciation or manners of wild white children." After Sue's death, they were further improved in New England, attending the best schools. A healthy combination of circumstances enabled them to reassert their mother's superior class lineage.⁴⁴

In popular depictions, poor white trash were, above all, "curious" folks whose habits were as "queer" as "any description of Chinese or Indians." Or, as a New Hampshire schoolteacher observed of clay-eaters in Georgia, the children were prematurely aged. Even at ten years old, "their countenances are stupid and heavy and they often become dropsical and loathsome to sight." Nothing more dramatically signified a dying breed than the decrepitude of wrinkled and withered children.⁴⁵

Commentators repeatedly emphasized the odd skin color: "unnatural complexions" of a "ghastly yellowish white," or as Hundley observed, skin the color of "yellow parchment." There were "cotton-headed or flaxen-headed" children, whose unhealthy whiteness resembled the albino. There were poor white, dirt-eating urchins who bore a "cadaverous, bloodless look"; their hair, identified as "crops," took on the appearance of the soil-depleting cotton that surrounded them. The women were a "wretched specimen of maternity" rather than ideal breeders. Nor did they care properly for their offspring. The "tallow-faced gentry," as one

Kansas newspaper disapprovingly labeled them, routinely stuffed their infants' mouths with clay. The words describing poor white trash had not been quite so pronounced since the seventeenth century.⁴⁶

"Like breeds like" continued to serve as the guiding principle etched into these damning portraits. Diarist Mary Boykin Chesnut, of a wealthy South Carolina family, offered one of the most repellent of midcentury snapshots. A woman from her neighborhood, one Milly Trimlin, was thought a witch by poor whites. "Superstitious hordes" had her bones dug up and removed from consecrated ground three times and scattered elsewhere. Despised by her own kind and living off charity, she was, Chesnut wrote, a "perfect specimen of the Sandhill tacky race." (Tacky was a degenerate breed of horse that lived in the Carolina marshlands.) Trimlin looked the part: "Her skin was yellow and leathery, even the whites of her eyes were bilious in color. She was stumpy, strong, and lean, hard-featured, horny-fisted."⁴⁷

Few were concerned about, much less offered any solution to, their terrible poverty. Regarded as specimens more than cognitive beings, white trash sandhillers and clay-eaters loomed as abnormalities, deformities, a "notorious race" that would persist, generation after generation, unaffected by the inroads being made by social reformers. Only a minority of southerners were like William Gregg, who considered training poor white trash for factory labor. Defenders of slavery had come to argue that the system of unpaid labor was natural and necessary, and actually superior to free labor. In 1845, former governor James Henry Hammond of South Carolina insisted that slavery should be the cornerstone of all relations, and that class subordination was just as natural. Jefferson's "all men are created equal" was, Hammond insisted without shame, a "ridiculously absurd" concept. Now a circle of influential southern intellectuals were openly insisting that freedom was best achieved when people remained within their proper station.⁴⁸

The "intellectual Caucasian" had arrived. In 1850, Professor Nathaniel Beverley Tucker of the College of William and Mary averred that this type possessed traits in the "highest perfection" and was naturally prepared for rule over both blacks and inferior whites. Six years later, the *Richmond Enquirer* restated the increasingly popular view that slavery should not be a matter of complexion but of lineage and habits. Thus it is not surprising that Harriet Beecher Stowe had slaveholders wishing for a

new class of poor whites—a class of white slaves. “Like other nomadic races,” Hundley wrote, white trash should “pass further and further westward and southward, until they eventually become absorbed and lost among the half-civilized mongrels who inhabit the plains of Mexico.” Outward migration was the saving grace for the new elitists.⁴⁹

Pedigree was the centerpiece of Supreme Court chief justice Roger B. Taney’s majority opinion in the *Dred Scott* decision (1857). Though this case assessed whether a slave taken into a free state or federal territory should be set free, its conclusions were far more expansive. Addressing slavery in the territories, the proslavery Marylander dismissed Jefferson’s prohibition of slavery in the Northwest Ordinance as having no constitutional standing. He constructed his own version of the original social contract at the time of the Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitutional Convention: only the free white children of the founding generation were heirs to the original agreement; only pedigree could determine who inherited American citizenship and whose racial lineage warranted entitlement and the designation “freeman.” Taney’s opinion mattered because it literally made pedigree into a constitutional principle. In this controversial decision, Taney demonstrably rejected any notion of democracy and based the right of citizenship on bloodlines and racial stock. The chief justice ruled that the founders’ original intent was to classify members of society in terms of recognizable breeds.⁵⁰

The vagrant, the squatter, had been redrawn, yet qualitatively he/she remained the same: a piece of white trash on the margins of rural society. Observers recognized how the moving mass of undesirables in the constantly expanding West challenged democracy’s central principle. California was a wake-up call. Anxious southerners focused attention not only on their slave society and slave economy, but on the ever-growing numbers of poor whites who made the permanently unequal top-down social order perfectly obvious. Who really spoke of equality among whites anymore? No one of any note. Let us put it plainly: on the path to disunion, the roadside was strewn with white trash.