

Why the South Fought: The Myth of Southern Poverty before the American Civil War

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Abstract

Census data from 1860 indicate that the average white Southerner was wealthier than their Northern counterpart. Even with higher levels of inequality, the median white Southerner was not poorer. For this reason, the assumption that the mass of white Southerners were impoverished by slavery is a myth. The census data instead suggest that white Southerners had done well out of their region's social order. This in turn explains both their racism and why so many fought to defend slavery during the American Civil War.

Keywords: the American Civil War, racism, slavery, United States, wealth

JEL codes: D31, H56, N31, N91, J47, O51

That so many Southerners fought for the Slave Power during the American Civil War remains a paradox. During and immediately after the war, the main Northern narrative was that Southern planters had enriched themselves while impoverishing their region, including the mass of "poor whites." The planters then chose to secede from the Union to defend slavery from the threat posed by Abraham Lincoln's election at the end of 1860. Yet this narrative raised the question of how the Confederacy managed to mobilize roughly 800,000 men—equivalent to 80 percent of the fighting-age male population (Gallagher 1997, 47). If most white Southerners had

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been impoverished by slavery, why did they fight to defend it? Confederate apologists soon answered with the "Lost Cause" narrative. They claimed that white Southerners fought for other reasons. Indeed, they argued, slavery was not even the main cause of the war. The Confederates were instead seeking to defend their states' rights from an overbearing federal government under Lincoln. In the early twentieth century, the dominant paradigm therefore became that the war was needless and could have been avoided through compromise. More progressive historians responded, however, by reaffirming the original Northern narrative. They drew especially on Charles and Mary Beard's (1930) framing of the war as a "Second American Revolution," in which the North's rising bourgeoisie overthrew the planter-dominated *ancien régime*. Eugene D. Genovese (1965) subsequently contributed an analysis of why the planters needed to expand slavery westward, leading to conflict with the North. And Eric Foner (1970) stressed how the Northern belief in free labor was fundamentally at odds with slavery, resulting in an inevitable conflict between the two. The historiography had thus come full circle. Historians had returned to the original Northern narrative in which the Civil War was a result of the Slave Power. The planters then used racism to dupe the mass of white Southerners into defending the institution that had impoverished them. "The stake was white supremacy," as James M. McPherson (1988, 243) put it. White Southerners were, in other words, motivated by racism. "Whether or not they owned productive property," McPherson (1989) explained, "all southern whites owned the most important property of all—a white skin." Culture would thereby become the dominant factor that historians used to explain why the South fought. What David Roediger (1991) evocatively called the "wages of whiteness" seemed to be the main explanation for why so many were willing to die for slavery.¹

This paper contributes to these debates by analyzing the political economy of racism in the late antebellum period. In a nutshell, the argument is that it is a myth that slavery impoverished white Southerners, despite it being the consensus view of economists today (Olmstead and Rhode 2018; Hilt 2020; Wright 2020; 2022). Census data instead suggest that the average white Southerner was far wealthier than their Northern counterpart in 1860. Indeed, such was their wealth that it compensated for higher levels of inequality, resulting in the median Southerner being as well off—if

¹ On the historiography of the American Civil War, see Towers (2011) and Woods (2012). Arnesen (2001) provides a critical overview of the literature on whiteness (also Fields 2001; Reed 2001). For an important dissenting analysis, see Sheehan-Dean (2007).



Frederick Law Olmsted, c. 1850

not better off—than the median Northerner. Consequently, the planters' vision was easy to sell. Most white Southerners had done well out of a social order based on slavery. Hence, their racism reflected their material interests. And that is why they fought.

I

Frederick Law Olmsted's (1861) *The Cotton Kingdom* has long been a key piece of evidence used to demonstrate the extent of Southern poverty in the antebellum period. Published at the beginning of the Civil War, it was condensed from several earlier books by Olmsted, which were in turn based on his travels through the South as a reporter for the *New York Times* in the 1850s. In his preface to *The Cotton Kingdom*, Olmsted (1861, 1:13) asserted that "the proportion of the free white men who live as well in any

respect as our working classes at the North, on an average, is small, and the citizens of the cotton States, as a whole, are poor." His words would then be repeated by historians over time.²

Nonetheless, in his original reporting for the *New York Times*, Olmsted was more circumspect. Despite the obvious evil of slavery, Olmsted did not condemn it for the poverty it caused white Southerners. Indeed, in one article from April 13, 1853, he even defended the South against the criticisms of Harriet Beecher Stowe, his fellow New Englander, whose abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had recently been published. "I must declare that the Virginia slave is more happy, more comfortable, in some sense more free; and in better and more manly relation to his masters, than the Irish peasant or the English agricultural laborer is to the 'higher classes' of those countries," Olmsted claimed. He had, after all, witnessed firsthand the effects of famine during a visit to Ireland in 1850. The enslaved, he believed, lived better than the Old World's poor. "Oh, God! who are we that condemn our brother? No slave ever killed its own offspring in cool calculation of saving money by it, as do English free women. No slave is forced to eat of corruption, as are Irish tenants," Olmsted continued. But he did not stop there. "No slave freezes to death for want of habitation and fuel, as have men in Boston. No slave reels off into the abyss of God, from want of work that shall bring it food, as do men and women in New-York." The poverty of Northern cities also compared unfavorably with the South. "Remember that, Mrs. Stowe. Remember that, indignant sympathizers," Olmsted concluded. "Oh, Christian capitalists, free traders in labor, there is somewhat to be built up, as well as somewhat to be abolished before we repose in the millennium" (in Beveridge and McLaughlin 1981, 131–132).

Furthermore, the claims that white Southerners were poorer than white Northerners were belied by the 1860 census. Based on the value of the personal property and real estate they declared, white Southerners were, on average, wealthier than their Northern counterparts. As seen in Panel (a) in Table 1, the wealth of the average white Southern man aged 18 and above was \$3,868, compared to \$1,820 in the North, making the Southerners 113 percent richer. Panel (b) shows that the differential exploded to 212 percent for women, suggesting that slavery may have given free female Southerners greater opportunities to accumulate wealth (Jones-Rogers 2019). Finally, Panel (c) shows that the average free household was 161 percent better

² Merritt (2017), for example, cites Olmsted extensively in her account of the Deep South's "poor whites." Southerners' descriptions of poverty in the North have been less frequently cited, but see Franklin (1976).

	(a) Men	(b) Women	(c) Households
United States	2,296	249	785
North	1,820	164	558
Northeast	1,907	186	593
New England	1,762	181	599
Middle Atlantic	1,972	189	590
Midwest	1,715	133	516
East North Central	1,713	127	508
West North Central	1,721	154	541
South	3,868	512	1,457
South Atlantic	3,587	492	1,359
East South Central	4,177	522	1,536
West South Central	3,984	559	1,569
West	1,160	109	596
Mountain	601	44	195
Pacific	1,268	140	709

Table 1
Mean White Wealth per Capita, 1860

Notes: The estimates for men and women are means in dollars for the white population aged 18 and above. For households with a white head, the wealth of all household members is aggregated and then divided by the number of members. Wealth is the declared value of real estate and personal property, including the value of the enslaved. The North is the Northeast and the Midwest. Calculated from Ruggles et al. (2023).

off in per capita terms in the South. Table 2 then uses medians to give a first indication of the distribution of wealth. Panel (a) indicates that the majority of white Southern men were better off than in the North, while Panel (b) reports that most women were propertyless across the country. Panel (c) shows that the median free household had roughly the same per capita wealth in the two regions. Despite the greater inequality levels indicated by the Gini coefficients in Table 3, then, the sheer wealth of white Southerners meant that they could afford to be more unequal without impoverishing the bottom half of the distribution any more than in the North. These data are not, of course, perfect, but they should still be considered the best source available for measuring wealth before the Civil War, as is discussed in Appendix A.³

³ Tables 1 to 3 are calculated using the full 1860 census data from IPUMS (Ruggles et al. 2023), although with top-coded entries excluded for reasons discussed in Appendix A. The estimates should be considered superior to Soltow's (1975), given that he relied on a limited sample of the census data. For men aged 20 and above, Soltow

	(a) Men	(b) Women	(c) Households
United States	150	0	162
North	150	0	162
Northeast	100	0	135
New England	100	0	180
Middle Atlantic	100	0	120
Midwest	250	0	188
East North Central	230	0	190
West North Central	300	0	180
South	200	0	167
South Atlantic	110	0	140
East South Central	300	0	200
West South Central	250	0	193
West	0	0	100
Mountain	0	0	40
Pacific	0	0	167

Table 2
Median White Wealth per Capita, 1860

Note: See Table 1 for details.

The census data suggest that poor white Southerners mainly lived in mountainous areas, where slavery was less prevalent. The maps in Figures 1 to 3 illustrate that the white population of Southern Appalachia was on average as poor as in the Midwest, but the median wealth levels were considerably lower due to greater inequality. Here, then, was the grain of truth behind the Northern narratives of Southern poverty. Appalachia had been settled by previous waves of poor immigrants from the British peripheries, who were unable to afford better land elsewhere (Fischer 1989, 605–642). As their population grew and the land-labor ratio fell, they then fell further behind the rest of the country, while inequality also increased (Dunaway 1996).

Yet this experience was not representative of the South as a whole. Figure 1 shows that in the rest of the South, the white population's average wealth levels were far above the North, especially the Midwest. Even the median wealth levels were comparable, if not higher, as seen in Figure 2. Appalachia's poverty spread, moreover, into Pennsylvania, making it hard

(1975, 103) arrived at Gini coefficients of 0.81 for the North and 0.85 for the South in 1860. As such, the regional differentials are the same, although the levels are higher in Table 3, possibly because Soltow's sampling method missed wealthy Americans. The greater differential in the inequality between households in Table 3 reflects the larger size of poorer households in the South.

	(a) Men	(b) Women	(c) Households
United States	0.854	0.983	0.802
North	0.830	0.982	0.746
Northeast	0.850	0.983	0.771
New England	0.834	0.981	0.751
Middle Atlantic	0.856	0.984	0.779
Midwest	0.801	0.981	0.710
East North Central	0.798	0.981	0.701
West North Central	0.808	0.982	0.736
South	0.874	0.980	0.847
South Atlantic	0.877	0.979	0.848
East South Central	0.867	0.979	0.840
West South Central	0.880	0.983	0.856
West	0.871	0.982	0.799
Mountain	0.869	0.978	0.828
Pacific	0.867	0.980	0.774

Table 3
Gini Coefficients for White Wealth per Capita, 1860

Note: See Table 1 for details.

to blame on slavery. Figure 3, meanwhile, reveals that the Gini coefficients were high across much of the coastal United States, from the Middle Atlantic in the Northeast, down through the Southern coastal plain to Texas. Inequality was therefore common in the United States, with the relatively egalitarian Midwest the anomaly. From this perspective, the South looks less unusual than claimed.

Appalachia's poverty was nevertheless projected onto the whole region, as in Hinton Rowan Helper's (1857) book *The Impending Crisis of the South*. Helper had been born into a relatively prosperous yeoman family on North Carolina's Piedmont plateau, but he resented the hegemony of the planters in the east of the state. Their wealth stood in stark contrast with the poverty of the vast majority of the Piedmont's inhabitants. Hence, Helper agreed with the Northerners who claimed that slavery had impoverished the South. In Helper's (1857, 44) words, he sought to defend "the stupid and sequacious masses, the white victims of slavery." The problem was that the planters had used their domination of Southern politics "to aggrandize themselves, to strengthen slavery, and to keep the poor whites, the constitutional majority, bowed down in the deepest depths of degradation," according to Helper (1857, 152–153). Nonetheless, his book was founded on a parochial vision inspired by the experience of the Piedmont,

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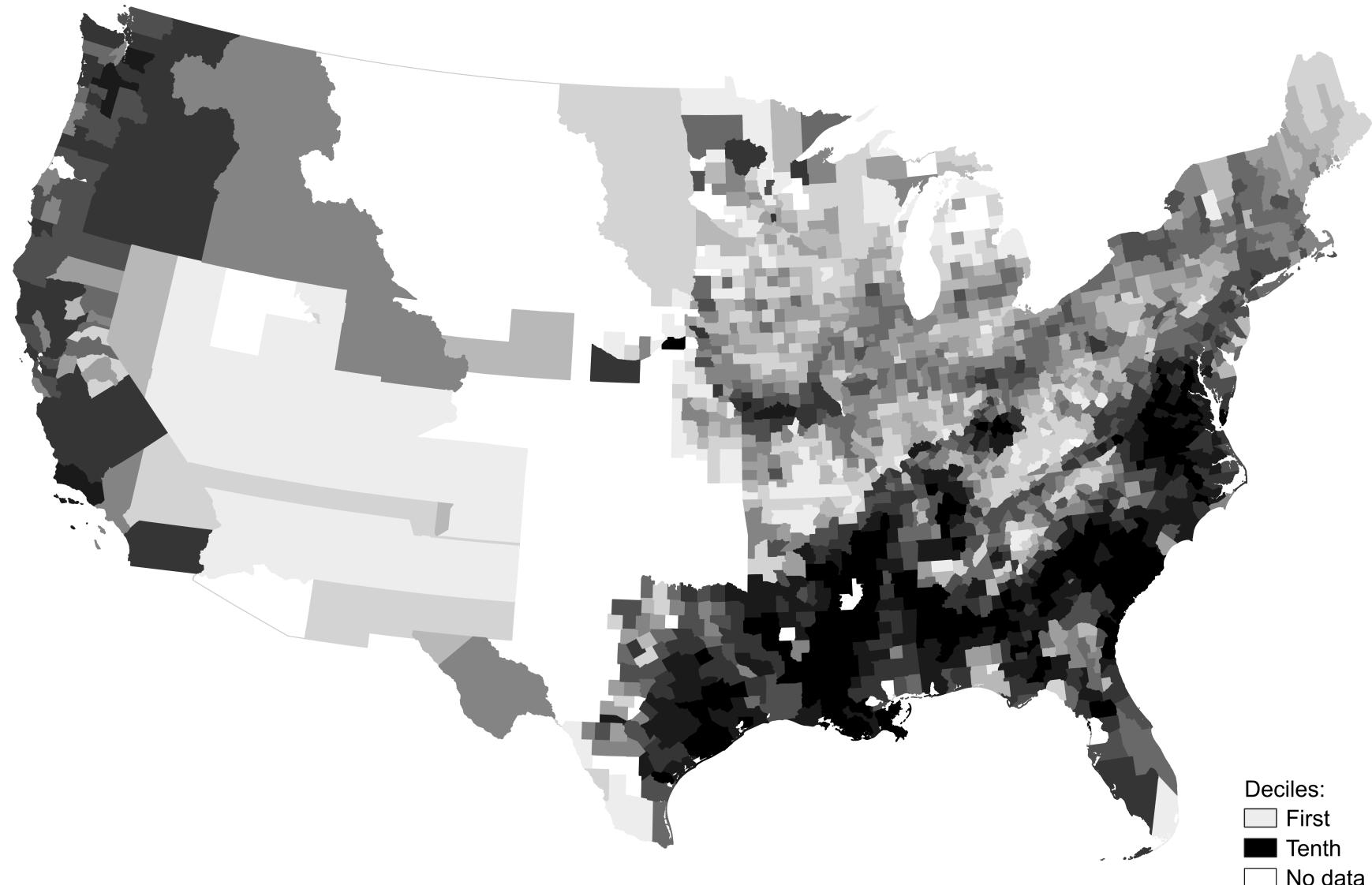


Figure 1
Mean White Household Wealth per Capita, 1860

Note: See Table 1 for details.

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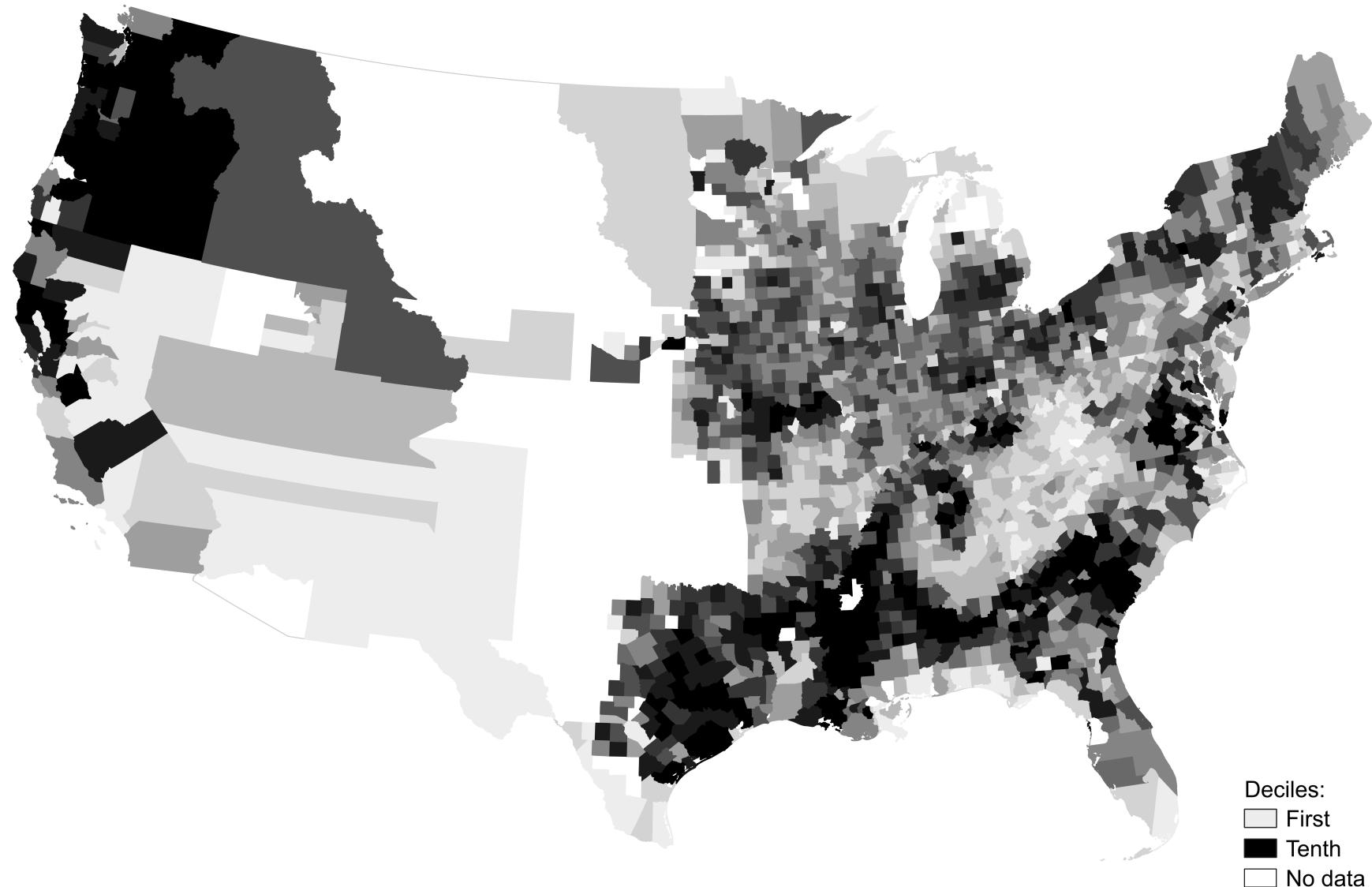


Figure 2
Median White Household Wealth per Capita, 1860

Note: See Table 1 for details.

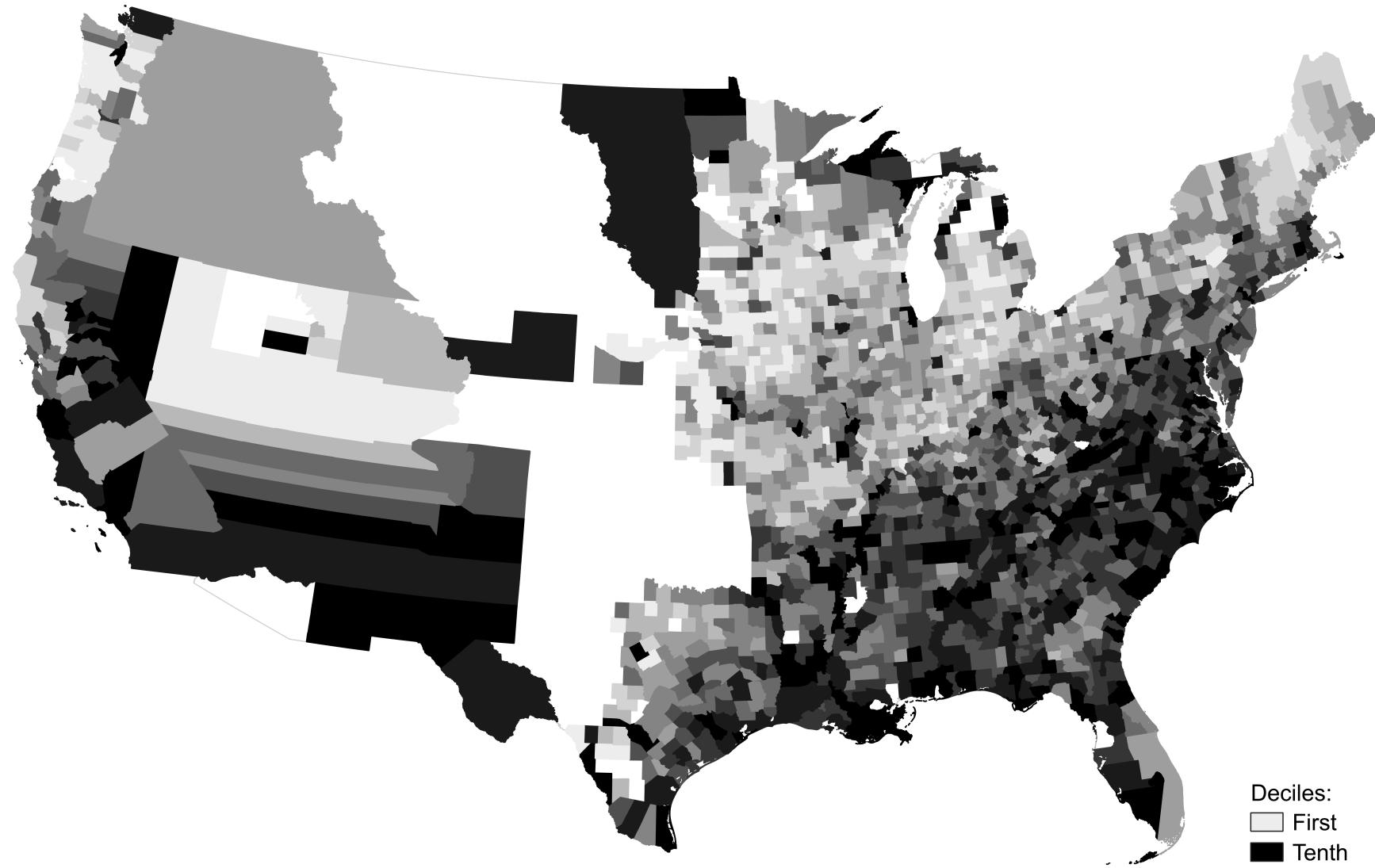


Figure 3
Gini Coefficients for White Household Wealth per Capita, 1860

Note: See Table 1 for details.



Hinton Rowan Helper, c. 1860

which both he and his Northern readers believed to represent the whole South (Brown 2006).

Northerners embraced Helper because they needed the image of impoverished white Southerners to validate their own identity. The ideal of free labor had become central to their institutions (Foner 1970), making it imperative that the South be seen as inferior in all respects (Grant 2000). The young Olmsted's warning about the North's own problems was therefore forgotten, even as the vicissitudes of modernity increased with greater urbanization. The inequities of urban life bred crime, seen most dramatically in New York's ethnic gangs (Asbury 1928, Chs. 1–11). The state responded by establishing penitentiaries, which paid for themselves by exploiting the forced labor of their inmates (McLennan 2008, Ch. 2). As a result, incarceration rates were generally higher in the North compared to the South, as shown in Table 4. This underbelly of the North's develop-

	Black	White		
		Total	Immigrant	Native
United States	0.77	0.20	0.33	0.16
North	1.10	0.22	0.32	0.18
Northeast	1.21	0.27	0.43	0.21
New England	1.47	0.25	0.48	0.19
Middle Atlantic	1.15	0.29	0.41	0.23
Midwest	0.86	0.16	0.19	0.15
East North Central	0.83	0.17	0.19	0.16
West North Central	1.06	0.13	0.19	0.11
South	0.47	0.15	0.40	0.12
South Atlantic	0.33	0.11	0.34	0.09
East South Central	0.46	0.16	0.44	0.13
West South Central	2.09	0.23	0.42	0.17
West	0.44	0.21	0.27	0.17
Mountain	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Pacific	0.45	0.25	0.31	0.20

Table 4
Incarceration Rates for Adult Men, 1860

Notes: The incarceration rates for the male population aged 18 and above. Calculated from Ruggles et al. (2023).

ment reflected the inequality that Olmsted had warned of. The trope of the "poor whites" in the South nevertheless helped the Northern ruling class to forget.

White Southerners, meanwhile, could reasonably believe that slavery had served their material interests. The myth of Southern poverty notwithstanding, the region's white inhabitants were in fact at least as prosperous as in the North. Only Northerners' need to believe in the superiority of their own institutions led them to believe that racism had allowed the planter class to dupe a mass of "poor whites" into supporting slavery. The reality, however, was that white Southerners were, on average, wealthier than Northerners, while median wealth levels were at least as high. And that is why they could rationally see defending slavery as being in their interests. There was a material basis for their racism.

II

The abolitionist Martin Robison Delany also believed that slavery had allowed white Southerners to prosper. Born in what became West Virginia, his mother was free while his father was enslaved. As a youth, he struggled to improve his position through education, culminating in him, together



Martin Robison Delany, c. 1865

with two other black students, being accepted to Harvard Medical School, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the heartland of abolitionism. Protests by white students soon followed, however, and Delany and his two black colleagues were expelled (Sterling 1971, Ch. 12). That experience then inspired him to write a book on the political economy of racism in the United States. Black Americans had, Delany (1852) explained, been subjugated for the benefit of white Southerners, who prospered by exploiting their captive labor force. No tropes of the South's "poor whites" could be found in Delany's *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*.

According to Delany (1852, 1), black Americans' position resembled that of the various other subjugated peoples throughout human history.

He observed how there had been "in all ages and in all countries, in every quarter of the habitable globe, especially among those nations laying the greatest claim to civilization and enlightenment, classes of people who have been deprived of equal privileges, political, religious and social." And the goal of this subjugation, he argued, was cheap labor. "Such classes have even been looked upon as inferior to their oppressors, and have ever been mainly the domestics and menials of society, doing the low offices and drudgery of those among whom they lived, moving about and existing by mere sufferance, having no rights nor privileges but those conceded by the common consent of their political superiors."

Racism, Delany (1852, 11–12) explained, was a way to facilitate this exploitation. It evolved, Delany suggested, from the tendency to make the subjugated peoples an internal other. "In past ages there were many such classes, as the Israelites in Egypt, the Gladiators in Rome, and similar classes in Greece; and in the present age, the Gipsies in Italy and Greece, the Cossacs in Russia and Turkey, the Slaves and Croats in the Germanic States, and the Welsh and Irish among the British, to say nothing of various other classes among other nations." They were excluded from the imagined community. "That there have in all ages, in almost every nation, existed a nation within a nation—a people who although forming a part and parcel of the population, yet were from force of circumstances, known by the peculiar position they occupied, forming in fact, by the deprivation of political equality with others, no part, and if any, but a restricted part of the body politic of such nations, is also true." There was a continuum from the exploited ethnic minorities of Europe to black Americans. "Such then are the Poles in Russia, the Hungarians in Austria, the Scotch, Irish, and Welsh in the United Kingdom, and such also are the Jews, scattered throughout not only the length and breadth of Europe, but almost the habitable globe," as Delany (1852, 12–13) put it. Racism was the result. "It is not enough, that these people are deprived of equal privileges by their rulers, but, the more effectually to succeed, the equality of these classes must be denied, and their inferiority by nature as distinct races, actually asserted. This policy is necessary to appease the opposition that might be interposed in their behalf." Black Americans were, he argued, merely the most accursed of a long line of accursed peoples. "Such then is the condition of various classes in Europe; yes, nations, for centuries within nations, even without the hope of redemption among those who oppress them. And however unfavorable their condition, there is none more so than that of the colored people of the United States."

White Southerners embraced racism, then, because it enriched them. By justifying slavery, it accelerated the settlement of the South. "An endless forest, the impenetrable earth; the one to be removed, and the other to be excavated. Towns and cities to be built, and farms to be cultivated—all these presented difficulties too arduous for the European," Delany (1852, 63) explained. Captive labor was therefore the solution. "The forests gave way before them, and extensive verdant fields, richly clothed with produce, rose up as by magic before these hardy sons of toil. In the place of the unskillful and ill-constructed wigwam, houses, villages, towns and cities quickly were reared up in their stead." It was thus the enslaved, Delany contended, who had allowed the South to prosper. "And even now, the existence of the white man, South, depends entirely on the labor of the black man." Furthermore, Delany (1852, 66) was not only referring to the planters. "Public roads and highways are the result of their labor, as are also the first public works, as wharves, docks, forts, and all such improvements. Are not these legitimate investments in the common stock of the nation, which should command a proportionate interest?"

The forced saving of the enslaved had promoted the South's growth, and white Southerners had captured its benefits. Planters treated their captive laborers as fixed capital to be employed at all times, even when the hourly levels of productivity were low (Anderson and Gallman 1977). Crucially, their consumption could be kept at a subsistence level, allowing the planters to expropriate the bulk—perhaps 50 to 60 percent—of their value added as profit (Vedder 1975; Hummel 2001, Ch. 2; Ransom and Sutch 2001, 203–212; Lindert and Williamson 2016, App. C). The enslaved were thereby forced to provide the bulk of the region's savings, allowing the South to grow without white Southerners having to sacrifice their consumption. They could instead force the enslaved to save for them.

The planters gained most, but some of their wealth also trickled down through various channels to the rest of the white population. By providing a cheap labor force for the Deep South's low-productivity agricultural sector, for example, slavery allowed the region to be settled to a greater extent than it otherwise would have been. As a result, it boosted land values for yeoman farmers and planters alike (Francis 2025a; 2025b; 2025c). In addition, the cotton belt became an important market for the rest of the South, which provided it with food, leading to intra-regional trade. A division of labor formed between the cotton belt and other parts of the South (Hilliard 1972). Yeoman farmers could then specialize in livestock production, which gave higher returns to their labor, as can be seen by

comparing the time required to produce agricultural products with their value. In 1860, for example, it took roughly 82 hours to grow 100 pounds of cotton, while a hundredweight of beef required 5.3 hours plus another 4.8 hours for the 2 bushels of corn needed for feed. The cotton then sold for about \$9.30, while the beef sold for \$3.80. The hourly returns were thus approximately 11 cents for cotton and 38 cents for beef.⁴ For a yeoman farmer who only had his own labor to rely on, it was therefore an advantage to be able to specialize in livestock production, as long as there was a market for his surplus. As a result, there was a complementarity between the plantations specialized in producing cash crops and the yeomanry who used them as a vent for their surplus livestock. What is more, once a plantation had a workforce of around 15 captive laborers, they could be efficiently organized into gangs, which then increased demand for free laborers to work as overseers (Field 1985; 1988). This second complementarity meant that wages tended to be higher where more people were enslaved (Clegg 2018, Ch. 4). Even landless laborers could thereby benefit from slavery.

In the late antebellum period, moreover, the wealth generated by slavery was used to directly support the South's development. Planters had long been expected to pay the bulk of taxation at the state level (Thornton III 1982, 352–360), and in the 1850s those resources began to be used to promote the development of the mountainous regions. The future West Virginia, for instance, had long been sidelined due to the dominance of the planters in the east of the state. The result was a secessionist movement that was, however, appeased in the 1850s. In 1851, a new constitution addressed many of the secessionists' political complaints, while the state government promoted the extension of the railroad network into the region (Noe 1994; Zucconi 2016). Similarly, railroads began to arrive in the upper Piedmont plateau, on the edge of the Appalachian Mountains. Increased commercialization then aligned farmers more closely with the planters (Weiman 1987; Gates 2001, Ch. 8). Hence, only by ignoring the evidence is it possible to argue that the resources provided by slavery were not being used to promote the South's development at the end of the antebellum period.⁵

⁴ These figures are approximate and are at a national rather than regional level. They are calculated from Gallman (1956, 121–122, 169, Table 17) and Craig and Weiss (2000, 8, Table 1)

⁵ Wright (1986, 39), for instance, claims that the South did not share "fully in the national railroad building boom" before the Civil War, but the statistics included in his own book contradict this statement. According to Wright (1986, 22, Table 2.2), the railroad mileage expanded by 292 percent in seven Southern states from 1850 to 1860, compared to 225 percent in seven Northern states.

It is unsurprising, then, that Confederate soldiers tended to see their own interests as tied up with slavery, even if they themselves were not slaveholders. It was the institution that formed the foundation of the social order from which they benefited. As a result, abolitionism seemed like a direct threat to their material interests, which were intertwined with their racism. They defended the Southern social order because they believed they had done well out of it. From their perspective, slavery had allowed them to prosper (Sheehan-Dean 2007), which is supported by the 1860 census data. Furthermore, Appendix B contains an econometric analysis of the free-slave state border region that suggests that the relationship was causal. The white population tended to be wealthier on the Southern side of the border, irrespective of geographical differences. Consequently, they seem to have been correct in their belief that they had benefited from slavery.

Why the South fought is therefore clear. White Southerners had good reason to defend slavery. Having subjugated the enslaved and used racism to make them an internal other, they could treat them like capital goods, forcing them to produce commodities for the planters' immediate benefit. As their wealth accumulated, however, other white Southerners also benefited, as can be seen in the census data. Delany's analysis is supported by the evidence, and white Southerners went on to behave as he thought they would: they fought to defend the institution that they benefited from.

III

The myth of Southern poverty nevertheless persisted. Indeed, such was its power in the North that some of the region's capitalists hoped to profit from the boom in the South that would inevitably occur after abolition. They read with some interest Olmsted's (1857) book *A Journey through Texas* because it documented German farmers successfully growing cotton on the western prairie. According to Olmsted (1857, 183), this was "very substantial evidence of the possibilities of not only white, but of well-regulated free-labor in the South." Olmsted himself then proposed to Boston's Brahmins—the name given to its leading businessmen—that they invest in establishing colonies of free cotton growers in Texas, who would also form a bulwark against the westward expansion of slavery (Abbott 1991, 47–49). In this way, an idea had been sown. Edward Atkinson (1861), a prominent Brahmin, took it up in his own book *Cheap Cotton by Free Labor*, published after the Civil War had begun. Most of the South's free population consisted, Atkinson (1861, 10) concluded, of "poor white trash,"

who had been impoverished by slavery. The solution was to establish Northern-style institutions and ideally transplant Northerners there as well. Following Olmsted, Atkinson (1861, 13–14) argued that Texas would be ideal due to the climate. "If it is true that these lands stand high in point of salubrity while inhabited by the whiskey-drinking, pork-eating race which now occupies them, how much more true would it be if they were occupied by an intelligent yeomanry, and the country dotted with free schools." The opportunity for Boston's capitalists was thus to promote cotton-growing in the South by immigrant farmers, who would inevitably be more efficient than the enslaved or the mass of "poor whites."

But these dreams soon encountered the reality of the postbellum South. The New Englanders' attempts to establish cotton-growing enterprises soon failed. Henry Lee Higginson, for example, was the scion of a prominent Brahmin family. After fighting in the Union Army, he and two associates acquired a 5,000-acre plantation in Georgia in 1865. They intended to improve agricultural methods and, most importantly, improve the incentives faced by black Southerners by introducing them to Northern institutions. They soon found, however, that the formerly enslaved did not want to work for wages. Rather, they wanted land to establish themselves as yeoman farmers. And they believed that it was theirs by right because they had the same analysis of slavery as Delany. Their labor had, they argued, made white Southerners rich, which meant those riches should be redistributed, beginning with the land. Higginson still hoped that they would "see that work or starvation is before them." But his attempts to grow cotton ultimately failed, leaving one of his business partners to conclude "that all the money ever made there was made in live stock—that is, in negroes. The cotton perhaps paid the expenses, and when they needed a little money, they sold a negro" (in Perry 1921, 252, 266). Higginson, like other members of Boston's ruling class, abandoned the South, turning instead to the Midwest, where they invested in the region's continued catch-up growth (Maggot 2017).

The wealth generated by slavery had disappeared with abolition. Most importantly, the value of much of the South's farmland collapsed, especially where slavery had been most prevalent (Francis 2025c). The New Englanders had discovered that the value of the land had been a function of slavery. The parallel is with how the value of the North's mineral deposits was "socially constructed" by the institutions that allowed Northerners to exploit them (David and Wright 1997). Once that particularly Southern institution was gone, black children and women could no longer be forced

to work in the gang system that had allowed planters to maximize the use of their labor (Francis 2025a; 2025b). And there was no longer the demand for overseers to guard them. As a result, the welfare of black Southerners increased while white Southerners were impoverished (Lindert and Williamson 2016, Ch. 6)—just as Delany’s analysis predicted would happen.

Yet it was still claimed that white Southerners had been impoverished by slavery. As a result, some white Southerners could retool the myth of Southern poverty for their own ends. A prominent faction of the Southern Democrats used it in their promotion of the idea of the “New South,” which sought to attract Northern investment while also ensuring that Northerners would acquiesce to the restoration of white supremacy (Gaston 1970, Ch. 2). Their means was a narrative that manipulated Northerners’ mythology for their own ends. The mass of white Southerners had themselves been victims of slavery, these propagandists argued, given how the institution had impoverished their region. As the Southern Democrat John W. Johnston (1887, 1) put it, the white man had been “a slave” whose chains “were as inexorable as those that bound the colored race.” For this reason, abolition had actually amounted to “the emancipation of the Southern whites.” And, by extension, black Southerners deserved no reparation for their treatment, given how the mass of “poor whites” had been the true victims of slavery. Northerners could then find their own worldview reflected back at them, with these more sympathetic white Southerners reaffirming their virtues.⁶

The myth thereby became the consensus view. Having originally been used by Northerners to imagine themselves as superior to the Southern other, the Southern Democrats then used the myth to justify the new racist order they wished to build with the help of Northern capital. Northerners in return embraced the New South, even as it descended into a carnival of violence against the formerly enslaved and their children. From the perspective of white Southerners, that terror was necessary to ensure that the region’s black population was subjugated again. Like Delany, they understood that slavery had benefited them before the Civil War. The census data analyzed here also clearly show that white Southerners were

⁶ An illustration of the lasting appeal of this rhetoric for Northerners comes from Wright (1986, 18–19), who approvingly quotes these words from Johnston (1887). Furthermore, Wright describes the Southern Democrat ideologues as “regional spokesmen,” as if there were no black Republicans in the South.

not impoverished in 1860. As such, they had a significant material motive to defend slavery.

White Southerners' racism was not false consciousness. Rather, it reflected their material interests. The descent into Civil War thus illustrates the extent to which race and class have always been intertwined in American capitalism (Reed 2002). Unfortunately, as Delany (1852) described, the subjugation of and discrimination against one group has long been a means for another group to get ahead. Delany's analysis was correct. The planter ruling class had not duped its own population. Rather, white Southerners were defending the institution that had enriched them. This was why Delany recruited black soldiers for the Union Army and became a Major—the Union Army's first high-ranking black field officer—in February 1865. Delany knew his enemy. And that was why he fought.

Appendix A

There are various issues when working with the census data for 1860. Here, two will be addressed in turn: undercounting by the original census takers and top-coding by Steven Ruggles et al. (2023):

1. *Undercounting* is a problem in the nineteenth-century American censuses, given the lack of professional census takers. The effects of that undercounting are, however, less clear. Keri Leigh Merritt (2017, 341–348) argues that it leads to a major underestimate of the number of "poor whites" in the antebellum Deep South. J. David Hacker (2013), in particular, is cited by Merritt (2017, 344) to support the claim that "at least 10 percent of native-born whites" were not counted before 1880. Yet Hacker (2013, 95) actually concludes the opposite, arguing that "the censuses probably missed well under 10 percent of the native-born white population." Merritt has clearly misread Hacker. Furthermore, Hacker (2013, 95–96) suggests that it is more likely to have been in the North where the poor were disproportionately undercounted. "If the net undercount of the foreign-born population was higher than among the native-born—which qualitative evidence suggests was likely—the overall net undercount may have approached or exceeded 10 percent in some census years and in urban areas with large foreign-born populations." Given that these areas were Northern cities, it is therefore possible that the census data reported in this paper overstate per capita Northern wealth and underestimate the level of inequality in the North. This would be the likely conclusion if Hacker is correct. A more com-

	Number	% of total
\$0	22,909,119	83.45
\$1–100	1,270,845	4.63
\$101–500	721,788	2.63
\$501–1,000	1,719,343	6.26
\$1,001–5,000	439,956	1.60
\$5,001–10,000	340,355	1.24
\$10,001–50,000	31,358	0.11
\$50,001–100,000	14,352	0.05
\$100,001–500,000	395	0.00
\$500,001–999,996	0	0.00
\$999,997+	3,375	0.01

Table A.1
Individual Wealth Distribution, 1860

Notes: Calculated from Ruggles et al. (2023).

prehensive census, in other words, would probably have reinforced the analysis made here.

2. *Top-coding* is a feature of the IPUMS data that is designed to stop wealthy individuals from being identified. When an individual has a value above \$999,997 in either real estate or personal property, Ruggles et al. (2023) cap it at that cut-off instead. These are in theory, then, the wealthiest Americans in 1860. In practice, however, it seems likely that the vast majority of the top-coded entries are the result of errors by the census takers.⁷ Most obviously, as Table A.1 shows, there are simply too many of them: 3,375 in total, all of whom are supposed to have had wealth of more than \$999,997. There are, on the other hand, no individuals with wealth of \$500,001 to \$999,996 and 395 with \$100,001 to \$500,000. Consequently, the tail on the distribution suggested by the top-coded individuals is unlikely, to say the least. Reinforcing that impression, many of their occupations are improbable, as seen in Table A.2. Some 1,387 reported being farmers or planters, but there are also 177 top-coded laborers, 81 carpenters, 52 farm laborers, 42 shoemakers, 30 blacksmiths, 21 brickmasons, and so on. None of these professions should be expected to harbor members of the mid-nineteenth-century

⁷ It seems likely that the errors were made by the census takers rather than in the process of digitalization. Ruggles et al.'s (2023) terms and conditions prohibit systematic matching of their top-coded individuals to the underlying census schedules. Nonetheless, checks of some entries with www.ancestry.com suggest that they have been faithfully entered into the IPUMS database.

	Number	% of total
Farmers and planters	1,387	41.5
None given	650	19.5
Managers	179	5.4
Laborers	177	5.3
Carpenters	81	2.4
Operative and kindred workers	74	2.2
Retired	61	1.8
Farm laborers	52	1.6
Other non-occupational response	51	1.5
Mechanics and repairmen	44	1.3
Shoemakers and repairers	42	1.3
At school/student	35	1.1
Blacksmiths	30	0.9
Teachers	24	0.7
Housekeepers	24	0.7
Sailors and deck hands	22	0.7
Physicians and surgeons	21	0.6
Brickmasons	21	0.6
Craftsmen and kindred workers	20	0.6
Other occupations	346	10.4

Table A.2
Occupations with Most Top-Coded Individuals

Notes: Occupations are based on the 1950 census categories. The top-coded individuals have either real estate and/or property worth \$999,997 or more. Calculated from Ruggles et al. (2023).

ultra-wealthy. For this reason, all members of households in which there is a top-coded individual are excluded from the analysis in the main text. If they were somehow included, it would have the effect of making the North wealthier but also more unequal than the South, given that Table A.3 shows that 2,642 of the top-coded individuals are in the former. Yet such an exercise seems ill-advised, given the implausible nature of the data for the top-coded entries.⁸

⁸ Derenoncourt et al. (2024, Online Appendix, 19) describe finding 211 top-coded observations in 1860, but it is unclear how they arrived at this figure because no count is made in their underlying code. The current version of the IPUMS full count has 3,341 top-coded individuals and 3,267 households with top-coded individuals in it. If, as seems likely, their code has imputed a value of \$3,432,867 to those households, they will have substantially overestimated the extent of the wealth gap between black and white Americans in 1860.

	Number	% of total
United States	3,341	100.0
North	2,642	79.1
Northeast	1,640	49.1
New England	802	24.0
Middle Atlantic	838	25.1
Midwest	1,002	30.0
East North Central	665	19.9
West North Central	337	10.1
South	671	20.1
South Atlantic	481	14.4
East South Central	119	3.6
West South Central	71	2.1
West	28	0.8
Mountain	27	0.8
Pacific	1	0.0

Table A.3
Regional Distribution of Top-Coded Individuals, 1860

Notes: The top-coded individuals have either real estate and/or property worth \$999,997 or more. Calculated from Ruggles et al. (2023).

	Mean	Median	Gini
United States	785	162	0.802
North	558	162	0.746
South	1,457	167	0.847
Confederate	1,611	178	0.848
Non-Confederate	920	138	0.825
West	596	100	0.799

Table A.4
White Household Wealth per Capita, with the Confederacy, 1860

Notes: See Table 1 for details.

It is also possible to make various robustness checks via disaggregation. Table A.4, for example, disaggregates the South into the states that joined the Confederacy and those that did not. As can be seen, the Confederate states tended to be wealthier than the non-Confederate Southern states, which were also considerably poorer than the North. Table A.5, meanwhile, separates households by farm and non-farm status. Panel (a) shows that the farm sector was relatively egalitarian in the North, with a higher median wealth than in the South. As such, Gavin Wright's (2006, 62) statement that "southern wealth was more unequally distributed than northern farmland" is probably correct from a technical perspective. What such an analysis

	Mean	Median	Gini
(a) Farm			
United States	1,018	322	0.742
North	670	345	0.619
Northeast	808	450	0.600
New England	696	403	0.581
Middle Atlantic	857	478	0.604
Midwest	570	288	0.625
East North Central	578	306	0.610
West North Central	547	240	0.666
South	1,769	267	0.822
South Atlantic	1,765	273	0.813
East South Central	1,711	252	0.823
West South Central	1,942	279	0.839
West	766	278	0.702
Mountain	192	80	0.697
Pacific	1,055	525	0.634
(b) Non-farm			
United States	558	70	0.844
North	451	69	0.824
Northeast	456	60	0.835
New England	518	89	0.811
Middle Atlantic	431	50	0.845
Midwest	440	88	0.801
East North Central	414	88	0.795
West North Central	540	100	0.816
South	989	70	0.870
South Atlantic	837	50	0.879
East South Central	1,164	100	0.860
West South Central	1,162	112	0.860
West	600	83	0.823
Mountain	227	19	0.899
Pacific	671	116	0.805

Table A.5
Farm and Non-Farm White Household Wealth per Capita, 1860

Notes: Households are classified as farm or non-farm based on the occupation of the household head. The farm sector includes both farmers and planters and farm laborers. See Table 1 for further details.

misses, however, is the higher levels of inequality in Northern cities, as seen in the wealth estimates for the non-farm households in Panel (b). For this reason, some caution is called for when James L. Huston (2021, 227) claims that "the free-state economy in the nineteenth century demonstrates the crucial importance of an equitable distribution of income in forging a

growing economy.” Such Northern triumphalism neglects the poverty of Northern cities, where immigrants toiled to produce manufactured goods, not least for the consumption of the region’s family farmers. The myth of Northern equality is the counterpart of the myth of Southern poverty.

Appendix B

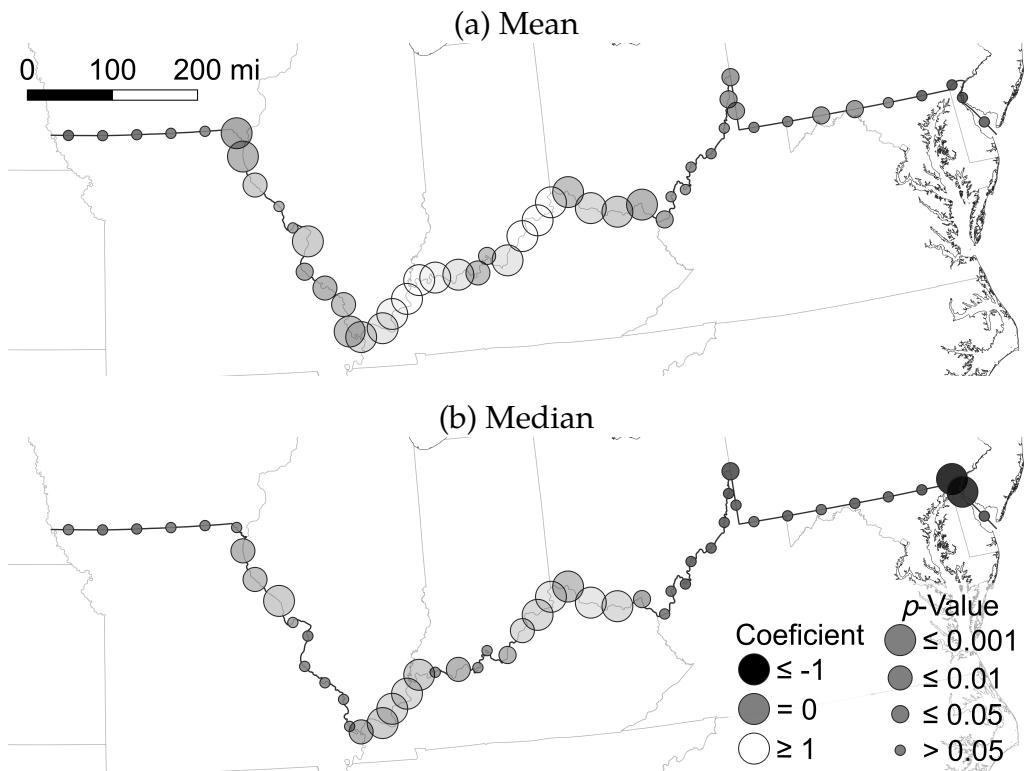
While this paper has relied on correlation, it is possible to infer some causality from the census data using a regression discontinuity design (RDD). This is an econometric method that looks for some discontinuity in time or space. Specifically, in this case, the discontinuity is the border between free and slave states, which has previously been used as a natural experiment to test slavery’s impact (Bleakley and Rhode 2024; Francis 2025c; 2025d). It aims to measure the effect of a treatment when crossing a cut-off point. Here, the treatment is the legality of slavery and the cut-off point is the free-slave state border. Distance from that border is the running variable that allows the RDD to estimate the effect of crossing from free states to slave states on white household wealth per capita. The basic equation is:

$$Y = \text{slavery} + \text{distance} + \text{slavery} \cdot \text{distance} + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

in which the dependent variable in a county (Y) is a product of a dummy variable for slavery’s legality there, its distance from the border, the interaction between the two, plus an error term (ε). The coefficient for slavery’s legality then becomes the treatment effect.

The results of a county-level spatial RDD can be seen in Figure B.1. The points show 50 separate regressions at equal spaces along the border. Three covariates—the elevation and slope of the land and the pH of the soil—are added to Equation 1 to account for geographical differences between counties. An algorithm then uses a triangular kernel to give greater weight to counties nearer the border point. Furthermore, a quadratic regression is then applied to each side of the border to correct for bias in the linear relation analyzed in the main regression. Robust standard errors are calculated to account for both variability in the original estimate and the additional uncertainty introduced by the bias correction process. Various robustness tests are also performed in the supplementary materials to ensure that the results are not driven by spillover effects.

Overall, the spatial RDD clearly suggests that slavery made white Southerners wealthier—even at the border, where relatively few people were enslaved. For mean white household per capita wealth in Figure

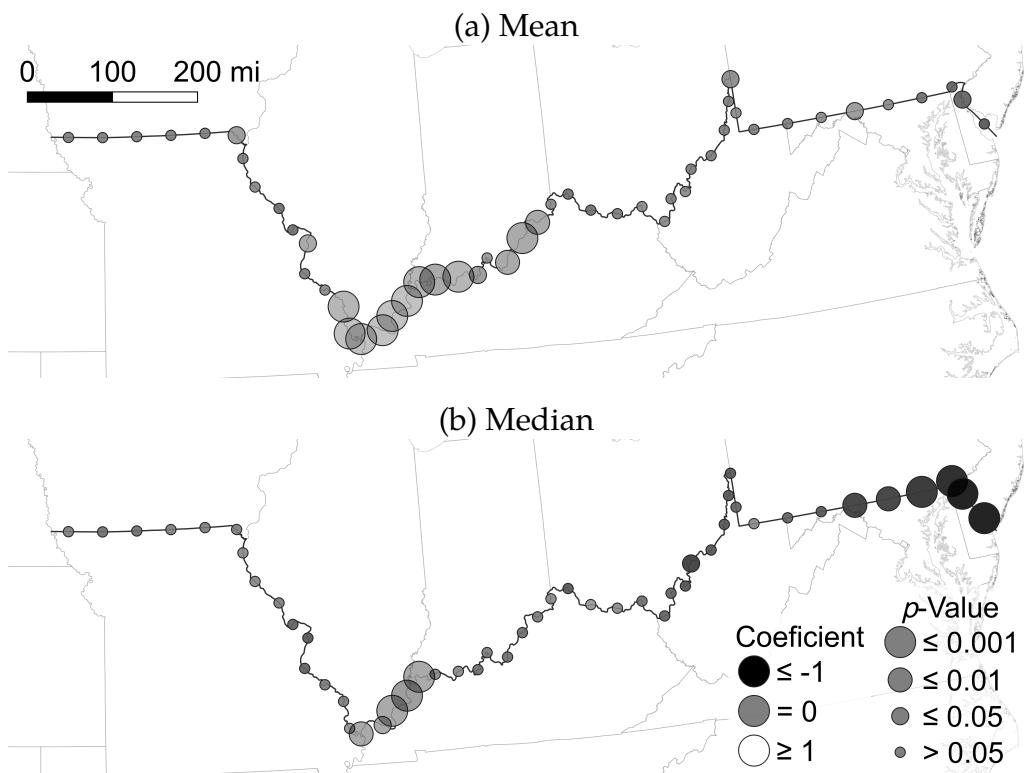
*Figure B.1*

A Spatial RDD for White Household Wealth per Capita, 1860 (v1)

Notes: The color of each border point denotes the magnitude and direction of the coefficient for slavery in Equation 1, while the size indicates the statistical significance. Where a point is darker, it indicates that slavery's legality had a more negative effect on the dependent variable, and that effect was more statistically significant where the point is larger. The slope and elevation of the land, plus the pH of the soil are included as covariates. Calculated from USGS (2011; 2012), Manson et al. (2022), and ISRIC (2024).

B.1's Panel (a), the points are consistently large and lightly colored points from the Kentucky-OHio border across to Missouri-Illinois, indicating that slavery had a positive and statistically significant effect. Greater inequality meant that the effect is diminished somewhat for the median in Panel (b), but even there it is generally positive and significant. That impression is then confirmed by Figure B.2, in which the enslaved people per white person has been added as a covariate. As a result, the points become darker and less statistically significant, indicating that it was primarily the presence of the enslaved that made white Southerners wealthier than their Northern counterparts.

The econometric results therefore support Aaron Sheehan-Dean's (2007) analysis of Virginia in *Why Confederates Fought*. "The prosperity of the 1850s convinced white southerners that their society was both dynamic and com-

*Figure B.2*

A Spatial RDD for White Household Wealth per Capita, 1860 (v2)

Note: The sources and specification are the same as in Figure B.1, except the number of enslaved people per white person has been added as a covariate.

petitive and ensured among them a strong commitment to sustaining the status quo," Sheehan-Dean (2007, 4) writes. White Southerners being impoverished by slavery was a myth spread by Northerners. "Contrary to arguments made by abolitionists and free-labor advocates that slavery depressed the southern economy and impoverished nonslaveholders," Sheehan-Dean (2007, 18–19) argues, "many nonslaveholders benefited from living in a society enriched by slave labor." Abolitionism was therefore a direct threat to their interests. "Virginia's economic success in the 1840s and 1850s, and especially the fact that a broad middle class shared in that prosperity, ensured that most white residents spurned alternative models of development."

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