

## **The Image of White Womanhood in the South: How it Affected Violence Towards Blacks After the Civil War**

By Sarah Henckler  
Davidson College

The emancipation of slaves in the United States marked a distinct shift in the life of the country's citizens, and none of the non-black population felt the change more than the southern white plantation owners. The life they had known in the antebellum era was completely disrupted economically, politically, and perhaps most importantly, socially. In the years following the Civil War, a movement of violence against blacks by southern white supremacists emerged and grew quickly. On the surface, the violence might seem to have stemmed from the hatred rooted in the disturbance that black freedom caused in the South. However, the ideal of white womanhood decried by the planter-class in the antebellum South affected upper-class white southern men, leading them toward racist violence in the years following the Civil War.

In his memoir on plantation life, James Battle Avirett reminisced over antebellum society, saying, "In the reverence paid to womanhood and the inviolable respect in which woman was held, the civilization of the old slave *régime* in the South has not been surpassed and perhaps will not be equaled among men."<sup>1</sup> The respect and admiration given to women was also noted by the women themselves. Letitia Burwell recalled her years in the antebellum South:

Although presenting an infinite variety of mind, manner, and temperament, all the gentlemen who visited us, young and old, possessed in common certain characteristics, one of which was a deference to ladies which made us feel that we had been put in the world especially to be waited upon by them. Their standard for woman was high. They seemed to regard her as some rare and costly statue set in a niche to be admired and never taken down.<sup>2</sup>

A statue is placed on a shelf for safe-keeping and admiration. Off the shelf, it can be broken or harmed. Burwell's use of this analogy helps explain upper-class white southern men's reaction to women's goodly characteristics: they felt white women must be protected.

References to white women assisting with the management of the plantation reveal themes of piety and a connection to Christian religious ideals. Thomas Nelson Page, in his book about antebellum life in Virginia, commented on the plantation mistress: "Her life was one long act of devotion, -devotion to God, devotion to her husband, devotion to her children, devotion to her servants, to her friends, to the poor, to humanity."<sup>3</sup> Avirett also associated his mother with religious ideals, describing her as his father's "other half, the blessed woman he had led from the neighboring county to grace his home and bless his life."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Burwell described plantation wives as "model women" who "managed their household affairs admirably, and were uniformly kind to, but never familiar with, their servants. They kept ever

---

<sup>1</sup> James Battle Avirett, *The Old Plantation: How We Lived in Great House and Cabin Before the War* (New York, 1901), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Letitia M. Burwell, *A Girl's Life in Virginia Before the War* (New York, 1895), 36.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Nelson Page, *Social Life in Old Virginia before the War* (New York, 1897), 38.

<sup>4</sup> Avirett, *The Old Plantation*, 44.

before them the Bible as their constant guide and rule in life.”<sup>5</sup> The plantation southerners attached a great significance to women’s purity and piety that is typically promoted by Christianity.

To the southern plantation class, the most important aspect of the woman’s role in managing the plantation was caring for her family. Historian Karin Zipf explains that society preferred women to “remain in the private sphere where they could cultivate the moral character of the family.”<sup>6</sup> Southern society recognized women as moral compasses for the men of the family, which contributed to the “worship that mothers garnered from men during most of the antebellum years.”<sup>7</sup> Fathers believed their wives were responsible for their offsprings’ moral character, and sons viewed their mothers as the creators of the family’s moral values.

Not only did plantation wives embody the ideals of white womanhood, but so did the plantation daughters. Page explained, “[Plantation daughters] were like the mother; made in her own image....They held by a universal consent the first place in the system, all social life revolving around them.”<sup>8</sup> He continued, “[The daughter] was not versed in the ways of the world, but she had no need to be; she was better than that; she was well bred.”<sup>9</sup> The plantation daughter was the ultimate embodiment of Burwell’s proverbial statue placed on the shelf. She was the focus of southern society, with the entire society gazing admiringly upon her. The daughter was pure and innocent, in contrast to the realities of the world, and ideally would remain so, if protected from outside harm.

White womanhood was prized at every age. The upper-class male understood the high status of white womanhood in southern society and felt compelled to protect it from any threat. In Page’s account of life in the antebellum South, he declared:

[The plantation master] was fully appreciative of...the responsibilities of his position. He believed in a democracy, but understood that the absence of a titled aristocracy had to be supplied by a class more virtuous than he believed any aristocracy to be. He purposed in his own person to prove that this was practicable.<sup>10</sup>

The planter believed himself to be a model, leader, and protector for the rest of southern society. His actions and decisions had to align with his professed virtue. It was essential for a planter-class male to fulfill his responsibility of protecting the ideals of white womanhood.

Along with the emphasis on virtue described by Page, honor played a prominent role in southern life. Mary Polk Branch described her father, a plantation owner, as being “noted for the purity and integrity of his character – his word being considered ‘as good as his bond.’”<sup>11</sup> If a southern plantation owner gave his word, he staked his character on it. Historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown explains more generally:

White Southerners reared children to value honor as much as, if not more than, godly conscience. Like the Puritan conscience, honor could be internalized, and when it

---

<sup>5</sup> Burwell, *A Girl’s Life in Virginia*, 34.

<sup>6</sup> 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 (1999), 508.

<sup>7</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982), 243.

<sup>8</sup> Page, *Social Life in Old Virginia*, 52-53.

<sup>9</sup> Page, *Social Life in Old Virginia*, 53-54.

<sup>10</sup> Page, *Social Life in Old Virginia*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Polk Branch, *Memoirs of a Southern Woman “Within the Lines” and a Genealogical Record* (Chicago, 1912), 7.

was violated, guilt was likewise the response. It did require self-restraint, but based upon pride, not divine commandment.<sup>12</sup>

Pride was the driving force of the southern gentleman's honor. His actions resulted from pride in his character, and by extension, pride in his associations.

The character of a southern planter was defined by his role as master. As Historian Stephanie McCurry explains, "Manliness, [and] masterhood [of the planter class male]...were based upon the domination of dependents."<sup>13</sup> The virtue of domination was challenged with the emancipation of the slaves. After the removal of slavery, their wives and daughters were the only dependents left to the white men. According to Zipf, since dependents were "emotional rather than intelligent and passionate rather than rational," white southern men believed that their "nature dictated that they depended upon others for support."<sup>14</sup> Thus, their responsibility was to protect their dependent women and maintain the honor of both their women and themselves. The southern white males' emphasis on responsibility and honorable character continued to hold true after the Civil War, and they sought to protect their women from the group who had challenged the planter's own masculinity by becoming independent: the former male slaves.

When blacks were enslaved, the plantation owners mastered every aspect of their lives. Even if a planter felt that a slave had threatened white womanhood, black men were prosecuted with relative fairness by their masters. There was, as historian Peter Bardaglio explains, "an adherence to legal formalism – the notion that the law was an autonomous body of rules that had to be applied equitably – thus significantly influenced the judicial treatment of criminal cases involving African Americans."<sup>15</sup> White men were secure in their position as masters and therefore could afford to treat blacks equitably in the judicial system; blacks presented no great challenge to the white population. However, it was more than legal formalism that gave blacks access to a fairly equitable legal system prior to emancipation. Historian Martha Hodes characterizes black men in the slave system as being protected because they were "the property of white people," and free black men as being protected because they had "the potential...to become property or to be treated as such."<sup>16</sup> If for no other reason, white southerners valued the lives of black men because of their monetary value. With the end of slavery, white southerners no longer saw any fiscal benefit from the life of a black man. Thus, emancipation removed a system with an integral buffer on violence towards blacks.<sup>17</sup>

The removal of this check on violence toward blacks did not bode well for the period of Reconstruction following the Civil War. With the South already in an aggrieved state after the loss of the war, they felt themselves being attacked again with the implementation of Radical Republican rule. Military supervision was instituted as southern state constitutions were rewritten and an attempt was made to reshape the "Old South" into the northern ideal. Southern whites were forced to live as equals with the blacks, whom they saw as beneath them socially, and indeed, in value of moral character and life worth. Granting freedom to

---

<sup>12</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 129.

<sup>13</sup> Stephanie McCurry, 'The Politics of Yeoman Households in South Carolina,' in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York and Oxford, 1992), 35.

<sup>14</sup> Zipf, 'The Whites Shall Rule', 501.

<sup>15</sup> Peter W. Bardaglio, 'Rape and the Law in the Old South: "Calculated to excite Indignation in every heart,"' *The Journal of Southern History*, 60 (1994), 765.

<sup>16</sup> Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men* (Binghamton, 1997), 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, and Bardaglio, 'Rape and the Law in the Old South,' 765.

the descendants of “the naked, savage Africans”<sup>18</sup> presented a threat to the ideal of white womanhood. If black men were allowed to take the ideal white woman “off of the shelf” and interact with her as an equal, it seemed to white male southerners that it would only be a matter of time before the black man’s heathen nature ruined the white woman’s moral purity. This would threaten the entire southern white upper-class, as white women were the moral compasses of the class. Thus, by extension, black freedom posed a challenge to the honor of the upper-class white southern men.

Understandably, the planter-class of southerners were disturbed by having their traditional way of life interrupted; but, was it logical for them to create violent racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan? In a perverted sense, it was. An examination of the importance of both honor and the ideal of white womanhood to white southern males, show they were closely tied to the violence against blacks that resulted in the years after the Civil War. William Pettigrew, a Southern gentleman, advised his brother, “As far as it can be done, we should live peaceably with our associates; but, as we cannot always do so, it is necessary occasionally to resist. And when our honor demands resistance, it should be done with courage.”<sup>19</sup> The need to maintain honor and protect the ideal of white womanhood gave planter-class men a strong motivation for racist violence.

Thus, Reconstruction saw the emergence of racial violence in the form of white supremacist groups. According to historian E. Merton Coulter, the Ku Klux Klan “had been organized before the end of 1865 by Confederate veterans for amusement and prank-playing, but not until 1868 did it spread and become generally known.”<sup>20</sup> Though the Klan targeted white men who attempted to support rights for blacks, the greatest violence was reserved for the blacks themselves, more specifically black males. As Martha Hodes explains, “White Southerners conflated the political rights of black men with sexual transgressions [toward pure white women] in justifying the Klan-led violence that terrorized freed people between 1868 and 1871.”<sup>21</sup> The Ku Klux Klan was most active in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Alabama. In 1869, Congress gave both North Carolina and Alabama permission to create state militias to control Klan violence.<sup>22</sup> While the Ku Klux Klan is the most well known white supremacist group formed after the Civil War, it was not the only one. The Knights of the White Camelia gained support in Louisiana, while other smaller organizations sprung up across the South. Though they were separate organizations, people still associated these factions with the general group of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>23</sup>

The objectives of the Ku Klux Klan were described by President Ulysses S. Grant in a speech to the House of Representatives on April 19, 1872. As Grant outlined, the Klan sought “by force and terror to prevent all political action not in accord with the view of the members; to deprive colored citizens of...the right to a free ballot...and to reduce the colored people to a condition closely akin to that of slavery.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the violence of 1868 reached

<sup>18</sup> Burwell, *A Girl's Life in Virginia*, 43-44. Burwell discusses her thankfulness to her ancestors. She declares: “For what courage, what patience, what perseverance, what long suffering, what Christian forbearance, must it have cost our great-grandmothers to civilize, Christianize, and elevate the naked, savage Africans to the condition of good cooks and respectable maids!”

<sup>19</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 130. Wyatt-Brown quotes Pettigrew, which he obtained from Dickson Bruce, *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin, 1979), 64-65.

<sup>20</sup> E. Merton Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction: 1865-1877*, (Baton Rouge, 1947), 165.

<sup>21</sup> Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 151.

<sup>22</sup> John Hope Franklin, ‘Reconstruction and the Negro,’ in Harold M. Hyman (ed.), *New Frontiers of the American Reconstruction* (Chicago, 1966), 70-72.

<sup>23</sup> Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction*, 169. Some of these groups include the Red Jackets, the Native Sons of the South, the Society of the White Rose, the Knights of the Black Cross, and the Whitebrotherhood.

<sup>24</sup> J.D. Richardson, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (Washington, 1898), VII, 164, as cited in Herbert Shapiro, ‘The Ku Klux Klan During Reconstruction: The South Carolina Episode’, *The Journal of Negro History*, 49 (1964), 43

a peak on Election Day, when the Klan made tremendous efforts to prevent black men from voting.<sup>25</sup>

However, while President Grant was correct in stating that the basic purpose of the Klan was to deny political rights and thus reduce blacks to a lower status, it is important to recognize that these efforts were being made as an attempt to protect white womanhood. Giving voting privileges to black men was seen as giving them full equality with white men, and thereby giving them equal access to white women. Martha Hodes explains from Klan writings, "As a male-only organization, one of the Klan's stated purposes was that 'Females, friends, widows, and their households shall ever be special objects of our regard and protection.'"<sup>26</sup> By limiting black voting rights, southern men believed they were doing just that. Bertram Wyatt-Brown draws on Klan writings when discussing the early robes of the Klan: they "were white, 'the emblem of purity for the preservation of the home and for the protection of the women.'"<sup>27</sup> The Ku Klux Klan set about its regime of violence believing that it was protecting the ideals of white womanhood that were prized by the southern planter class.

Northerners seemed surprised that all classes of white southerners were involved in the Klan. An unidentified woman from South Carolina wrote to a northern newspaper, the *Boston Traveller*, to describe the membership of the Klan:

[The Ku Klux Klan] is not as you [northerners] suppose, composed of 'border ruffians,' but its members are from what might be called 'respectable families' and the different bands are 'always headed,' says one of the Southern matrons near us, 'by a gentleman;' many of its members are ex-Confederate soldiers and officers, and their organization and discipline is perfect.<sup>28</sup>

The organizations and violence they perpetrated were primarily driven by the upper-class: the class motivated by the pursuit of honor and the protection of the ideal of white womanhood.

The Ku Klux Klan did not consist entirely of southern planter-class men. Just prior to the Civil War in 1860, approximately one-fourth of southern white families were slaveholders, and many of those families only held one or two slaves.<sup>29</sup> With a maximum of one-fourth of the white male population involved, the Klan and other white supremacist organizations would not have been able to spread wide scale racial violence throughout the South. However, that percentage of men was the "leaders of all phases of life: social, economic, and political."<sup>30</sup> After the Civil War, lower-class southern whites attached themselves to the upper-class. The upper and lower-class whites were now associated from fighting together for the Confederacy. Also, in a southern society where all men were now free, white men did not want to associate with the blacks, and thus the upper and lower-class white men separated themselves from blacks by allying themselves through a bond of whiteness. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown explains, for southern whites, "the war experience provided memories and myths upon which a sense of sacred collectivity was based."<sup>31</sup> The bond that resulted from the fight for "The Cause" of the Confederacy was compounded by the fact that southern men saw "Reconstruction more and more a question of the survival of

<sup>25</sup> Shapiro, 'The Ku Klux Klan,' 37.

<sup>26</sup> Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 160.

<sup>27</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 454.

<sup>28</sup> 'Extent of the Organization in South Carolina and Character of Its Members: From the Boston Traveller, May 31,' *New York Times* (3 June 1871), 2.

<sup>29</sup> Robert R. Russell, 'The Effects of Slavery Upon Non-Slaveholders,' in Edward Magdol and Jon L. Wakelyn (eds.), *The Southern Common People: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Social History* (London, 1980), 139.

<sup>30</sup> John Samuel Ezell, *The South Since 1865* (New York, 1975), 8.

<sup>31</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 111.

the integrity and dignity of the Caucasian race.”<sup>32</sup> Because of their uncertainty over the survival of the “great” white race, the link of whiteness grew stronger in an attempt to resist what they saw as a black takeover. Finally, the emancipation of slaves meant that many lower-class southern whites were put on the same economic level as blacks. This economic equality with blacks was a condition that was intolerable to many whites, and so they sought to distinguish themselves from blacks by allying with the southern planter-class.<sup>33</sup> The alliance gave the former planter-class a solid support base in their white supremacist groups; indeed the *New York Tribune* described lower-class whites as “ready tools” for the upper-class leaders of these groups.<sup>34</sup>

Though there is a logical connection between the upper-class southern male’s view of white womanhood, in no way is the highlighting of this connection an attempt to excuse the behavior of the Ku Klux Klan and other individuals who committed racist violence. The exploration of the ideal of white womanhood in regard to the racist violence that emerged in the South after the Civil War is an attempt to understand how seemingly respectable gentlemen could have both allowed this violence to occur and perpetrated it in the post-Civil War South. It appears, quite simply, that the foundation for racist violence was there, and unfortunately, upper-class white southern males chose to build upon it.

---

<sup>32</sup> Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction*, 164.

<sup>33</sup> Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction*, 163. Coulter explains: “After the war, the nearer a former nonslaveholder came to the status of a poor white, the more intolerant of the Negro he became.”

<sup>34</sup> Shapiro, ‘The Ku Klux Klan,’ 49. He cites *The New York Tribune*, November 14, 1871.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

- Avirett, James Battle, *The Old Plantation: How We Lived in Great House and Cabin Before the War* (New York, 1901).
- Branch, Mary Polk, *Memoirs of a Southern Woman "Within the Lines" and a Genealogical Record* (Chicago, 1912).
- Burwell, Letitia M., *A Girl's Life in Virginia Before the War* (New York, 1895).
- Clinkscales, J.G., *On the Old Plantation: Reminiscences of His Childhood* (Spartanburg, 1916).
- 'Extent of the Organization in South Carolina and Character of Its Members: From the Boston Traveller, May 31,' *New York Times* (3 June 1871), p. 2.
- Page, Thomas Nelson, *Social Life in Old Virginia before the War* (New York, 1897).

### Secondary Sources

- Bardaglio, Peter W., 'Rape and the Law in the Old South: "Calculated to excite Indignation in every heart"', *The Journal of Southern History*, 60 (1994), pp. 749-772.
- Coulter, E. Merton, *The South During Reconstruction: 1865-1877*, (Baton Rouge, 1947).
- Ezell, John Samuel, *The South Since 1865* (New York, 1975).
- Franklin, John Hope, 'Reconstruction and the Negro', in Harold M. Hyman (ed.), *New Frontiers of the American Reconstruction* (Chicago, 1966), pp. 59-76.
- Hodes, Martha, *White Women, Black Men* (Binghamton, 1997).
- McCurry, Stephanie, 'The Politics of Yeoman Households in South Carolina,' in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York and Oxford, 1992), pp. 27-35.
- Russell, Robert R., 'The Effects of Slavery Upon Non-Slaveholders', in Edward Magdol and Jon L. Wakelyn (eds.), *The Southern Common People: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Social History* (London, 1980).
- Shapiro, Herbert, 'The Ku Klux Klan During Reconstruction: The South Carolina Episode', *The Journal of Negro History*, 49 (1964), pp. 34-55.
- Wyatt-Brown, Bertram, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982).

Zipf, Karin L., “‘The Whites Shall Rule the Land or Die’: Gender, Race, and Class in North Carolina Reconstruction Politics’, *The Journal of Southern History*, 65 (1999), pp. 499-534.