

“1619” and the myth of white unity under slavery

Book review: *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* by Keri Leigh Merritt

Eric London
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In August, the *New York Times* launched the “1619” initiative, marking the 400th anniversary of the disembarkation of the first African slaves in what was to become the United States.

The historical premise of the *Times* campaign is that “white people,” as a race, benefited from slavery economically, politically, and socially, and that even today, white workers—an irredeemably racist “basket of deplorables,” in Hillary Clinton’s words—continue to benefit from the privileges invented during slavery. The unstated agenda is to sow racial divisions among workers and to forestall the growing movement of the working class.

In the series’ lead article, Nikole Hannah-Jones cites a group of historians to claim that “white Americans, whether they engaged in slavery or not, ‘had a considerable psychological as well as economic investment in the doctrine of black inferiority.’” In the same issue, Matthew Desmond writes that the slave system “allowed [white workers] to roam freely and feel a sense of entitlement.”

In reality, the “facts” upon which the *Times* bases its claim that slavery produced “white privilege” vary from half-truth to outright falsehood. The book *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge Press—2017) by Keri Leigh Merritt, does much to set the record straight.

Merritt is an independent scholar, and her distance from academia is a strength. A Southerner from a self-described poor and right-wing family, she has explained that her goal is to uncover the historical roots of social backwardness and political confusion in the South.

The vast majority of whites did not derive any social, political or economic benefits from the system of slavery. On the contrary, Merritt explains:

Under capitalism, labor power was the commodity of the laborer. Conversely, under feudalism, as well as under slavery, the ruling classes owned, either completely or partially, the labor power of the working classes. The system was predicated on elites coercing individuals to work, often by violent means. In the slave South, where laborers were in competition with brutalized, enslaved labor, the laborers, whether legally free or not, had little to no control over their labor power. The profitability and profusion of plantation slave labor consistently reduced the demand for free workers, lowered their wages, and rendered their bargaining power ineffective, indeed generally (except in the case of specialized skills) worthless. In essence, they were not truly “free” laborers, especially when they could be arrested and forced to labor for the

state or for individuals.

A solely racial view of slavery in the American South is insufficient to grasp the thoroughly reactionary character of the social order which arose on the rotten foundations of human bondage. In the first half of the 19th century, an oligarchy basing itself on slavery and aristocratic privilege enforced its rule through vigilante terror and police-state dictatorship aimed at the whole non-slaveholding population, black and white alike.

This slaveholding class, enriching itself through trade with the ruling classes of aristocratic Europe, threatened to destroy the egalitarian and democratic principles of the American Revolution. Secession, which the oligarchy carried out in the face of broad opposition among poor whites, was a counterrevolutionary rebellion from above against the principle enshrined in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal.”

The racist school of historical falsification

Merritt begins by attacking the “myth” that whites were united in defense of slavery, a lie first created by the political representatives of the slavocracy, then revived by Jim Crow-era historians, and today pushed forward by the *Times*.

She takes up the Tennessee Agrarians school of Confederate apologists, including historian Frank Lawrence Owsley, writing, “The antebellum South, Owsley incorrectly asserted, was undoubtedly democratic in nature. Slavery, he claimed, was actually beneficial for all whites, regardless of economic class and social status.” Instead, Merritt’s research led her to conclude, “One of the biggest and most persistent falsities of southern history is revealed: the myth of white unity over slavery.”

The antebellum South was defined by extreme inequality not only between slaveholders and their human “property,” but among whites. In 1850, Merritt notes, 1,000 cotton-state families received \$50 million per year in income, as compared to \$60 million per year for the remaining 66,000 families. She also cites a study of Louisiana which found 43 percent of whites lived in urban areas in 1860, and that of these city dwellers 80 percent were semi-skilled or unskilled workers. Meanwhile, half of rural white families were landless, and half of those who owned land tilled less than 50 acres. Poor whites comprised the vast majority of

the free population, Merritt concludes, noting “only about 14 percent of the state’s whites could be classified as middle class.”

In 1860, 56 percent of personal wealth of the United States was concentrated in the South. In that region’s cotton belt, wealth in slaves accounted for 60 percent of all wealth, greater even than the value of the land itself. As the price of slaves rose in the final decade before the Civil War from \$82,000 in 1850 to \$120,000 in 1860 (in 2011 dollars), the concentration of slave ownership at the top of Southern society increased dramatically. Slave ownership was far beyond the economic reach of even most landowning whites.

The poorer whites who did own land were forced into unproductive terrain. As the abolitionist *National Era* put it, “Slavery, with its biting social ills, beats them away from the richer soil, and keeps them hopelessly down and debased on the barren hills.” Merritt writes that one-third of whites in the South “had nothing more than clothing and small sums of petty cash on the eve of secession.”

“Slave labor eliminated job possibilities, depressed wages where jobs existed, and forced white wage workers into the most degraded and dangerous work deemed ‘too hazardous for Negro property,’” Merritt explains. Whenever whites attempted to strike, “they constantly were made aware of the thousands of readily available black strikebreakers waiting to take their places should they ask for better wages or request safer working conditions.”

Merritt quotes Richard Morris, historian of the American Revolution and onetime president of the American Historical Association, who wrote: “a significant segment of the southern labor force of both races operated under varying degrees of compulsion, legal or economic, in a twilight zone of bondage...[they] dwelt in a shadowland enjoying a status neither fully slave nor entirely free.”

Living conditions for poor whites and slaves in the antebellum South

Despite their legal freedom, Merritt writes, “This grave economic stratification between masters and non-masters meant that in material terms, the poorest southern whites lived somewhat similarly to slaves.”

Whites lived in “one room shacks made of logs and mud,” normally without windows. They had difficulty traveling from place to place, often in carts pulled by dogs. Without shoes, hookworm was a constant concern, and starvation was a threat. “Not having enough to eat was a constant worry for a sizable percentage of the white population,” Merritt writes, citing one slave who said, “We had more to eat than they did.” Of their white neighbors, the slave wrote, “They were sorry folk.”

Merritt cites historian Avery Craven, who “identified several similarities between the material lives of poor whites and slaves. Their cabins differed ‘little in size or comfort,’ he wrote, as both were constructed from chinked logs and generally had only one room. Furthermore, these two underclasses ‘dressed in homespuns, [and] went barefoot in season... The women of both classes toiled in the fields or carried the burden of other manual labor and the children of both early reached the age of industrial accountability.’ Even the food they prepared and ate, Craven concluded, ‘was strikingly similar.’”

White men often spent months apart from their families as they walked through the country looking for work. “In contrast to the low divorce rates of the upper class,” Merritt writes, “poor whites’ relationships were similar to slaves in some respects” due to this lack of economic stability.

Alcoholism and illiteracy were widespread. The southern antislavery advocate Hinton Helper explained that among Southern whites, “Thousands ... die at an advanced age, as ignorant of the common alphabet as if it had never been invented.” While a widespread system of

“common school” public education had taken root in the North, there were hardly any schools in the antebellum South. Curtailing access to public education was a deliberate measure to socially control whites who were natural opponents of slavery. As Merritt explains:

Whether the means involved disenfranchising poor whites, keeping them uneducated and illiterate, heavily policing them and monitoring their behaviors, or simply leaving them to wallow in cyclical poverty, the ends were always the same: the South’s master class continued to lord over the region, attempting to control an increasingly unwieldy hierarchy. Slaveholders’ worst fears were coming to pass as the ranks of disaffected poor whites grew. As one editorial out of South Carolina contended, the biggest danger to southern society was neither northern abolitionists nor black slaves. Instead, the owners of flesh needed to concern themselves with the masterless men and women in their own neighborhoods—this “servile class of mechanics and laborers, unfit for self-government, and yet clothed with the attributes and powers of citizens.”

The dictatorship of the slave oligarchy

To maintain order under conditions of extreme social inequality, the Southern oligarchs subjected not only slaves, but also poor whites to physical coercion, paramilitary terror and police surveillance. The society they ruled was an aristocratic order in which the Constitution was a dead letter.

An entire legal code was established to police non-slaveholding whites. The South’s first police forces and prison systems were established “to impose social and racial conformity,” with police “jailing individuals for the most benign behavioral infractions. Indeed, the rise of professional law enforcement changed the entire system of criminal justice.” In the antebellum it was whites who filled the new jails, since black property was too valuable to remove from labor through incarceration. White convicts were subjected to brutal acts of public whipping and even water torture. Slaveowners illegalized trade between poor whites and slaves and arrested whites suspected of befriending or engaging in sexual relationships with slaves.

Slaveowners built vigilante groups, especially following the devastating Panic of 1837, “in an effort to force the population into acquiescence.” They were not, as the *Times* claims, comprised merely of “white people,” but rather of wealthy white people. Merritt explains that these vigilante groups were:

[E]ssentially bands of slave- and property-holders who monitored both the behaviors and beliefs of less affluent whites. [Historian Charles] Bolton described the targeted whites as those “whose poverty or indolence made them undesirable.” Slaveless whites increasingly found themselves inhabiting a world in which they had to censor every utterance and defend every action.

Under the direction of this oligarchic terror:

[L]ocal mobs lynching and killing poorer whites abounded in the late antebellum period. The majority of those brutalized were

accused of abolitionism of some sort—whether they were distributing reading materials, talking to other non-slaveholders about worker’s rights, or simply seemed too friendly with African Americans.

This contradicts the *Times*’ blanket indictment that “slave patrols throughout the nation were created by white people who were fearful of rebellion,” and showed “our nation’s unflinching willingness to use violence on nonwhite people.”

Far from gaining political privilege as a result of slavery, poor whites’ supposed rights existed at the mercy of the masters. They could be jailed without charge, arrested for “vagrancy,” and even executed for committing property crimes like burglary and forgery. As Merritt notes, “for all intents and purposes, due process was nullified.”

Tellingly, poor whites were barred from reading abolitionist literature, and could be executed for engaging in political speech threatening to the great plantation owners. Poor whites were effectively barred from voting as they desired, casting ballots *viva voce* as the slave-owning election monitors who controlled their employment prospects and store credit looked on.

Poor whites were sometimes auctioned off into indentured servitude for defaulting on loans. White children—including young Abraham Lincoln and his presidential successor, Andrew Johnson—were also “bound out as indentures” either by their impoverished parents or where a judge found the parents “immoral.”

Merritt explains that “binding out was an arrangement not unlike slavery in many respects,” and in the years preceding secession, a section of slave owners even advocated the enslavement of whites as well as the re-enslavement of freed blacks. Some dark-skinned whites were captured and enslaved. Those who found themselves in this fate, by the 1850s had the burden to prove they were not black.

The emergence of white opposition to slavery in the 1850s

Outcast from the profits of the slave system and subject to the dictatorial conditions of the oligarchic government, slaveless whites developed a profound sense of their class position, Merritt explains—as did the slaveowners themselves.

She references the private diaries and public statements of many slaveowners, including “Christopher Memminger, a wealthy Charlestonian slaveholder, [who] argued that white workers—especially foreign ones—were ‘the only party from which danger to our institutions is to be apprehended among us.’ Poor white laborers, who had to compete with unpaid and underpaid black laborers, ‘would soon raise the hue and cry against the Negro, and be hot abolitionists—and every one of those men would have a vote.’”

Further, “By the middle of the 1850s, the cracks that had always been present within the façade of white racial solidarity finally turned into deep fissures. When the Panic of 1857 hit and wealth inequality continued to deepen, slaveholders realized that they had to be proactive in the defense of their property and power.”

As inequality grew and as the South slowly industrialized in the 1850s (by 1860, 10.5 percent of white men in Alabama worked in manufacturing), emerging trade union associations began holding meetings and publishing statements demanding abolition of slavery.

Merritt quotes a group of workers in Lexington, Kentucky, who resolved that slavery “degraded labor, enervated industry, interfered with the occupations of free laborers, created a gulf between the rich and the poor,

deprived the working classes of education, and tended to drive them out of the state.” The white workers concluded that “public and private right ” required slavery’s “ultimate extinction.”

When the seceding states held conventions and voted on disunion, Merritt explains that white workers and poor farmers overwhelmingly voted against. This contradicts the *Times*’ presentation of poor whites as actively supporting or silently acquiescing to slavery—“they generally accepted their lot,” in the condescending phrase of Matthew Desmond. In fact, secession was rammed through in fraudulent elections by slaveowners in a desperate attempt to save their slave system both from Northern Republicans and from the prospects of disunion from within. A war to establish slavery in the west (and likely in the Caribbean and Latin America) was needed to prop up a slave order that was crumbling from within. The slaveowners carried out their rebellion in order to preempt this movement from below.

Merritt writes: “Regardless of their professions, one thing was clear. Secession, the Confederacy, and Civil War were all overwhelmingly the creations of one small class of Americans: wealthy southern slaveholders.”

The lack of support among poor whites for the Confederate war effort and the active opposition from below was a major factor in the South’s military collapse in 1864 and 1865, as explained by David Williams in *Bitterly Divided: The South’s Inner Civil War* and Victoria Bynum in *Free State of Jones*, upon which the 2016 film by the same title was based.

Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the myth of “white privilege”

Merritt’s work disproves the assertions by the *Times* that slavery was a popular institution among all white southerners and that all whites obtained special privileges under slavery. These arguments, based on distortions, lies, and simply leaving aside contradictory evidence, amount to a rehashing of the segregationist myth of the solid South.

Yet Merritt ultimately asserts in her book’s conclusion that with the end of Reconstruction, poor whites obtained a privileged position in Southern society relative to poor blacks. She writes:

Poor whites began as pariahs in the antebellum era because they had no real place in the slave system and therefore actually threatened it. With the emancipation of African Americans, poor whites were finally brought into the system of white privilege, albeit at the bottom. This inclusion nonetheless placed them higher on the southern social hierarchy than freedmen, and they gained certain legal, political, and social advantages solely based upon race.

The historian cannot be taken to task for ending her study with the conclusion of the Civil War. Class and race relations in the South after the Civil War comprise a vast and complicated subject. However, having demonstrated, contrary to the morality tale of the *Times*’ Project 1619, that poor whites in the antebellum South did not benefit from slavery, Merritt baldly asserts that after the Civil War, they did. This is an unfortunate conclusion that not only vitiates against her previous analysis. It is false and necessitates a reply.

The Civil War and its major achievements—the abolition of slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment, etc.—represented a dramatic step forward for all workers. Furthermore, for a brief moment during the period of “Radical

Reconstruction” immediately following the Civil War, there was a dramatic improvement in the political position of both the freed slaves and poor whites, with both groups flocking to the Republican Party.

However, the Republican Party was a capitalist party. Having carried out the “second American Revolution,” which included the largest seizure of private property in world history prior to the Russian Revolution, it proved to be far more assertive in representing the interests of private property and the railroad corporations than in defending the interests and rights of the freed slaves. Over the course of the 1870s, the radical Reconstruction policies were whittled away, and abandoned altogether in the “Great Compromise” between the southern Democrats and northern Republicans in the disputed Hayes-Tilden election of 1876.

In the reaction that followed, the former slave-owning class, deprived of their human property but not of their land, continued to view forced racial division as necessary for maintaining social order and defending extreme levels of social inequality. The political mechanism through which this was achieved was, as before, the Democratic Party, this time overseeing a political monopoly based on Jim Crow segregation—whose aim was the total division of black workers from white.

Merritt concludes that, while poor whites “actually threatened” the status quo under slavery, they did not threaten post-slavery property relations because they “had a place” in post-Reconstruction Southern segregation due to their “privilege” in contrast to blacks. She does not explain what this alleged “privilege” consisted of, but it was nowhere to be found for the millions of white southerners who were subsumed, alongside blacks, in the crop-lien system of agriculture known as sharecropping.

Neither did poor southern whites benefit politically from the extreme oppression of blacks. Beginning in the 1890s, the Southern elite imposed a series of restrictions on the vote that virtually barred blacks from participating in elections, and drastically reduced the involvement of whites, among them poll taxes (fees levied at the voting booth), literacy tests, and the “grandfather clause” which required voters to demonstrate that their grandfathers had been voting citizens.

As for social improvements, the South remained the most backward region of the country, with massive poverty for both races, poor infrastructure, low levels of literacy, and short life expectancies. Poor blacks and whites remained in objective terms exploited by the white Southern ruling class and, behind it, the railroad companies, the banks and the corporations in the North and Northeast. As historians like C. Vann Woodward and Eric Foner have established, postwar Southern racism was fanned from above by a Southern ruling class that was terrified over the prospect that poor whites and blacks would act upon their common interests.

None of this lessens the horrific reality that thousands of blacks were lynched, tens of thousands more thrown in jail, and blacks as an entire segment of Southern society were forced into legal and social second-class citizenship in what was, in all but name, a racial caste system. Skin color made a qualitative difference in the life of a Southern person living under Jim Crow.

But segregation did not provide poor whites with positive political or social benefits that would lead to an improvement of their living standards. In economic and political terms, racial segregation drove wages down for all races, it reduced social spending on schools, hospitals and other social services, and the backward political and cultural climate that dominated the South well into the mid-20th century has created conditions for the hyper-exploitation of all white and black workers that remains today.

In a larger sense, regardless of what an individual poor white person thought (and racism was not the sole property of the rich), the segregationist system did not provide the majority of whites with “privilege” because segregation ultimately blocked the development of a

united movement from below, which was the only thing that could have improved the living conditions of all Southern workers and farmers.

The political and material roots of racist ideology

As Woodward showed in his landmark *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, segregation, and all that it entailed, took decades to implement. It was not until the first years of the 20th century that it reached its full dimensions—the near-total segregation of public space, the stamping out of democratic rights, and the ready use of violent “southern justice” and the lynch mob to prop it all up. And it came in direct response to a political movement of poor whites and blacks that posed an existential threat to slavocracy’s heirs in “the New South.”

The post-Reconstruction development of the class struggle across the US, including in the South, gave impetus to a powerful tendency among black and white workers and poor farmers toward unity against the corporations. It was this objective process which organically undercut the racial politics of the Southern Democratic elites. Faced with the threat posed by the Farmers Alliances and Populist movements of the post-Reconstruction period, rich whites, aided by the strikebreakers in the Ku Klux Klan, asserted that efforts to mobilize small farmers and workers against the big landowners and the corporations (especially in unity with black sharecroppers) threatened the system of “white supremacy.”

Woodward describes how thousands of poor white and black farmers filled the small towns of Georgia in the early 1890s, traveling great distances to hear Congressman Tom Watson declare that the People’s Party opposed racism and would “make lynch law odious to the people.” Woodward wrote of southern Populism at its apex:

Under Watson’s tutelage the Southern white masses were beginning to learn to regard the Negro as a political ally bound to them by economic ties and a common destiny, rather than as a slender prop to injured self-esteem in the shape of ‘White Supremacy.’ Here was a foundation of political realism upon which some more enduring structure of economic democracy might be constructed. Never before or since have the two races in the South come so close together as they did during the Populist struggles.

The catastrophic breakup of this burgeoning alliance was in large part the product of widespread farmer dissatisfaction with the People’s Party’s rotten “fusion” with the Democratic Party, both in the 1894 midterm elections and in 1896 with the party’s nomination of Nebraskan agrarian Democrat William Jennings Bryan as its presidential candidate, who had previously secured the nomination of the Democratic Party. This event, hypocritically facilitated by Watson himself, deflated the Populist wave and opened up a period of bitter reaction across the country. This should serve as a historical lesson for those who argue today that “left” causes will be aided by working within the confines of the Democratic Party.

In the South, the Democratic Party capitalized on the mood of defeat to drastically expand Jim Crow segregation, making a breakthrough in their decades-long effort to divide poor whites and blacks against one another. In May 1896, when the plan for Bryan’s nomination was far advanced, the Supreme Court gave pseudo-legal cover to the doctrine of “separate but equal” in its infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision.

The historian Robert Wiebe wrote that “the movement for Jim Crow revived after 1896.” Referencing the decline of Populism, Wiebe adds:

The viciousness with which Southern farmers and townsmen attacked the Negro after 1896 told a story of the community's failure ... Along with that lingering suspicion of immigrants came an increasingly elaborate race theory, designed to cover all peoples, and the spread of a cold, formalized anti-Semitism. Throughout America a residual fear had shrunk the outer limits of optimism.

Tom Watson, as Woodward explains, became a vicious racist, rejoining the Democratic Party and notoriously inflaming public opinion against Jewish factory manager Leo Frank when the latter was falsely charged with the 1913 murder of a 13-year-old white girl, Mary Phagan, in Atlanta. Watson called Frank a "libertine Jew" and demanded his death in his newspaper, the *Jeffersonian*, contradicting his earlier statements by writing, "Lynch law is a good sign; it shows that justice lives among the people." A mob killed Frank on August 17, 1915.

The political degeneration expressed by Watson's transformation was not inevitable or predestined by intrinsic racism or popular Southern "bitterness" over the defeat of the Confederacy in the Civil War. That position has far more in common with the Lost Cause historians than the *New York Times*' "1619" promoters would care to admit. A different trend was expressed, for example, in the Alabama-born anarchist editor Albert Parsons, who had served as a young man in the Confederate Army and would be hanged in 1887 in Illinois after the Haymarket provocation. Parsons wrote of his break with the Confederacy:

I have made some enemies. My enemies in the southern states consisted of those who oppressed the black slave. My enemies in the north are among those who would perpetuate the slavery of the wage workers.

Merritt cites Karl Marx's statement in Volume 1 of *Capital* that "Labor in white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in black skin. But out of the death of slavery a new, rejuvenated life sprouted immediately."

The abolition of slavery triggered a massive growth of manufacturing, in particular in the Northern cities, and opened up the prospect for great revolutionary struggles of the working class, which rapidly manifested in the explosive railroad rebellion of 1877. That strike witnessed powerful united demonstrations of white and black workers in places like St. Louis, where the Workingman's Party fought for the unity of workers of all races in the fight against the railroad barons.

Since the end of World War II, the South has undergone heavy industrialization, transforming states like Georgia, Florida, and North Carolina from agricultural backwaters into the "sun belt" of manufacturing and production. This is a component of a global process, in which the international integration of the world economy has transformed China, Southeast Asia, Latin America, India and even sections of Africa into centers of world production, bringing billions of workers into the process of production. All over the world, traditions of racial and religious chauvinism are being undercut by objective economic developments and advances in communications and transport.

The chief task of the present political situation is to establish the unity of this powerful international working class, regardless of race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, or any other dividing line, in a common global fight against the capitalist system. This requires a fight against all forms of historical falsification, including efforts to portray American slavery as having conferred on white workers a "privilege" from which they still benefit. Ultimately this argument is another chapter in the American

ruling class's long history of employing race to divide and conquer.

Merritt's book is a critical contribution to this fight, undermining the claim that poor and working-class whites benefited from slavery. It is hoped that she, along with other honest historians, will reevaluate the assumption that they were beneficiaries of the racial oppression under Jim Crow.



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