

The Creation of Virtue:
A Political Strategy in Reconstruction Era North Carolina

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New York Times journalist Frederick Law Olmstead noted in his study of the antebellum American South that only “a very slight value is placed upon female virtue among this [low] class.”¹ In the years preceding the Civil War, those in control of Southern society considered common white women not only to be unchaste but also “deviant and depraved.”² These women were dependent on labor in both the public and private spheres to ensure the survival of their families, placing them outside of the protective boundaries of the household. For poor white women and enslaved black women, the notion of “domestic privacy” that defined the social existence of elite white women was unattainable. Women of the lower class existed outside of “the place that properly belongs to her in the social system,” a place of innocence, submission, and purity.³ Not only did poor white women’s labor alienate them from notions of propriety, but it also created the circumstances for contact with slaves and free blacks who did not take part in proper society.⁴ Such contact was not encouraged as socially acceptable in the antebellum South. However, it was not treated with the lethal rage that became common during the Jim Crow era. Though racial slavery experienced disruption when white mothers bore black children (status followed the mother), the economic value of slave men mitigated the consequences of accusations of sexual violence or misconduct.⁵ In short, the base reputation of common white women prevented feelings of widespread outrage at their liaisons with black men.⁶

¹ Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 508, quoted in Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 200.

² Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins*, 193-194.

³ “The True Woman,” *Valley Virginian*, December 4, 1867. *Valley of the Shadow*, <http://valley.lib.virginia.edu/news/vv1867/va.au.vv.1867.12.04.xml#01>.

⁴ Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*, Gender & American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 46.

⁵ Diane Miller Sommerville, “The Rape Myth in the Old South Reconsidered,” *The Journal of Southern History* 61, no. 3 (August 1995): 491, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2211870>.

⁶ Martha Elizabeth Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Bellevue: Yale University Press, 1997), 5.

Despite their low standing, postbellum, discourse centering on the vulnerability of poor white women and the hyper-sexual, violent nature of black men became commonplace.⁷ With the abolition of chattel slavery, the economic scaffolding of the South, those landed elites suffered significant reductions in profit with the loss of slave labor, exacerbating sentiments of bitterness and underlying white supremacy. African Americans were eager to test the limits of their new freedom, rejecting previous social boundaries and participating actively in the public sphere. Furthermore, during reconstruction, black men asserted themselves as political entities, to the dismay of elite whites. Although poor white women held a humble position in the social hierarchy of the South prior to the Civil War, nevertheless elite white North Carolinian men uncharacteristically chose to elevate common white women to demonize black men as Reconstruction threatened the loss of property, social control, and political power to African Americans.

Section 1: Loss of economic control

Regardless of their racial commonality, elite and poor whites did not share status. In the years preceding the disruption of the Civil War, the landed elite of North Carolina took measures to protect their property and livelihood. Until 1857, the fifty-acre rule effectively disenfranchised roughly half of the white males in the state.⁸ Through their possession of landed property, elite men maintained largely exclusive control over the political sphere, using that monopoly to further their profits through tax reductions for slave property. This fact did not endear landed whites to their economically less-fortunate cousins. When it was time to fight the Civil War for the protection of elite property, poor white men often did so reluctantly. As the fighting crawled on and circumstances on the home front became increasingly desperate, the likelihood that a North

⁷ Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 147.

⁸ David Brown, *North Carolinians in the Era of the Civil War and Reconstruction*, ed. Paul D Escott (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 16-17, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10535716>. (Accessed October 12, 2017)

Carolinian Confederate soldier would desert was directly related to his economic status.⁹ A soldier conscripted into military service was not present to plant fields or gather in a harvest; such an absence could be devastating to his family. According to Vincent Coyler, Superintendent of the Poor in North Carolina, “I had to attend to the suffering of poor whites as well as blacks.”¹⁰ Coyler goes on to detail the high number of white North Carolinian men, women, and children that the Civil War had humbled to the point of requesting aid. Following the war’s conclusion, mutual poverty began to link poor whites with newly-free blacks, threatening the political monopoly of the elite with the rule of the “dirty unwashed scum.”¹¹ Should these lowly populations of North Carolina unify, the white elite would risk losing their exclusive grasp on wealth and power.

While poor whites in North Carolina grew increasingly disillusioned with elite control, African Americans used the years of Reconstruction to assert control over their labor against the directions and best interests of their former owners. After Emancipation, black people were no longer legally bound to their masters; work hours supplied by rural black laborers fell between 28 and 37 percent from the antebellum amount.¹² As ex-slaves rejoiced in their new-found freedom, they actively threw off the standards of labor that had oppressed them under slavery. African Americans demanded higher pay from their masters-turned-employers and spent more time in leisure with family. Furthermore, if a type of labor did not suit them, they no longer did it.¹³ African Americans exited rural areas in mass, seeking reunification with family members dispersed by slavery

⁹ Judkin Browning, “Removing the Mask of Nationality: Unionism, Racism, and Federal Military Occupation in North Carolina, 1862-1865,” *The Journal of Southern History* 71, no. 3 (August 1, 2005): 603, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27648821>.

¹⁰ Vincent Coyler, “Former Superintendent of the Poor in the Department of North Carolina to the Chairman of the American Freedman’s Inquiry Commission,” May 25, 1863, O-328 1863, Letters Received, series 12, Adjutant General’s Office, Record Group 94, National Archives, <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Colyer.htm>.

¹¹ Paul D Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 121.

¹² Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (Cambridge [Eng.] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 46.

¹³ Escott, *Many Excellent People*, 111.

and safety in numbers in urban areas. These actions, perceived as unjustified insubordination, were economically damaging to the white elite.¹⁴ By rejecting previous modes of labor and migrating away from rural areas, ex-slaves significantly slowed agricultural production, shrinking landed white men's profit margins. Besides their indirect diminishment of white capital through labor practices, some African Americans utilized extra-legal means to supplement their incomes. Elite whites feared that ex-slaves would directly relieve them of their property post-war.¹⁵ Still steeped in narratives of white supremacy and the ingrained presence of slavery in Southern societies, landed North Carolinians did not accept their former slaves' actions as reasonable or justifiable reactions to hundreds of years of oppression. They interpreted them as direct threats to their economic profit.

As African Americans flexed economic agency and common whites grew dissatisfied with their position in the Southern social hierarchy, elite whites began to fear that black North Carolinians would rebel and demand economic resources. Combined with increased Northern intervention during military reconstruction, North Carolina's landed population experienced tremors of change from all areas. While the agricultural economy slowed due to lack of labor and property losses counted in the billions of dollars, African American's new standing as free people forced white elites to interact with their ex-slaves in an unprecedented manner.¹⁶ Such interactions disturbed the sensibilities of ex-masters accustomed to absolute authority over their laborers. To mitigate the potentially disastrous effects of Emancipation on their economic interests, North Carolina instituted black codes to reinstate some semblance of order in the chaos. More specifically, the legislation of apprenticeship gave former masters "preference to other persons" in the selection

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Dan T. Carter, *When the War Was over: The Failure of Self-Reconstruction in the South, 1865-1867* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 163-164.

¹⁶ Thavolia Glymph and John J. Kushma, eds., *Essays on the Postbellum Southern Economy*, 1st ed, The Walter Prescott Webb Memorial Lectures 18 (College Station [Tex.]: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 50-51.

of former slaves for labor.¹⁷ Despite their efforts to recreate slavery's economic structure in a post-slavery society, elite North Carolinians were thwarted, at least temporarily, by the Civil Rights Act of 1866. Their land devaluing and federal occupation looming, landed whites feared "confiscation and negro dominion."¹⁸ The more African Americans flexed their economic agency, the more the elite white men tightened their grip on Southern society.

Section 2: Loss of social control

Not only did the demise of chattel slavery alter the Southern economy, but it also began to rearrange the prevailing social hierarchy. No longer was the African American a docile, even amicable, subordinate. Those planter whites who had long assumed the loyalty of their slaves were often shocked to find that the affections that had previously marked the relationships with their property sprang from the coercive nature of slavery. One owner lamented that despite his "mild & humane care & control of the family Negroes," that they had grown increasingly intolerant of their station during the Civil War and rejected his overtures.¹⁹ After emancipation eroded propertied white men's economic position, even those who maintained a measure of paternalistic affection for their slaves before the war did away with such feelings altogether.²⁰ While some ex-masters reacted to their altered social standing with African Americans with bitterness and detachment, most reacted with unbridled anger. Violence and crime erupted across North Carolina and reached such a level that Jonathan Worth, the state's first governor during Reconstruction, pleaded with newspaper editors to refrain from publishing damning stories that would reveal the conditions in the state. W. J. Yates of the *Charlotte Democrat* replied that he would censor his coverage to "maintain the good name

¹⁷ North Carolina General Assembly, *Public Laws of North Carolina*, Public Laws of North Carolina, session of 1866, p. 99; and Senate Ex. Doc. no. 26, 39 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 197. March 10, 1866

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Report of the Commissioner...1867*, 105, quoted in Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (Cambridge [Eng.]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 51.

¹⁹ Carter, *When the War Was Over*, 160-161.

²⁰ Escott, *Excellent People*, 103.

of the state.”²¹ Thus, emancipation violently ended the long-standing social structure that slavery had constructed in North Carolina.

Not willing to relinquish social authority so easily, North Carolina's elite reacted by reaffirming the status of whites as superior and deserving of social jurisdiction. As Sidney Andrews observed in his travels, “The curse of North Carolina [is] that the best men in the Convention stand by unblushingly in their places and repeat one after another... ‘I believe in the white man only. I believe that this country was made for white men only...’”²² Racism in the state was palpable and the notion of ‘best men’ affirmed white supremacy. As Southern society grappled with the unbound presence of African Americans, Southern white men manipulated the concept of ‘best men’ to limit the societal participation of black men. By its standards, the only men worthy of wielding significant influence over Southern society were those who, by action and ideology, exhibited a genteel quality.²³ The North Carolina white elite maneuvered the notions of virtue, morality, and household authority to exclude black men from the social sphere. Based on his ability to maintain control over his household and elevate it through virtuous behavior, the ‘best man’ qualified to be a full member of society. By constructing standards that were both strict and malleable, the white elite of North Carolina created a notion of manhood that excluded black men from social participation.

As they utilized standards of morality and behavior to constrain black men socially, North Carolina’s white elite invited common whites to join them as deserving members of society. In accomplishing this goal, elite whites appealed to the desires of poor whites for higher social standing and superiority, positions previously reserved only for the propertied classes. As status depended on

²¹ W.J. Yates, *W.J. Yates to Gov. Jonathan Worth, January 24, 1866*, Letter, from the University of North Carolina, *Jonathan Worth Papers, 1798-1899*.

²² Sidney Andres, *South Since the War*, 117-118, quoted in Escott, *Many Excellent People*, 100.

²³ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*, *Gender & American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 62.

the management of the household, poor white women became the vessel of the landed appeal. Despite their antebellum status in the social hierarchy as depraved and promiscuous, in the Reconstruction South, common white women's identity was subsumed under the non-sexual identity of their elite contemporaries which required protection from men and functioned as social currency.²⁴ In *The Wilmington Daily Journal*, two editors bemoaned the potential societal consequences of the 1868 North Carolina state constitution. Should it be passed, the editors argued, public schools would coercively educate white children alongside black students, injecting their declaration with anxiety over the supposed threat that young black men posed to their white female counterparts.²⁵ Because the proposed state-funded public schools would serve low-income students, this article served as part of the strategy to drum up support among common white men against the new constitution. In its attempt to reconstruct the social hierarchy of the South, the North Carolina Conservative Party created white men as heads of valuable households.

In addition to appealing to poor whites' desire for improved status, Conservative Party supporters linked black male suffrage with intermarriage and racial mixing in their quest to recreate slavery's social structure. *The Wilmington Daily Journal* shrieked, "IT IS IN THE POOR MAN'S HOUSE THAT THE NEGRO WILL ATTEMPT TO ENFORCE HIS EQUALITY."²⁶ In their new-found concern for the well-being and social standing of common whites, North Carolina's elite pitted common whites against African American men to hold together the structure created by racial slavery. As reported by *The Raleigh Sentinel*, equal political standing for black men would result in the similar social standing of both races, decimating Southern society.²⁷ Accordingly, Conservative

²⁴ Diane Miller Sommerville, "The Rape Myth in the Old South Reconsidered," 488.

²⁵ Karin L. Zipf, "'The Whites Shall Rule the Land or Die': Gender, Race, and Class in North Carolina Reconstruction Politics," *The Journal of Southern History* 65, no. 3 (August 1999): 499-500, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2588132>.

²⁶ "IT IS IN THE POOR MAN'S HOUSE THAT THE NEGRO WILL ATTEMPT TO ENFORCE HIS EQUALITY." *The Wilmington Daily Journal*, February 21 and March 27, 1868.

²⁷ Zipf, "The Whites Shall Rule the Land or Die," 511-512.

mouthpieces treated sexual contact between black men and white women as the pinnacle of social degeneration. Though for a brief period during Radical Reconstruction Republican majorities repealed miscegenation laws, such measures did not last long. According to one North Carolina court in 1869, Reconstruction measures were “not intended to enforce social equality, but only civil and political rights.”²⁸ The court’s statement goes on to extoll the benefits for both races of racial separation. To white elites, the distinction between North Carolina’s black and white populations was necessary to maintain their position of power.

Section 3: Loss of political power

Though the changes to North Carolina’s economy and society alarmed landed whites, the entrance of African Americans into the political sphere provoked the most animated response from the ruling class. With Emancipation, elite North Carolinians did not rejoice with their ex-slaves. Landed whites men’s position as recognized political agents enabled their concentrated control over the economy and the private sphere; such a position was under threat. Under the Reconstruction Acts of 1867, participation in the Confederate rebellion was a means for disenfranchisement.²⁹ President Andrew Johnson’s pardon of ex-Confederates explicitly excluded those with high military, civil, or diplomatic rank.³⁰ As many landed whites were active participants in the Confederacy, this act chipped away at the elite monopoly that had traditionally controlled North Carolina politics. With the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments in quick succession from 1865 to 1870, North Carolina became home to a significant population of legally franchised

²⁸ Peter Bardaglio, “‘Shameful Matches’: The Regulation of Interracial Sex and Marriage in the South before 1900.,” in *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, ed. Martha Elizabeth Hodes (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 123.

²⁹ U.S. Congress, “Section 5.,” First Reconstruction Act, 1867. <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-civilwar/4821> (accessed October 25, 2017).

³⁰ President Andrew Johnson, “A Proclamation,” May 25, 1865, *America’s Reconstruction: People and Politics After the Civil War*, University of Houston Digital History, http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/exhibits/reconstruction/section4/section4_pardon1b.html (accessed October 23, 2017).

black men, a substantial political force.³¹ In Greenville County alone, African Americans made up fifty percent of the total population.³² The western counties did not possess such a significant ex-slave population. However, the North Carolina African American population was sizable enough to pose a threat to white elite political reign. Moreover, with the rise of the Republican Party and its policies of Radical Reconstruction, common whites began to unify with newly enfranchised blacks to work for their common interests.³³ Should this new coalition succeed in gaining the political majority, elite whites would risk losing their ability to influence legislation to their benefit.

Despite the fact that African American men's political power was relatively circumscribed postwar, the white elite lamented their invasion of North Carolina politics. Passed in 1866 before the control of federal military reconstruction, the North Carolina General Assembly's black codes mandated that African Americans could not complete transactions involving large sums of money without a white witness. The codes also mandated that blacks could not testify in court against whites without their explicit consent. Among other legal limitations, the black codes legislated that a black man convicted of "assault with an attempt to commit rape upon the body of a white female, shall suffer death."³⁴ Democrats also celebrated the passage of a resolution against intermarriage, a defeat against "the loathsome doctrine of negro equality."³⁵ Despite myriad limitations, African Americans relentlessly sought to have a seat at the political table. According to the *North Carolina Times*, they celebrated their new-found freedom "in a very appropriate and successful manner" with

³¹ "Registration Scenes," *Harper's Weekly*, September 28, 1867, *Civil War Era NC*, <https://cwnc.omeka.chass.ncsu.edu/items/show/171>, (accessed October 26, 2017).

³² Laura F. Edwards, "Sexual Violence, Gender, Reconstruction, and the Extension of Patriarchy in Granville County, North Carolina," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 68, no. 3 (19910701): 241-243.

³³ Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900*, 118-119.

³⁴ North Carolina General Assembly, *Public Laws of North Carolina*, Public Laws of North Carolina, session of 1866, p. 99; and Senate Ex. Doc. no. 26, 39 Cong., 1 Sess., p. 197. March 10, 1866

³⁵ Alfred L. Price and David Fulton, "The 'Constitutional Convention,' (So Called)," *Wilmington Journal*, March 27, 1868.

“shining faces.”³⁶ North Carolina’s black population worked toward civil rights, demanded fair wages and education, and called for the abolishment of laws that encoded discrimination.³⁷ Elite whites saw the entrance of African Americans into politics as a direct threat to their authority over society and their dependents: white women.

With the recent advent of black political activity, the presidential election and state constitutional convention of 1868 provided the Conservative party and its progeny, the Democrats, and opportunity to erupt in their disgust for Republican political control.³⁸ When the Republican-controlled convention proposed the recitation of an oath that reaffirmed the authority of the Constitution, including the Reconstruction amendments, as a requirement for suffrage, Democrats balked. By their estimation, this proposal discriminated against Democrats by forcing them to renounce their repulsion for federal control or risk disenfranchisement. The Democratic *Wilmington Journal* cried “It is in perfect keeping with the character of your [Republican] party to recommend low and vile men to the exclusion of some of the best and purest men in North Carolina.”³⁹ In their quest to combat their political advancement of black men, Democrats hurled every accusation imaginable at black men. According to Democrats, black men were mentally feeble, animalistic, easily-manipulated, and, most importantly, sexually predatory towards white women.⁴⁰

As elite whites strategized against black political power, accusations of sexual violence by black men increased. While both victims of assault and news media only sparsely reported rape cases in the years before the Civil War, articles with such vulgar titles as “A Young Lady Abducted and

³⁶ Joy, George Mills, “North Carolina Times: articles on the celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation, 1864.,” *North Carolina Times*, January 16, 1864. *North Carolina Digital Collections*, <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15012coll8/id/13352/rec/15>

³⁷ Escott, *Many Excellent People*, 106.

³⁸ Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 21.

³⁹ Alfred L. Price and David Fulton, “The ‘Constitutional Convention,’ (So Called),” *Wilmington Journal*, March 20, 1868.

⁴⁰ Zipf, “The Whites Shall Rule the Land or Die.”

Her Ravisher Skinned Alive” began to crop up in Southern newspapers during Reconstruction.⁴¹ Predictably, the “ravisher” in this article was an African American man. Through their demonization of black men, Democrats linked sexual violence to the Republican Party, a proponent of civil rights and equal suffrage. As Rebecca Edwards succinctly argues, “If enfranchised black men were guilty of rape, Republican officials were the surrogate rapists.”⁴² Republicans fired back, using Democrats own hysteria over black male sexuality and political power to portray Democrats as ignorant, corrupt, and undemocratic.⁴³ Their counterattack, however, did not halt Democrat’s chosen strategy. In the case of Sarah Daniel and the Cooper brothers, Conservative governor Jonathan Worth used the alleged rape of a white woman by black men to simultaneously endear poor white men, assert control over the African American population, and decry the horrors of federal occupation and Republican control.⁴⁴ Thus, accusations of black-on-white sexual violence became the preferred political weapon in the white supremacist arsenal.

The North Carolina white elite reacted to the political threat of emancipation and Republicanism with sexually-loaded accusations of depravity. With their economic gains diminished and their social control wavering, landed white men strove to steer their impoverished counterparts away from political unification with African Americans and toward a policy of universal white supremacy. The chosen strategy in this endeavor was the demonization of black men contrasted with the societal purification of poor white women. As Reconstruction dragged on, Republicans lost their majority in North Carolina and other ex-Confederate states. Furthermore, the void left by the

⁴¹ “A Young Lady Abducted and Her Ravisher Skinned Alive,” *Staunton Spectator*, October 15, 1867. *Valley of the Shadow*, <http://valley.lib.virginia.edu/news/ss1867/va.au.ss.1867.10.15.xml#04>

⁴² Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery*, 22.

⁴³ Thomas Nast, “This is a White Man’s Government,” September 3, 1868, and “Would You Marry Your Daughter to a Nigger,” July 11, 1868, *Harper’s Weekly*, <http://elections.harpweek.com/1868/cartoons-1868f.asp?UniqueID=1&Year=1868>, (accessed October 25, 2017).

⁴⁴ Laura F. Edwards, “The Disappearance of Susan Daniel and Henderson Cooper: Gender and Narratives of Political Conflict in the Reconstruction-Era U.S. South,” *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 2 (1996): 370-317, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178419>.

federal government with the termination of military reconstruction preceded the escalation of racial violence and the rise of militant white supremacist groups.⁴⁵ As the 19th century progressed, the South became more volatile and public discourse slandering black men as rapists only increased, accompanied by extra-legal execution. In 1892, lynching reached its lethal peak, with the alleged rape of white women as a prevalent justification.⁴⁶ This tragic spike in allegations and murders did not reflect an increase in sexual crime perpetrated by black men, but rather the racist hysteria of whites and their attempt to assert white supremacy. Though the sexually-charged politics of the North Carolina elite served a specific and temporally-defined purpose, in the years following Reconstruction this strategy expanded and entrenched racial violence in the United States.

⁴⁵ Wells, Ida B. "The New Cry," *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*. Ebook. Salt Lake City: The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, 1894. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14975/14975-h/14975-h.htm> (accessed October 14, 2017).

⁴⁶ Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 178.

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