

Public Poor Relief in Buncombe County, North Carolina, 1792-1860

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In April 1792, Buncombe County resident Philip Hoodenpile was ordered to bring the "three orphan children which are in his protection and care" to the next meeting of the county court. Three months later Hoodenpile brought the children, two boys and a girl, to Buncombe Courthouse (later to be named Asheville). In reviewing the case, the court decreed that because he "did not use said orphans agreeable to contract made with him at the time they were bound to him," the children were to be taken away and entrusted to different masters. This single statement suggests that Buncombe County officials viewed the proper care and upbringing of these children as an important responsibility.¹

Buncombe County was not unique in its concern for orphan children. That local officials all over the South indentured children to suitable adults and provided more generally for the destitute is well established. Yet far less understood is how public poor relief was conceived and utilized as a social tool. How a community cares for its poor can reveal much about its values and beliefs about social welfare. Of particular significance in this regard is the newfound emphasis that North Carolina reformers placed on mass education during the 1840s and 1850s. This article will address these issues, focusing on Buncombe County and Asheville, the county seat.

Given the vast historiography that examines the minutiae of antebellum southern life, surprisingly, only one modern book explores the history of southern poor relief—Barbara Bellows's study of benevolence in Charleston. A few articles have appeared on subjects such as poor relief in Mississippi, orphanages in New Orleans, and the Baltimore almshouse, but further research is needed on the purpose, scale, and meaning behind the assistance offered to the southern poor.² Two recent monographs

1. Minutes of the Buncombe County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, April term, 1792, State Archives, Office of Archives and History, Raleigh, hereinafter cited as BCCM.

2. Barbara L. Bellows, *Benevolence among Slaveholders: Assisting the Poor in Charleston, 1670-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); Christopher Johnson, "Poor Relief in Antebellum Mississippi," *Journal of Mississippi History* 49 (February 1987): 1-21; Priscilla Ferguson Clement, "Children and Charity: Orphanages in New Orleans, 1817-1914," *Louisiana History* 27 (fall 1986): 337-352; Douglas G. Carrol Jr. and Blanche D. Coll, "The Baltimore Almshouse: An Early History," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 66 (summer 1971): 135-152. In this article, public poor relief is defined as that funded by taxpayers or administered by local officials.

on poor whites in antebellum North Carolina, by Bill Cecil-Fronsman and Charles Bolton, while interesting and informative, shed little light on the scope and meaning of poor relief.³ Older works by Roy M. Brown, Guion Griffis Johnson, and Benjamin Klebaner generally discuss the scale and legal foundations for public poor relief in antebellum North Carolina, but they lack sufficient analysis. Furthermore, all three focus on the records of a few eastern North Carolina counties, from which they draw conclusions for the whole state. This approach fails to account for the obvious differences between the societies of the coast and those of the mountains that affected the size of the poor population.⁴ North Carolina had a smaller slave population and a smaller plantocracy than other states in the antebellum South, especially Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia, but within the state, variations in population and geography resulted in marked cultural differences. Farmers in eastern North Carolina grew tobacco, rice, and cotton, like their counterparts in Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia. Their farms were, on average, worth more than those in other parts of the state, and they were more likely to own slaves.⁵ Consequently, the social structure of eastern North Carolina had significant similarities with neighboring states. While slavery existed throughout the state, in western North Carolina far fewer slaves were needed, as the mountainous topography discouraged plantation-style agriculture. The proportion of slaveholders in Buncombe County, for example, was about half the state average.⁶ But the enduring myth that only rugged self-sufficient farmers populated the western half of the state has been effectively dispelled by historians John Inscoe and Wilma Dunaway, who have shown convincingly that the society of western North Carolina was far more complex than the simple "self-sufficient farmers" typology allows for.⁷ The average worth of Buncombe County's farms in 1850 was more than

3. Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites: Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992); Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

4. Roy M. Brown, *Public Poor Relief in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1928); Guion Griffis Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937); Benjamin Joseph Klebaner, "Some Aspects of North Carolina Public Poor Relief, 1700-1860," *North Carolina Historical Review* 31 (October 1954): 479-492.

5. The number of farmers in Lenoir County who owned slaves, for example, was double the state average, and their farms were worth more than three times that of the average farm in North Carolina. Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Lenoir County, North Carolina, and Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Lenoir County, North Carolina, Population Schedules, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (microfilm, State Archives).

6. Two hundred eighty-four of Buncombe's 10,610 white people (2.68 percent) were slaveholders in 1860, compared to a state average of 5.5 percent. 1860 Census, Buncombe County, North Carolina: Population Schedule, National Archives (microfilm, State Archives).

7. John C. Inscoe, *Mountain Masters, Slavery, and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 2-5; John C. Inscoe and Gordon B. McKinney, *The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 13; Wilma A. Dunaway, *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 124-125.

one thousand dollars, very close to the state average. Moreover, farmers shared their region with artisans, merchants, lawyers, and clerics.⁸

Nevertheless, a number of individuals barely subsisted on poor quality lands in remote areas of Buncombe County. For most of the antebellum period, Buncombe was the largest and most populous county in western North Carolina, and Asheville was easily the largest town. Yet Buncombe remained an overwhelmingly rural county: only one in ten people lived in Asheville.⁹ There were no private benevolent societies in the county, most likely a result of Asheville's small population and slow social development. Even the county's churches were slow to organize and made few charitable efforts outside their own congregations.¹⁰ Some wealthier citizens of the county informally and individually contributed to poor relief; James E. Patton, for example, endowed free places for "children of poor parentage" at the Newton Academy in his will. However, organized and sustained poor relief was generally a state affair in this rural and mountainous county.¹¹

When Buncombe County was carved out of Burke and Rutherford Counties in 1791, ready-made structures existed to assist the indigent. In colonial North Carolina, the English parish system provided for the poor. Those who had acquired a "legal settlement"—usually by residing in the parish for a year—were entitled to help from the parish if they were unable to support themselves.¹² Assistance usually came in the form of "outdoor" or "outside" relief, in which the poor received assistance while living in their own homes; the system was funded through a local tax raised by the parish. In 1777, responsibility for the poor shifted from an ecclesiastical function to a civil one—that is, from the vestry to wardens of the poor, but the essence of the poor law remained the same.¹³ The county court—the all-inclusive body that dealt with all aspects of local administration before more sophisticated tiers of government were

8. The average value of the 1,105 Buncombe County farms was \$1,144.26, compared to a state average of \$1,191.86. 1850 Census, Buncombe County.

9. In 1850, the federal census counted 13,425 people in Buncombe County, of whom 1,100 lived in Asheville. F. A. Sondley, *A History of Buncombe County, North Carolina*, 2 vols. (Asheville: Advocate Printing Co., 1930), 2:827-828.

10. This pattern emerged despite the existence of Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist churches in Asheville and the surrounding county by the 1830s. In more populous towns and cities religious congregations often took the lead in the creation of benevolent societies. For example, in 1839, Protestant women in Mobile, Alabama, founded the Protestant Orphanage Asylum Society a year after Catholic women had organized the Catholic Female Charitable Society. Harriet E. Amos, *Cotton City: Urban Development in Antebellum Mobile* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985), 174.

11. Will of James E. Patton, October 1, 1835, Book A (1831-1868), p. 111 (microfilm), Buncombe County Wills, State Archives.

12. On the origins of the English poor law, see Paul Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Longman, 1988), especially pages 113-137.

13. See Walter Clark, ed., *The State Records of North Carolina*, 16 vols. (11-26) (Raleigh: State of North Carolina, 1895-1906), 24:89-94. For a brief summary of the colonial poor law, see Brown, *Public Poor Relief*, 18-26; Klebaner, "North Carolina Public Poor Relief"; and Alan D. Watson, "Public Poor Relief in Colonial North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* 54 (October 1977): 347-366.



Buncombe County, the largest and most populous county in western North Carolina in the antebellum period, sustained its poor partly through donations from wealthy individuals but mostly through county taxes. Asheville, located on the French Broad River, is Buncombe's county seat. This engraving, "View of Asheville, N.C., and the Mountains from the Beaux Cacher Knob," is from Henry E. Colton, *Mountain Scenery: The Scenery of the Mountains of Western North Carolina and Southwestern South Carolina* (Raleigh, N.C.: W. L. Pomeroy, 1859), 16.

instituted—was directly responsible for providing for the poor. Court minutes from 1792 to 1803 indicate that the county authorities assisted only seven families; however, there may have been more. The absence of election returns and officials' bonds in that eleven-year period precludes a definitive search for the original wardens. There was no poorhouse or almshouse to shelter needy families; thus the court's assistance usually came in the form of payment to third parties who had taken in paupers and provided them with shelter, food, and clothing. Susannah Baker and her child were assisted in this manner for most of that period.¹⁴ Until the end of 1798, Susannah was housed by Charles Galloway, while from 1799, James Poteet took over the responsibility for her care. Both received one pound, ten shillings per month for providing residential care.¹⁵ John Allen, John Holcombe, and Jesse Bailey took turns housing "old" Stephen Bailey and his wife, Winifred, receiving between twenty-five and thirty pounds per year to cover their expenses.¹⁶ The criteria that the county court used to determine which cases were worthy of support are unclear. The court minutes note payments to and contracts with caregivers, not the circumstances behind the applications for relief, nor cases where the court refused assistance. The fact that Susannah Baker had a child, and evidently no husband, and that the Baileys were probably too old to support themselves, possibly influenced the court to grant poor relief. Either the individual circumstances of those applying for assistance were investigated by a body that has not left any records, or they were sufficiently well known to the officials, and the community, as to render a written record superfluous.

The only case for poor relief documented in any detail is that of Isaac Bates. In October 1798, the clerk of court recorded that Bates was "an invalid, wounded in the revolutionary war, by the Indians in the year 1776"; furthermore, he had "totally lost his right arm . . . and hath long since been a resident of our said County of Buncombe . . . [but] hath no apparent means of acquiring a livelihood, except by manual labour, which he is altogether unable to perform."¹⁷ The fifteen pounds per year that Bates received was the only instance in which the Buncombe County Court ordered cash to be paid directly.¹⁸ Clearly, Bates's injury "in the service of his country" influenced the court, which probably believed it owed some debt of gratitude toward an old soldier who had fallen on hard times through no fault of his own.

As far as it is possible to tell, therefore, no able-bodied men in early Buncombe County received charity, a practice in line with the traditional English model of

14. Baker was first recorded as receiving charity in July 1795 and last recorded in October 1803. BCCM.

15. No reason was noted for the change in lodging, though it probably took place after Galloway's death.

16. The Baileys first received help in October 1798 and were last recorded in April 1803. BCCM.

17. October term, 1798, BCCM. In backdating his claim to 1797, the clerk recorded that Bates had "lately" lost the use of his arm.

18. Bates was paid in arrears and received money for four years, from 1797 to 1800.

charitable provision, whereby only the "impotent" poor were granted relief.¹⁹ The sick, disabled, and aged were suitable objects of charity, as were children. Able-bodied unemployed people were not. Those who were thought capable of working were expected to do so, regardless of mitigating circumstances such as economic downturns and harvest failures. This no doubt placed a burden on families to support indigent relatives when starvation and death might be the alternative. As one historian has argued, this private, informal, and undocumented charity might well have exceeded the amount doled out by official sources, though records to substantiate this suggestion do not survive.²⁰

The county court continued to provide for the poor out of the local tax revenue, while the wardens of the poor were in charge of distributing the poor taxes raised by the county.²¹ In 1823, for example, county residents were required to pay ten cents per year for the support of the poor, as well as three cents for every hundred dollars worth of land and town property they owned.²² The levy was monitored every year and adjusted to meet the varying expenses of the wardens of the poor. From its low point of ten cents in 1823, the poor tax peaked at thirty-five cents in 1854 but was lowered to just fifteen cents two years later, presumably because the expenses of the wardens of the poor had fallen and there was no need to collect more. Yet the average annual amount expended on public poor relief did rise substantially during the antebellum period. Despite yearly fluctuations, poor taxes were generally higher in the 1850s than they had ever been. In 1838, the county had spent just over three hundred dollars on alleviating the sufferings of its most needy citizens. By 1853, the wardens of the poor needed more than eleven hundred dollars for the same purpose.²³ These figures suggest not only that the number of poor people requiring assistance was increasing in the late antebellum period, but also that the officials of Buncombe County had strategies in place for dealing with such contingencies.

19. Slack, *Poverty and Policy*, 62-112.

20. Zachary Ryan Calo, "From Poor Relief to the Poorhouse: The Response to Poverty in Prince George's County, Maryland, 1710-1770," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 93 (winter 1998): 404.

21. Clark, *State Records*, 24:90. Wardens of the poor cared for the old, sick, indigent, and physically and mentally handicapped, overseeing cases, distributing funds, and supervising the operation of institutions. Their name and purpose derive from the colonial church wardens and vestries. See Raymond A. Winslow Jr., "Wardens of the Poor," in *North Carolina Research: Genealogy and Local History*, 2d ed., ed. Helen F. M. Leary (Raleigh, N.C.: North Carolina Genealogical Society, 1996), 283. An interesting online site for research on poorhouses, including those in North Carolina, is www.poorhousestory.com. As no records of Buncombe County's wardens of the poor are extant, the day-to-day workings of poor relief in the county are lost from that date on. Such records were undoubtedly kept, and many survive in other, mainly eastern, counties in North Carolina. Buncombe County's records were probably destroyed during the sacking of Asheville by Union troops in 1865. While the details of poor relief in Buncombe County can therefore never be known with certainty, records of the Buncombe County Court provide much information on poor relief after 1803. Only Cherokee and Ashe Counties, of the westernmost counties in North Carolina, have any extant records of the wardens of the poor.

22. January term, 1824, BCCM.

23. July term, 1842 (the 1838 accounts were presented here), October term, 1853, BCCM. Average poor tax rates were less than fifteen cents before 1850 but nearly twenty-five cents after 1850.

The Wardens have assembled according
to appointment on the 23rd May 1842

303 John Dickson
Isaac Head
Robert Gornhall
Joseph Hill
Beliahah Forences
John Rouse
Sophie Green

May 23 1842 made an
allowance to Robert Chotom
for 6 months from this date
Eight - - Dollars to be put
into the hands of Jonathan How
for said Chotom and if dead
whatsoever amount in value of same
to be lay out a little more

what 20th 1842
Paid \$500 for them
in full \$500

May 23 1842
Head of get
Philip 5
J. Rouse

In 1777, responsibility for the poor shifted from the vestry to the wardens of the poor, a body elected every three years to oversee the poor taxes raised by the county. These officials, most from the county's elite families, determined eligibility for public assistance. Buncombe County's wardens of the poor records have not survived. This page is from Minutes and Accounts, Wardens of the Poor, 1832-1855, Ashe County Miscellaneous Records, State Archives, Office of Archives and History, Raleigh.

Under the statute of 1777, wardens of the poor were to be elected every three years. Most came from the county's wealthiest and most prestigious families, such as the Pattons and the Gudgers.²⁴ While men were sometimes reluctant to serve, in general, the elite shouldered their burden amicably. As John Insoe has pointed out, the elite mountain families were among the first to settle in the most fertile valley locations, ensuring their relative wealth and consequent economic and social preeminence.²⁵ Men from these families went on to occupy nearly all the positions of influence and power in their society. Asheville merchant James W. Patton, for

24. Clark, *State Records*, 24:89, 90. In the 1850 census, only one person who served as a warden of the poor during the following decade had an estate value of less than one thousand dollars. 1850 Census, Buncombe County.

25. Insoe, *Mountain Masters*, 116.

example, served as the superintendent of common schools in 1847, as president of the county court in 1855, and as chairman of the wardens of the poor in 1857.²⁶ Elite men like Patton had cultivated an ethic of social responsibility, viewing public service as a republican virtue. Of course, serving in various official capacities allowed such men to govern public policy directly. As wardens of the poor, they had the final say in determining who was a fit recipient for public assistance and who was not. The power such responsibility conveyed was immense.

The wardens of the poor in each county in North Carolina had wide powers of discretion in determining the level of poor relief offered to inhabitants. A number of factors influenced officials' decisions about the best methods for dealing with the poor. The nationwide asylum movement that aimed to institutionalize the poor, for example, affected Buncombe County. In 1809, the state legislature empowered the county to raise a tax fund in order to purchase a fifty-acre tract within two miles of Asheville "to build a poorhouse thereon."²⁷ Evidently nothing came of this early attempt at institutionalization, but a similar permissive act was passed fifteen years later. This time, the wardens of the poor were instructed to establish a poorhouse and enforce "such rules and regulations as may conduce to the healthy morals and good government of the poor." Specifically, they were to keep the able-bodied poor "at moderate labour" so they would merit the "suitable diet, clothing, lodging and other necessaries" that local taxpayers were providing.²⁸ The exact date of the construction of the poorhouse, or its precise location apart from being on the "west side of French Broad River," is unknown, but apparently it was not a success. In 1846, the county court authorized the wardens of the poor to sell the poorhouse "and to apply the proceeds of the sale to the improvement of the lot adjoining the jail."²⁹ According to Dorothea Dix, whose 1848 survey of North Carolina's provision for the disadvantaged provides the only extant account of the poorhouse, "its remote situation and serious discomforts through bad management led to the entire break-up of the establishment."³⁰ Dix's informant in Asheville explained that the merger of the poorhouse and the jail

26. In the 1850 census, Patton's worth was valued at \$35,000; at the time of his death in 1861, his holdings were worth more than \$100,000. Buncombe County Record of Inventories, 1822-1929, State Archives, February term, 1869, BCCM.

27. "An act to authorise the Wardens of the poor of Buncombe county to purchase a piece of land and build a poorhouse thereon," *Laws of North Carolina*, 1809, ch. 43, p. 20.

28. "An act to authorise the county court of pleas and quarter sessions of the counties of Caswell and Buncombe to appoint Wardens of the poor to build a poor and work house," *Laws of North Carolina*, 1824, ch. 6, sec. 1-4, 53-54.

29. October term, 1846, BCCM.

30. Dorothea L. Dix, *Memorial Soliciting a State Hospital for the Protection and Cure of the Insane: Submitted to the General Assembly of North Carolina, November, 1848* (Raleigh, N.C.: Seaton Gales, 1848), 18. The poorhouse was probably constructed in the late 1820s, but no county court records survive from that period. For more on the asylum movement nationally, see Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 94. On the passage of the acts permitting poorhouse construction, see Klebaner, "Public Poor Relief," 482.



James W. Patton, an Asheville merchant and hotel operator, was among the elite men who viewed public service as an ethical responsibility. He served as superintendent of common schools in 1847, as president of the Buncombe County Court in 1855, and as chairman of the wardens of the poor in 1857. Portrait of Patton reproduced courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.

onto one site saved the county money, but the facilities apparently did not impress the poor. Dix was told that "but one pauper has been sent to jail, and he ran away dissatisfied with his quarters, in about three weeks."³¹

By 1850, the federal census recorded only five inmates of the poorhouse, three men and two women. The criteria for admission to the poorhouse seem to have been age and infirmity, traditionally those used to determine who was a fit object for county help. One inmate was eighty-year-old Nancy Campbell; another was Levi Windows, recorded as being "blind and subject to fits."³² The number of residents was most likely small because few paupers were willing to live in an institution. Like their counterparts in eastern North Carolina, paupers in Buncombe County probably viewed living in the poorhouse as conferring "disgrace and infamous notoriety." They were "too proud

31. Dix, *Memorial*, 19.

32. 1850 Census, Buncombe County: Free Population Schedule, National Archives (microfilm 432, reel 622), 616: household 1538.

to go to the poor house. Many of them rather suffer than go there."³³ Thus the poorhouse became an expensive white elephant, costing money to staff and maintain while housing few paupers. It is not surprising, then, that the wardens closed the poorhouse in the mid-1850s and reverted to the strategy of outdoor relief used by the county court between 1792 and 1803. At its quarterly meeting in December 1858, the wardens distributed \$283.04 for the upkeep of thirty individuals, many of whom were being cared for by other family members. A Mrs. Randle received ten dollars "in support of her daughter," while James Reed received five dollars "for support of his mother," and John Parham received five dollars in "support of his sister."³⁴ The case of Sarah Lankford is particularly interesting. In April 1832, a penniless Sarah indentured her thirteen-year-old son, Berry, to Joseph R. Brank, who agreed to give him one year of schooling, clothing, and a horse worth fifty dollars, far more than Sarah could have provided. Sixteen years later, Berry, now a farmer with real estate valued at two hundred dollars, agreed to take care of his mother, providing the wardens of the poor contributed \$2.50 a month for her upkeep.³⁵ Other residents received money for "keeping" unrelated paupers in their own homes and providing necessary goods for them. Albert Ingle, for instance, cared for Elizabeth Lovely at the rate of \$12.50 per quarter. Tellingly, three people who had been poorhouse inmates in 1850 were now being helped in this fashion.³⁶ Buncombe's experiment with institutionalization had evidently failed.

With Buncombe's white population of over ten thousand in the 1850s, the provision of official charity to probably less than a hundred people over the course of a year seems meager, but it was comparable to other rural areas of the South.³⁷ Moreover, the county's funding of outdoor and occasionally indoor, or institutional, relief for the poor was only a part of the network of assistance available to the poor of Buncombe County.

When the county court delegated responsibility for the indigent to the wardens of the poor in 1803, it retained control over two aspects of poor relief that required legal

33. William D. Valentine Diary, volume 12: February 28, 1852-March 16, 1853, May 4, 1852, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, hereinafter cited as Valentine Diary.

34. *Asheville News*, January 13, 1859. In the 1860 census, John Parham's sister, Sarah, was recorded as being an "idiot," most likely the reason she received poor relief. 1860 Census, Buncombe County: Free Population Schedule, National Archives (microfilm 653, reel 889), household 537.

35. *Asheville News*, January 13, 1859; April term, 1832, BCCM. Sarah Lankford, sixty-six, still lived with her forty-two-year-old son, his wife, and their five children when the 1860 census was taken. 1860 Census, Buncombe County: Free Population Schedule, (microfilm 653, reel 889), household 110.

36. *Asheville News*, January 13, 1859. By 1858, Mrs. Sally Glenn, described in 1850 as "rheumatic," was being cared for by Mrs. Starnes. John Thompson, now nearly seventy years old, lived with Mr. T. A. Starnes, and Nancy Campbell, in her late eighties, lived with Mrs. Bates. It is telling that of the several individuals known to be paupers in 1858, none were identified by that label in the 1860 census, perhaps signifying a reluctance to admit an impoverished condition to the enumerators. 1860 Census, Buncombe County.

37. Johnson, "Poor Relief in Antebellum Mississippi," 1.



In 1824, during the nationwide asylum movement, the state legislature authorized construction of a poorhouse on the "west side of French Broad River." The institution was rebuilt on a lot adjacent to the county jail, but few paupers were willing to live there. The poorhouse was closed in the mid-1850s, with the county again providing "outdoor relief" to those in need, often the aged and infirm. This engraving, titled "View of Black Mountain from Glass's House," is from Rebecca Harding Davis, "By-Paths in the Mtns.," Part 2, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 61 (August 1880): 362.

contracts: the binding out of orphans and providing for the support of bastard children. The county court had the power to compel fathers to support illegitimate children, mainly to prevent any child from becoming "a county charge," given that the child's mother might not be able to support it.³⁸ The father was normally ordered to pay twenty dollars per year to the mother until the child was three, presumably because at that age the child would either be bound out, or as the child would have been weaned, the mother would have been able to work to support it. Some fathers agreed to pay "all costs" associated with the upkeep of the child, effectively publicly confirming that the oath sworn by the mother as to the identity of the father was correct. Not all fathers were ready to take on such responsibilities, however. Henry

38. July term, 1848, BCCM.

Hunt, for example, insisted that a jury decide whether he was the father of Nancy Cload's baby, as she alleged. If he hoped that an all-male jury would sympathize with him, he was wrong. The jury agreed with Nancy as to Henry's culpability.³⁹ The county court, however, did not always support the mother's case; some men indeed were accused falsely. Moses Mayfield, for example, was found by a jury not to be the father of Ann Edmonds's child.⁴⁰

Ensuring that illegitimate children did not become destitute was only one part of the court's guardianship of the young. The 1715 Act Concerning Orphans empowered North Carolina parishes, later counties, to bind out orphans to those able to care for them. The court interpreted "orphans" somewhat loosely, as was traditional throughout the South in the early nineteenth century. Children under the age of twenty-one without parents were naturally included, but so were those with one parent living who was unable to provide support. For children with property, precinct courts were authorized to "Grant Letters of Tuition or Guardianship . . . for the care of bringing up Education of all Orphans & for the taking care of their Estates. . . ." For children who had little or no property, the act required apprenticeships: ". . . such Orphan [sic] shall be bound Apprentice to some Handycraft Trade (the Master or Mistress of such Orphan not being of the Profession of the People called Quakers) till they shall come of Age. . . ."⁴¹ Parents who indentured their children knew they were surrendering all legal authority over them to a master or mistress, losing even the right to see them. Only parents who knew they would be unable to give their children the best start in life took this sort of desperate, selfless action. Three-year-old Mary McEntire, for example, was offered for indenture by her mother after her father "absconded from his family" shortly after Mary's birth.⁴² As a single parent, Mrs. McEntire, who may well have had other children, knew that the education and training offered by farmer Henry Wells, Mary's new caretaker and master, was far above anything she herself might have offered.⁴³ It was not just mothers who were unable to cope with all the pressure of parenthood. Andrew Randall "surrendered" his children, John and Jane, to be indentured to George Robison because he simply could not afford to care for them himself.⁴⁴ Once they had been indentured, very few children were returned to their parents, who were required to demonstrate a new-found ability to maintain their

39. July term 1823, BCCM. Some fathers trying to avoid payment appealed their convictions to the county superior court. See the cases of Newton H. Alexander and David Brooks, July term, 1833, and January term, 1844, BCCM.

40. January term, 1833, BCCM.

41. Clark, *State Records*, 23:70, 71. See also Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 703.

42. April term, 1845, BCCM.

43. In 1850, Wells had an estate valued at two hundred dollars. 1850 Census, Buncombe County.

44. October term, 1849, BCCM.

children's health, education, and well-being if they wanted to resume their parental duties.⁴⁵

On average, the Buncombe County Court indentured five or six children per year between 1792 and 1860.⁴⁶ But this average masks a wide fluctuation in the number of cases. For example, in 1840, only one child was bound out; in 1849, eighteen were indentured. Generally, more children were bound out in the later antebellum period than at the start of the nineteenth century, as Buncombe County's population grew.⁴⁷ The fact that there were always enough local people willing to support orphans, often for ten, fifteen, sometimes even twenty years, is revealing. Residents clearly considered caring for homeless or indigent children an important social responsibility. While most masters took in only one child, some accepted whole families, suggesting that the free labor of the apprentices might have been a significant consideration. Historian Wilma Dunaway has skillfully asserted the importance of indentured labor in Appalachia, and undoubtedly children could contribute much to the household economy.⁴⁸ It was perhaps for this reason that Charles Slaigle accepted charge of Ephraim Ledbetter in 1838, only months after Elizabeth Goodwin, who had been with Slaigle for fifteen years, reached her majority.⁴⁹

While officials of the county court accepted the fact that masters might benefit from the labor of indentured children in return for providing a home and care for the child, they were not willing to allow them to abuse that system. They continued to monitor children, who officially remained wards of the court. Consequently, when the court heard reports that children were not receiving the care specified under the contract of indenture, it summoned masters to answer for their behavior. John Jefferson Cogburn, for example, was indentured to Joseph Lance at the age of eight in 1842. Five years later Lance was summoned to appear before the court to "show cause, if any he can, why the said boy shall not be rebound to someone else." Evidently, he could not show sufficient "cause," and Cogburn was rebound to twenty-five-year-old farmer John Frady at the next session of the court. Why Lance was deemed an

45. For an interesting article that discusses the struggles between parents and benevolent societies over the control of children, see Barbara L. Bellows, "My Children, Gentlemen, Are My Own": Poor Women, the Urban Elite, and the Bonds of Obligation in Antebellum Charleston," in *The Web of Southern Social Relations: Women, Family, and Education*, ed. Walter J. Fraser Jr., R. Frank Saunders Jr., and Jon L. Wakelyn (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 52-71.

46. Two hundred sixty-seven children were indentured in these years, but minutes do not exist from 1796 to 1798, 1812 to 1822, and 1824 to 1832.

47. Twenty-six children were indentured between 1800 and 1810, compared to sixty-three between 1850 and 1860, a rise of 242 percent. According to the federal census, the population of Buncombe County rose from 5,812 in 1800 to 12,654 in 1860, a rise of 218 percent. Sondley, *A History of Buncombe County*, 2:827.

48. Dunaway argues that 15 percent of the work force in Appalachia was indentured. Dunaway, *The First American Frontier*, 114.

49. Goodwin was indentured in October 1822 and reached her majority on October 22, 1837. Ledbetter was indentured in February 1838 until he reached his majority on December 6, 1854. October term, 1822, February term, 1838, BCCM.



Besides overseeing poor relief, the wardens of the poor also controlled the binding out of orphans and children whose parents were unable to provide support. Between 1792 and 1860, Buncombe County indentured an average of five or six children per year. Young street peddlers, as depicted here in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (August 1858): 300, might have been likely candidates for indenture.

unsuitable master is not clear. He may have abused the boy or failed to provide him with the education he originally promised, but whatever the reason, the court was satisfied that Cogburn's best interests lay with someone else.⁵⁰

In addition to protecting indentured children from abuse, the county court also sought to preserve the estates of orphans who did not come from impoverished families. Accidents, disease, war, or the death of a mother during childbirth also affected children of wealthy families. While these children were more likely to find a relative to care for them without recourse to the county court, those left without guardians were indentured in much the same way as those from more humble backgrounds.⁵¹ Yet the county court's differential treatment of children starkly reveals

50. October term, 1842, January, April terms, 1847, BCCM. John Frayday [sic] was worth four hundred dollars according to the 1850 census, and either by accident or design, John Jefferson Cogburn was listed as Jefferson Frayday. By 1850, Lance had left Buncombe County. 1850 Census, Buncombe County.

51. Binding records indicate that, even though young children were essentially being fostered, they were nevertheless considered servants, and their caretakers were legally termed "masters." Orphans with sufficient estates were not apprenticed; their caretakers were legally termed "guardians." Beginning in 1755, following instances of fraud, guardians were required to lodge a bond with the court to ensure the

their social origins. Martha Roberts, for example, was to receive "good wearing apparel suitable for a young Lady" upon reaching the age of eighteen, as well as a bed and furniture worth twenty-five dollars. Mary and Susan Higgins, by contrast, would get nothing more than a Bible and a hymnbook from their master, while Mills Henderson was to receive "common wearing apparel suitable to his condition in life."⁵² Buncombe County officials evidently did not see any need to encourage social equality among their charges, preferring to use the indenture system to respect and reinforce existing social hierarchies.

This differential between rich and poor was not confined to white children. Free black orphans indentured by the court shared some commonalities, such as being denied access to education, yet important differences remained. James Baird only got "one good suit" from his master, while Joseph Wright received two suits of homespun and a horse, saddle, and bridle worth one hundred dollars. Several other free black children were to be taught a trade, such as carpentry or masonry, that could support them as adults.⁵³ Free blacks were most likely treated preferentially if they had white fathers. Indeed, it is possible that their masters in some instances *were* their fathers, though without further evidence this is impossible to prove.

Family background was not the only criteria used by the court to determine the care offered to orphan children. A wide gender imbalance existed among those receiving care, with boys making up more than two-thirds of those indentured. Considering that the numbers of boys and girls in the county were roughly equal, the court's priority treatment of boys suggests how western North Carolinians understood the nature of family support.⁵⁴ Boys would be the future breadwinners; therefore their education and training were vital to breaking the cycle of poverty and dependence. With the skills provided by their masters, boys could maintain themselves and a family—at least that was the idea. Girls, on the other hand, were unlikely to embark on a trade, and their future dependence as wives and mothers meant that they needed less training in specific skills.

The gender prioritization of boys in Buncombe County contrasted starkly with charitable provision in eastern North Carolina and elsewhere in the South. In most southern cities, elite women formed female benevolent societies expressly concerned with assisting poor white girls. Women in Baltimore, Richmond, and Savannah, among other places, went out of their way to ensure that girls were educated and

responsible management of an orphan's estate. Alan D. Watson, "Orphanage in Colonial North Carolina: Edgecombe County as a Case Study," *North Carolina Historical Review* 52 (April 1975): 106.

52. October term, 1847, April term, 1857, July term, 1853, BCCM. In 1850, Mary Higgins was the youngest of five siblings living with their sixty-four-year-old grandmother, Margaret.

53. January term, 1859, February term, 1843, BCCM. For examples of free blacks being bound to learn a trade, see October term, 1848, October term, 1855, and July term, 1857, BCCM.

54. Among those under nineteen years of age, boys constituted 51 percent, girls, 49 percent, in both the 1850 and 1860 Buncombe County censuses.

trained in seamstressing and domestic work that would enable them to support themselves in adulthood.⁵⁵ Women in eastern North Carolina also singled out poor white girls for assistance. Organizers of the Female Orphan Asylum Society of Fayetteville, incorporated by the state in 1813, declared that they "intend to board, clothe, and educate [young girls], and when properly qualified and of suitable ages, to have them bound out to suitable trades, whereby they may become useful members of society." By 1822, girls in New Bern, Wilmington, and Raleigh were able to take advantage of similar offers of help.⁵⁶

In the mountains surrounding Asheville, however, no exclusively female benevolent societies existed to advocate for girls and young women during the indenture process. Such an organization might have served as a counterweight to the court's emphasis on the future prospects of boys when determining indentures. The details of the contracts between masters and the court reveal how far the gender differential translated into practice. From 1822, masters were obliged to provide schooling and training as well as normal sustenance for the children in their care, and many also had to provide goods and even cash payments to the children at the end of their indentures. About a fifth of the indentured boys were offered the chance to learn a trade, and those who eventually became blacksmiths, masons, carpenters, and plasterers would have had good prospects for future economic security.⁵⁷ Girls rarely had similar opportunities to learn skills such as seamstressing, millinery, or mantua-making; the training they did receive was usually of a more general sort. Some girls were to be given a spinning wheel upon turning eighteen, signifying some concern by the court for their future employment, but these girls were certainly in the minority. No master was instructed to give a girl a spinning wheel after 1853.⁵⁸ When girls were free from indentures, it was far more common for them to receive a bed and other furniture, clearly signaling the court's belief that homemaking would be a high priority in their lives.⁵⁹ At the age of eighteen, some girls even received a cow and calf, perhaps as a form of dowry for a

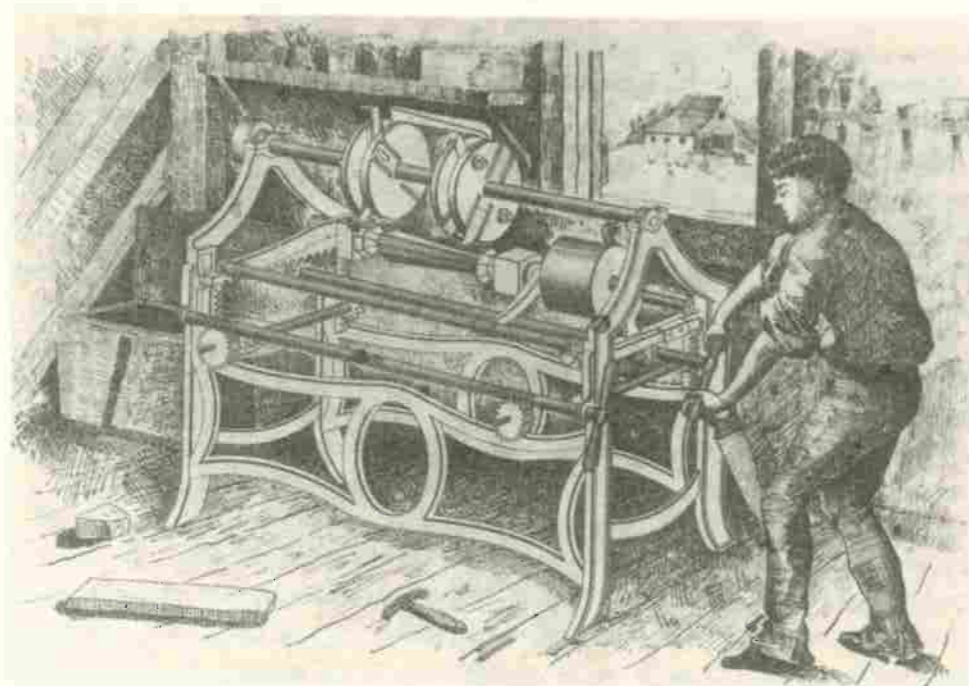
55. See, for example, the minutes of the Savannah Female Asylum, 1811-1843, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah. On the lives of working women, see Michele Gillespie and Susanna Delfino, eds., *Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

56. The Newbern Female Charitable Society was founded in 1812, the Female Benevolent Society of Wilmington in 1817, and the Raleigh Female Benevolent Society by 1822. Charles L. Coon, *The Beginnings of Public Education in North Carolina: A Documentary History, 1790-1840* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1908), 83, 91 (quotation), 166, 208.

57. Thirty-three of the 126 boys offered anything received such training, most commonly in blacksmithing (9). In contrast, orphans in colonial Edgecombe County were most likely to be trained as farmers. Watson, "Orphanage in Colonial North Carolina," 109.

58. Only eleven out of the fifty-two girls who received anything got a spinning wheel. Conversely, orphan girls in Cumberland County in 1800 were regularly ordered to be trained in "housewifery" and spinning. Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 705.

59. Forty-one of fifty-two girls who received anything got a bed and furniture. BCCM, 1792-1860.



Indentured boys often learned to become blacksmiths, masons, carpenters, and plasterers; girls rarely had similar opportunities. This engraving of a young apprentice in "Wood Working-turning" is from Benjamin Butterworth, comp., *The Growth of Industrial Art* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1888), 200.

future husband.⁶⁰ Boys never received such domestic appurtenances; instead, about a third received a horse, saddle, and bridle worth between forty-five and one hundred dollars.⁶¹ One of the keys to economic security in the mountains was mobility, so the ability to travel to find work gave these boys a comparative advantage over others who were not so fortunate.

In line with state law, most children indentured after 1846 received a Bible and a hymnbook.⁶² The provision of religious texts to poor children coincided with the court's new interest in overseeing the morality of their charges. For example, in October 1842, the court ordered Rosannah and Mary Edmonds "bound to some person properly calculated to raise them," a clear criticism of their unmarried mother, Ann, while in 1858, the master of Jenetta Bassett was instructed to "give her good proper moral instruction."⁶³ In the later years of the antebellum era, therefore, the court was not only interested in ensuring that poor children were cared for, but also that they were cared for in the right way.

60. Fourteen of the fifty-two girls who received anything got a cow and calf. BCCM, 1792-1860.

61. Exact figures were 43 of 126 boys. BCCM, 1792-1860.

62. Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, 703.

63. October term, 1842, April term, 1858, BCCM.

The vast majority of those indentured after 1822 were to receive some form of education, the exceptions mainly being free black children, none of whom were to attend school.⁶⁴ In the 1820s and 1830s, little difference can be discerned between the amount of education girls and boys were to receive. For example, in October 1824, seven-year-old William Arrington and his four-year-old sister, Emily, were indentured to Peter Tredway, who promised to give them both two years of schooling.⁶⁵ This reflected a contemporary emphasis on female education and republican motherhood. Articles printed in the Asheville *Highland Messenger* emphasized the mother's role in teaching children. Moreover, properly educated women would have a good influence on their husbands and therefore enhance "the moral character of families."⁶⁶ But in reality, girls were increasingly being discriminated against by the court, despite the rhetoric of newspapers. By the 1850s, boys were generally receiving more schooling than girls. Jonathan Cogdell, for instance, was to receive three years of schooling, while his sister, Charlotte, was to receive only two.⁶⁷ While literacy and numeracy were seen to be essential skills for both boys and girls, Buncombe County officials believed that boys needed more education than girls to prepare them for their adult lives, and they acted accordingly in providing those opportunities.

The court's insistence that masters provide any education at all for their charges is revealing. Historians have long argued that public education became popular among elites in the first half of the nineteenth century because it offered the chance to reduce disorder and immorality. Poor people would learn to become "useful members of society," knowing their proper place, no longer tempted by the grog shops, gambling dens, and houses of ill fame found in most cities. Education was to be used as a tool to make society more harmonious.⁶⁸ While most historians of antebellum moral reform have focused on northern states, there were also southern equivalents. Southern elites not only expressed similar concerns about moral decay and the dissolute life-styles of the poor, but they also responded by forming benevolent societies with aims broadly similar to those in northern cities.⁶⁹ The advantages of a population well versed in "virtue and piety" were not lost on the citizens of Asheville, who foresaw an era when western

64. Free black children often received a larger cash payment from their masters at the end of their term, almost in lieu of an education. Both Leander Foster and Henry J. Hyatt, for example, were to receive fifty dollars cash. October term, 1855, June term, 1846, BCCM.

65. October term, 1824, BCCM.

66. See *Highland Messenger* (Asheville, N.C.), January 8, March 12, July 2, 1841, June 5, 1846.

67. October term, 1850, BCCM.

68. See, for example, C. S. Griffin, *The Ferment of Reform, 1830-1860* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 17; Carl F. Kaestle, *The Evolution of an Urban School System: New York City, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 18-23; Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 34-35; Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 11.

69. See Bellows, *Benevolence among Slaveholders*, 135.

North Carolina would be famous for its "prosperity and employment."⁷⁰ But achieving a reformation of public attitudes required the assistance and cooperation of the state.

North Carolina led southern states in providing free state-funded education for its citizens. As early as 1804, Gov. James Turner argued that public funding for education was vital so that "the children of the poorest citizens might have access, at least, to necessary instruction."⁷¹ The state was slow to act on these promptings, as it was not until 1839 that the legislature finally passed a common schools act that devolved money from the state Literary Fund, established in 1825, to the counties to spend on providing free education to all children.⁷² With the passage of the common schools act of 1839, the county was able to recoup two-thirds of the cost of providing education from the state, though this ratio was not strictly adhered to.⁷³ Buncombe County quickly became one of the first to vote in support of the school law and implement it.⁷⁴

Before common schools were established, education in Buncombe County was limited to a few private schools, such as the Union Hill Academy. Outside Asheville, some children had the opportunity to attend the so-called "field schools."⁷⁵ It was probably to these schools that masters sent poor children in order to fulfill the terms of their indentures. Despite the introduction of free education in 1839, which presumably would appeal to parents, the fee-paying schools continued to thrive. Apparently, some of the county's wealthiest citizens held some elitist pretensions. Even though the common school system raised the tax burden for all, many recognized the social advantages the new policy would bring. In addition to creating "a decent, orderly, and respectable population," schooling would inculcate children with "the value of justice, order and moral worth," while keeping "the foundations of society safe."⁷⁶ Those most in need of this type of indoctrination were the children of the poor; as a result, those who could afford it continued to send their children to fee-paying schools. Some educational reformers knew that this discrimination would attach a stigma to those who sent their children to a common school, and consequently they urged

70. *Highland Messenger*, June 26, 1840, June 25, 1841.

71. Coon, *The Beginnings of Public Education*, 49.

72. Coon, *The Beginnings of Public Education*, 889.

73. In 1841, for example, Buncombe County received \$794 from the state but only contributed \$126 from local taxes toward the \$920 actually spent on education during the year. *Highland Messenger*, August 20, 1841. In 1842, the "school tax" was ten cents per poll and per three hundred dollars of taxable property, rising to 12.5 cents in 1851. February term, 1843, April term, 1851, BCCM. During the 1850s, the county's share of the state Literary Fund was \$2,961.12, based on the county's population of 12,338 as enumerated in the 1850 Buncombe County census. That amount, supplemented by a local contribution, remained the same throughout the decade. *Asheville News*, November 9, 1854, November 11, 1858.

74. *Raleigh Register*, August 24, 1839; *Highland Messenger*, February 12, 1841.

75. Union Hill Academy was founded in 1793. Between 1797 and 1814, its principal was Presbyterian minister Rev. George Newton. It was later renamed the Newton Academy. See Ora Blackmun, *A Spire in the Mountains: The Story of 176 Years of a Church and a Town Growing Together, 1794-1969* (Asheville, N.C.: First Presbyterian Church, 1970), 14-21. By 1842, a female academy and another male academy had opened in Asheville. *Highland Messenger*, December 16, 1842. For a colorful description of North Carolina's field schools, see Valentine Diary, volume 14: February 24, 1854-June 2, 1855, April 27, May 3, 4, 1854.

76. *Highland Messenger*, March 11, 1842, June 26, 1840.

wealthier parents to forsake academies in favor of common schools. Those who did, they were told, would be giving "early lessons in republican equality" to poor children.⁷⁷

Perhaps because of the attitude of some elite parents, the reaction of many of the ordinary citizens of Buncombe County to the introduction of common schools was rather half-hearted, as indeed it was in other parts of the state.⁷⁸ Despite the initial optimism of newspaper editors that "in almost every place the people have manifested a desire to avail themselves of the benefit of the act of the last legislature," this enthusiasm waned rather quickly.⁷⁹ Unless the attitudes of poor parents could be changed, there was no hope of improving the embarrassing statistic provided by the 1840 census that North Carolina had the highest proportion of illiterate people of any state in the Union.⁸⁰ The *Highland Messenger* lamented the "ignorant, vicious, and lazy parents" who permitted their children to "grow up without even the cultivation of those habits of industry and those principles of moral honesty necessary to enable them to procure for themselves the necessaries of life." Failure to address the problem, warned an editorial, would threaten "the safety of the nation" because the American citizens of the future would no longer be aware of their responsibilities to the republic.⁸¹ "Cadmus," writing in 1846, criticized the parents of the county for "imagining they discharge their duty in relation to [their] children by giving them a few months tuition in the year, while the rest of the time is allowed up in physical labor and mental forgetfulness." "Cadmus" was perhaps being unrealistic to imagine that poor parents, with crops to harvest, would allow their labor pool to be monopolized by learning, but he himself attributed the poor attendance of indigent children to "the incompetency of the teachers." "Cadmus's" real target was the lack of money forthcoming from the county to match state funding for common schools. If more money were available, his argument ran, the county would be able to attract better qualified teachers who would enthruse their pupils with the virtues of learning.⁸²

The appointment of Calvin H. Wiley as the state superintendent of common schools in 1852 was a sign that education was moving up the political agenda in North Carolina. If nothing else, Wiley ensured that annual reports to the state legislature on the condition of the common school system would be submitted. Promoters of

77. *Highland Messenger*, June 25, 1841.

78. See, for example, the description of citizens' apathy toward a common school in Winton, Hertford County, in the Valentine Diary, volume 6: April 22, 1842-July 10, 1844, May 3, 1842, and volume 9: February 11, 1848-July 17, 1849, July 14, 1848.

79. *Highland Messenger*, June 5, 1840. One correspondent to the *Highland Messenger* even suggested that the attitudes of politicians toward common schools could determine the outcome of elections. *Highland Messenger*, June 26, 1840.

80. *Highland Messenger*, January 21, 1842. According to the 1850 census, literacy rates actually fell during the 1840s, from 89 percent to 87 percent of white adults in North Carolina. In Buncombe County, literacy rates also fell slightly, from 86 percent to 85 percent. These percentages are for the white adult population and do not include school-age children.

81. *Highland Messenger*, April 21, 1843.

82. *Highland Messenger*, May 22, 1846.

education knew that North Carolina's achievements paled in comparison to those of the New England states. They knew that much remained to be done to bring tens of thousands of unschooled children within the orbit of the common school system, but generally they were proud of what had been accomplished from such a low base.⁸³

In 1853, Wiley reported that forty-two of the fifty-eight school districts in Buncombe County actually had functioning schools. Moreover, just over half of the white children in the county were receiving some form of education, a proportion that was in line with the rest of the state. School was a periodic event, usually only operating for a few months per year, with the twenty-eight licensed teachers receiving between ten and sixteen dollars per month.⁸⁴ Most of the common schools seem to have been in remote areas, and as late as 1856 there was no free school in Asheville itself.⁸⁵ This may have been because Asheville's population was more prosperous than the county as a whole and so could generally afford to pay the fees of private academies that were concentrated in the city, but it also reflects Asheville's small size. Fewer than one in ten Buncombe County residents lived in the town.

It is clear from Wiley's annual reports that during the 1850s the common school system was gaining strength and popularity in Buncombe County. By 1860, there were six more schools than in 1853 and twice as many teachers, twelve of whom were female. Most importantly, three-quarters of eligible children actually attended school during the year.⁸⁶ The trend in Buncombe was mirrored elsewhere in western North Carolina. Of the five westernmost counties of Buncombe, Cherokee, Haywood, Henderson, and Macon, only Cherokee County had fewer children in the common school system than the state average of 52 percent.⁸⁷ While more money from the state undoubtedly helped to fund more teachers and construct more schools, this would have been irrelevant without the willingness of poor parents in western North Carolina to send their children to school. All the statistical evidence suggests that in 1860, they were more willing than ever to do this.⁸⁸

83. *Highland Messenger*, May 22, 1846. See also W. W. Holden's address before the State Educational Association as reported in the *Asheville News*, August 13, 1857. In 1858, Wiley estimated that illiteracy among those under twenty-one had fallen to just 2 percent. *Asheville News*, April 29, 1858.

84. *First Annual Report of the General Superintendent of Common Schools* (Raleigh, N.C.: W. W. Holden, 1854), appendix.

85. *Asheville News*, April 17, 1856.

86. *Report of the General Superintendent of Common Schools for the Year 1860* (Raleigh, N.C.: Holden and Wilson, 1861), 14.

87. *Report of the General Superintendent, 1860*, 14. The proportions were Buncombe, 74 percent; Cherokee, 42 percent; Macon, 56 percent; Haywood, 65 percent; and Henderson, 59 percent. In 1850, Buncombe and nearby Rutherford Counties had the two highest enrollment figures of children in public schools in North Carolina.

88. State income for education grew to \$8,612.48 in 1860. *Report of the General Superintendent, 1860*, 19. Charles Bolton argues that the children of yeomen were more likely to attend school than those from very poor families, but without detailed class attendance lists for Buncombe County, this contention is impossible to prove. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South*, 55. Calvin Wiley himself acknowledged that "we cannot educate these people against their will." *Report of the General Superintendent of Common Schools for the Year 1858* (Raleigh, N.C.: Holden and Wilson, 1859), 34.

Female Education.

How little do the people of this country understand the importance of this subject! Politicians and scholars and bankers may say what they please about the chief interest of the nation: we can make good the assertion that no concern is more essential to the real and permanent welfare of any people than the training of females. They deserve parental care to educate them well; and if their claims are disregarded, so in general will the mental wants of the rougher sex. Their influence in the world is, and ought to be powerful. If prepared to exert their power and to do it well, they can and will do much good: if degraded and neglected in regard to mental and moral culture, they can surely do little good, and will probably do much harm. In all civilized countries they silently exercise a soft and kindly power—where their characters are good—and a sad and dangerous one—where they are corrupt.—No man that is acquainted with the modern history of Europe can be ignorant of what important effects are attributed to female influence in the management of public affairs. Benevolent and religious institutions, the current opinion of the day, the customs of society, and the moral character of families and communities, are in a great measure controlled and moulded by women.

By the 1840s, newspaper editorials were emphasizing republican motherhood and advocating education for women, especially in order to teach their children properly and promote "the moral character of families." This editorial is from the *Highland Messenger*, March 12, 1841.

Historians of the common school movement have argued that the small and scattered population of the South, its economic dependence on staples that accentuated periods of economic uncertainty, and, most importantly, the existence of an aristocratic pro-slavery plantocracy mitigated against acceptance of free public education.⁸⁹ While this is no doubt true with regard to some areas of the South, especially Virginia, in other states, including North Carolina, the concept took hold. By the 1850s, poor parents increasingly supported common schooling, perhaps because the idea was becoming politically significant; conceivably, education for the poor could be used as a tool to meld southern society. With increased sectional tensions, elites throughout the

89. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 204.

southern states sought to minimize the potential threat posed by poor white non-slaveholders to the status quo. It became vitally important to ensure that ordinary southerners knew which side they should support in any future conflict between North and South. Several historians have examined the variety of different, often interlocking, strategies used by elites to promote social cohesion.⁹⁰ Missing from these interpretations is an understanding of how important public poor relief was in making the poor "stakeholders" in their society.

In North Carolina, educational reformers clearly altered their rhetoric to reflect the changing purpose of providing free schooling to the poor. Instead of stressing the role that education might play in reducing social problems through the indoctrination of "the purest morality," those promoting schooling began to argue that the poor needed to be taught how important they were for the southern cause.⁹¹ Calvin Wiley claimed he had always hoped "that the Common Schools would be instrumental in producing a more homogeneous and a more united people," and to this end, he had ensured that approved school texts in North Carolina were "designed to develop and foster a love of home."⁹² One contributor to the *North Carolina Journal of Education* suggested that a proper southern education would make the poor youth "even more eager for the perpetuity of the state, than were his ancestors before him"⁹³ In 1860, Wiley argued in his annual report that "the enlightenment of all the governing race of the country was a social, industrial, and political necessity of the first importance."⁹⁴ Furthermore, he stressed the "mutual dependence" of all citizens on each other, noting that any "breach between classes of citizens, is just as dangerous as efforts to excite slaves to insurrection." He praised the school system that told the poor "you are welcome here, and your wants appreciated."⁹⁵ A year later, with North Carolina on the brink of secession, Wiley argued that it was even more important to "preserve the social distinctions between the races" by educating poor whites.⁹⁶ The wide dissemination of these writings—to colleges, newspaper offices, and local councils—ensured that these

90. Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Lacy K. Ford Jr., *The Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Timothy James Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

91. North Carolina governor Benjamin Smith, 1811 message, in Coon, *The Beginnings of Public Education*, 80.

92. *Report of Common Schools for 1858*, 10 (first quotation); Calvin Wiley, "Education, the Best Defence," *North Carolina Journal of Education* 3 (February 1860): 60 (second quotation).

93. "Education Necessary to the Preservation of Liberty," *North Carolina Journal of Education* 1 (March 1858): 80.

94. *Report of the General Superintendent of Common Schools for the Year 1859* (Raleigh, N.C.: Holden and Wilson, 1860), 14.

95. *Report of Common Schools for 1859*, 37-39.

96. *Report of Common Schools for 1860*, part 2, 14.

sentiments were read by many influential people. It was perhaps by suggesting that education was a patriotic activity, and that it was the one factor that would differentiate poor whites from blacks who were denied access to learning, that reformers were able to persuade poor parents that sending their children to school was the right thing to do.

Public poor relief in Buncombe County clearly had multiple aims. Most obviously, it was intended to alleviate the worst cases of want among the destitute poor, but only for those few people who were otherwise incapable of caring for themselves. Individuals deemed physically and mentally capable of self-assistance were not fit objects of charity. Secondly, it aimed to provide for children whose parents were no longer able to care for them adequately, but it did so via a system of indenture that was flexible enough to maintain the social differentiation between the orphans of wealthy families and those who were from more modest backgrounds. Finally, after 1839, public poor relief sought to bring education to the masses who otherwise would have remained on the margins of society. It is clear that public poor relief had a conservative agenda in antebellum Buncombe County, aiming to reinforce existing social, gender, and racial hierarchies rather than reform them by encouraging mobility and opportunity for the poor. Indeed, the operation of poor relief was probably more conservative in western North Carolina than in eastern parts of the state where, for example, there was explicit recognition of the needs of girls. Nevertheless, the assistance offered to Buncombe County's poor population was more important, both politically and socially, than most historians have previously acknowledged. Education was used to help create a unified social ethic in western North Carolina, a vital step for successfully establishing white solidarity on the eve of the Civil War.⁹⁷ It is possible to argue that most white citizens in western North Carolina supported the Confederacy partly because a state-sponsored education had instilled in them the "love of home" as a virtue. The lack of such teaching in eastern Tennessee—in many ways a very similar society to that of western North Carolina—might explain the greater support for the Union on the western side of the state line.⁹⁸ Understanding the role that public education and poor relief played in society can begin to explain the ultimate support of Buncombe citizens for the Civil War.

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97. Although western North Carolina was often perceived as disloyal during the war, in fact, many of the deserters who took refuge in the mountains were from outside the state or from other parts of North Carolina. At the beginning of the war, the rate of enlistment in Buncombe and other western counties was significantly higher than the state average. Richard Reid, "A Test Case of the 'Crying Evil': Desertion among North Carolina Troops during the Civil War," *North Carolina Historical Review* 58 (July 1981): 248, 249.

98. For a discussion of mountain Unionism, see Inscoe and McKinney, *Heart of Confederate Appalachia*, 83-104.

Chapter Three

A Struggle for Survival

Non-Elite White Women in Lowcountry Georgia, 1790–1830

Timothy J. Lockley

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Western Europe was a relatively unimportant collection of poor agricultural societies on the edge of the Eurasian landmass when Portuguese maritime advances encouraged ocean exploration in the 1420s. By 1492 Columbus had landed in the Bahamas, establishing the first permanent link between the two hemispheres, and soon initiated the transatlantic trade in African slaves. By 1535 the Spanish had conquered the wealthiest and most populous New World societies (Aztec, Incan, and Mayan peoples), bringing so much gold and silver to Europe that it doubled the money supply and led to massive inflation. This sixteenth-century "Price Revolution" was exacerbated by a rapid increase in population due to declining death rates as epidemics receded. The Dutch, English, and French were the primary beneficiaries of these changes, which led them to enter the competition for North America.*

Because of their isolation, Native American populations lacked the immunities to diseases like smallpox, measles, and influenza that the Old World had built up over the centuries. The resulting depopulation hastened European dominance. There were probably two million Indians in the South in 1500, but that number had been halved by the time Jamestown was settled in 1607, and by 1790 had fallen to 3 percent of pre-Columbian figures.

Spaniards like Juan Ponce de Leon and Hernando de Soto explored Florida and other parts of the Lower South. By 1590 a chain of military and Franciscan outposts stretched from present-day South Carolina to Florida, and St. Augustine (1565) became the first permanent European settlement on the North American mainland. The French focused their efforts on fur trading in present-day Canada,

*but the desire for a warm-water outlet led them to establish Gulf Coast colonies, the most important being New Orleans (1718). Ursuline nuns arrived in 1727 and founded what may have been the first school for Euroamerican girls. As the novel, opera, and ballet *Manon Lescaut* illustrates, some French women from the streets and prisons also immigrated, as did "casket girls," rural women who brought their dowries with them. The French and Indian War (1763) brought the British removal of six thousand French families from present-day Nova Scotia to southern Louisiana, where they maintain their Cajun culture even today. Changing hands many times, Louisiana and Florida eventually became part of the United States in 1803 and 1819, respectively. Yet the influence of Latin culture remains larger than is usually recognized.*

*Most Latin immigrants were male, a demographic pattern that produced racially mixed populations in Latin America and concubinage in New Orleans and other Deep South cities. White males formed relationships with slaves or free blacks, occasionally as an alternative to marriage. During the antebellum period New Orleans was a center of the "fancy-girl" trade in light-skinned women, who brought \$5,000 when prime fieldhands sold for \$1,600. *Plaçage* developed among free blacks, whereby light, well-educated, chaste women were introduced to white males at the city's quadroom balls. Ensuing relationships resulted in contracts with "protectors," stipulating support for the women and future children. From such interracial unions developed a caste of creoles of color, proud of their French cultural heritage.*

French planters fleeing the uprising in Saint Domingue in the 1790s brought their slaves with them. Caribbean slaves had retained more of their African culture than those in British North America, because of the constant infusion of new slaves from Africa and because they vastly outnumbered whites. They were able to retain many African practices in New Orleans's Congo Square, where they were permitted to dance, make music, and trade. Women traded in the marketplace, as they did in Africa. African religious practices involving such things as signs and amulets were widespread in Louisiana. Marie Laveau, a free woman of color, and her daughter became powerful practitioners of Voodoo, an expression of African religious beliefs influenced by Catholicism.

If the Deep South was more Latin than is often realized, the Upper South was less English. Roanoke, birthplace of Virginia Dare (1587), the first English child born in the New World, was unsuccessful. Jamestown, founded in 1607, soon imported English women, mostly as indentured servants, but in 1619 the first Africans arrived, adding to the cultural mix. The Shenandoah Valley became a road down which families of Scots-Irish and Germans from Pennsylvania entered