

turning the white majority into a lordly class, sharing in the privileges and prerogatives of governing the slave class. Though the members of this ruling class knew that they were not equal to each other, they were compensated by the illusion of superiority—and the reality of rule—over the black population beneath them.

One school of thought—call it the equal opportunity school—located the democratic promise of slavery in the fact that it put the possibility of personal mastery within the reach of every white man. The genius of the slaveholders, wrote Daniel Hundley in his *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, is that they are “not an exclusive aristocracy. Every free white man in the whole Union has just as much right to become an Oligarch.” This was not just propaganda: by 1860, there were 400,000 slaveholders in the South, making the American master class one of the most democratic in the world. The slaveholders repeatedly attempted to pass laws encouraging whites to own at least one slave and even considered granting tax breaks to facilitate such ownership. Their thinking, in the words of one Tennessee farmer, was that “the minute you put it out of the power of common farmers to purchase a Negro man or woman . . . you make him an abolitionist at once.”<sup>37</sup>

That school of thought contended with a second, arguably more influential, school. American slavery was not democratic, according to this line of thinking, because it offered the opportunity for personal mastery to white men: American slavery was democratic because it made every white man, slaveholder or not, a member of the ruling class by virtue of the color of his skin. In the words of Calhoun: “With us the two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black; and all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals.”<sup>38</sup> Or as his junior colleague James Henry Hammond put it, “In a slave country every freeman is an aristocrat.”<sup>39</sup> Even without slaves or the material prerequisites for