

Social divisions in antebellum North Carolina

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By 1860, there were six fairly distinct social classes in North Carolina. The gentry or planter class consisted of owners of large plantations with more than twenty slaves, high public officials, and well-to-do professional men, such as lawyers, doctors, and business leaders. Although smallest, with only about 6 percent of the white population, this class controlled much of the state's government and business and included men such as Josiah Collins, III of Somerset Place¹ at Creswell and Paul Cameron of Stagville plantation² near present-day Durham. With their large enslaved populations, Somerset and Stagville were exceptions rather than the rule. In 1860, 28 percent of the white population owned slaves, but only 3 percent of these slave-holding whites would have been considered in the planter class. The vast majority of slave-owners owned fewer than ten slaves.

The 25 percent of slave-owning whites that did not belong to the planter class belonged to the middle class. This group was made up of small merchants and manufacturers, lesser public officials, and professional men of moderate income, and small farmers owning fewer than twenty slaves and more likely owning only one or two. Examples of men in the middle class included John Harper of Bentonville³ and Zebulon Vance⁴ of Asheville. This middle class held many of the same ideals of the gentry and even aspired to move into that higher class.

The remainder of the white population, sometimes classified together as common whites, made up the third and fourth social classes. The yeomen farmer/skilled labor class was the largest white class in North Carolina. It constituted about 60 to 65 percent of the white population. The yeoman farmers were smaller land owners who farmed their land independently. They did not own slaves and grew crops or raised livestock for their own use, with any surplus going to settle debts or barter for goods. Others in this class included naval stores workers, miners, mechanics, overseers, artisans, and tradesmen. James Bennett⁵ of Orange County was a good example of a Piedmont yeoman farmer. Generally satisfied with their lot in life, these folks had a decent standard of living and, in terms of political rights, had a status equal to the higher classes. A few may have envied those in the gentry, but most admired them and aspired to be like them.

Approximately 5 to 10 percent of the white population fell into the fourth class. Poor whites were landless tenant farmers and poor laborers who went from job to job as

available. The majority of this class was illiterate and performed the lowest level of jobs. Although excluded from the ranks of the social, political, and economic elite, poor whites, like yeomen, supported the basic social hierarchy established by the planter class because it protected their position as higher than that of the enslaved. Many common whites not only verbally supported the slave system, they also served on slave patrols and county militias that guarded against slave revolts and tracked down runaways. When the time came for war, this class filled the Confederate ranks and fought to defend the very system that kept them at the bottom of the white social order. This is perhaps one of the reasons the Civil War has been described as “a rich man’s war, but a poor man’s fight.”

North Carolina had a rather large population of free African Americans — 30,463 in 1860 — who constituted the fifth social class. Approximately 10 percent of the black population fell into this category. The most sizable free black communities were in Wilmington, New Bern, and Halifax. Over two-thirds of this class was mulatto, that is, persons of mixed race. Although some blacks traced their freedom back to the Revolution, or even before, most obtained liberty from manumission or emancipation by their owner. In the wake of Nat Turner’s rebellion and fears of other insurrections, freedom by emancipation became more difficult by mid-century, with new laws restricting where freed slaves could live and setting high costs to the owner for freeing them. Some enslaved people purchased their own freedom or freedom for family members. Owners sometimes hired out trusted slaves, allowing them to keep a portion of their salary. If an enslaved person could save enough funds and the owner was agreeable, freedom could be purchased.

Being a free black in North Carolina was better than being enslaved, but there were still many restrictions and much discrimination against them. Common whites saw free blacks as direct competition for jobs and trade, leading to even more tension between the races. Increasing legal restrictions prevented true freedom of movement by free blacks and prohibited their associations with enslaved blacks. Despite these restrictions, many free blacks, such as skilled cabinet maker Thomas Day of Caswell County or businessman John Caruthers Stanley of New Bern, lived productive lives. Some, like Stanley, even owned slaves themselves, often, but not always, family members. Other free blacks farmed, much like their counterpart white yeoman farmers.

The sixth and lowest social class was that of the enslaved persons. Slaves made up nearly one-third of the state’s total population in 1860. Most served as agricultural labor on farms and plantations. They were found in every county in the state, with a greater concentration in the eastern areas that had the most suitable soil for growing cash crops, especially cotton. Some businessmen simply saw slavery as an investment, a place to put their capital, which would increase in value. Owning slaves was a sign of wealth, prestige, and power in the entire South and in North Carolina, both east and west. Western counties that produced fewer cash crops had fewer slaves. Although the mountain climate and terrain prevented the development of large plantations, such as those in the eastern part of the state, slavery was, nevertheless, a vital part of the mountain economy. The major distinction in slavery in the west was the diversity of economic activity it supported. Enslaved men and women often worked alongside the mountain farmer/owner, in thriving tourist businesses such as hotels and resorts, in mines, and in livestock endeavors.

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Notes

1. See <http://www.nchistoricsites.org/somerset/somerset.htm>.
2. See <http://www.nchistoricsites.org/stagville/stagville.htm>.
3. See <http://www.nchistoricsites.org/bentonvi/bentonvi.htm>.
4. See <http://www.nchistoricsites.org/vance/vance.htm>.
5. See <http://www.nchistoricsites.org/bennett/bennett.htm>.