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Prosperous Blacks in the South, 1790–1880

LOREN SCHWENINGER

“THERE ARE ALSO, IN THE VICINITY, a large number of free-colored planters,” Frederick Law Olmsted wrote in 1856, a few years after a steamboat trip down the Cane River in Louisiana. Having stopped at several plantations to take on cotton, he had learned that, in fifteen miles of “well-settled and cultivated country” on the bank of the river, beginning ten miles below Natchitoches, there was only “one pure blooded white man.” Describing these planters as “GALLIC AND HISPANO-AFRIC CREOLES,” Olmsted noted that they were the slaveholding descendants of “old French or Spanish planters and their negro slaves.” As a reporter for the *New York Times* and *New York Tribune*, Olmsted had traveled extensively in the South during the early 1850s, publishing four books about his experiences, but few groups stood out more vividly in his memory than Louisiana’s Creoles of color. Not only did these American-born people of color possess a European and African cultural heritage but they also acquired substantial wealth and property.¹

For many years, historians paid only slight attention to blacks who reached the upper economic levels in the nineteenth-century South. In 1905, amateur historian Calvin Dill Wilson wrote a ten-page essay in the *North American Review* called “Black Masters: A Side-Light on Slavery,” and a decade later John Russell added a brief article in the *Journal of Negro History* on the same subject.² The “scientific historians” of the William A. Dunning school—Walter Lynwood Fleming, Mildred Thompson, James G. De Roulhac Hamilton, James W. Garner, among others—almost completely ignored black landholders and prosperous black business people, but to some extent this was also true for a later group of historians who attacked the racist assumptions of the Dunning school. The books and articles of Carter G. Woodson, Abram Harris, Merah Stuart, Luther Porter Jackson, John Hope Franklin, Vernon Lane Wharton, and other revisionist authors included only brief notations of blacks

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¹ Frederick Law Olmsted, *Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, in the Years 1853–1854, With Remarks on their Economy* (New York, 1856), 632–33. Creoles of color were persons of French or Spanish and Negroid descent born in the Americas. In Louisiana, the term “Creole” was also applied to whites culturally related to the original French settlers. See Ira Berlin, “Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America,” *AHR*, 85 (February 1980): 45.

² Calvin Dill Wilson, “Black Masters: A Side-Light on Slavery,” *North American Review*, 181 (November 1905): 685–98; John Russell, “Colored Freemen as Slave Owners in Virginia,” *Journal of Negro History*, 1 (June 1916): 233–42. See also Wilson, “Negroes Who Owned Slaves,” *Popular Science Monthly*, 81 (November 1912): 483–94.

who had acquired substantial amounts of property.³ Even with the explosion of research on various aspects of the black experience during the late 1960s and 1970s, historians seemed more interested in racial exploitation, black culture and black consciousness, and the political activities of blacks during Reconstruction than with those who achieved financial success.⁴

The appearance of David Rankin's article "The Impact of the Civil War on the Free Colored Community of New Orleans" and Gary B. Mills's book *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color* in 1977, however, ignited a new interest in this subject. Subsequent studies also asked how blacks, in the midst of slavery, racism, and white oppression, acquired substantial amounts of wealth. In his study of a Plaquemines Parish sugar planter, Andrew Durnford, David Whitten uncovered rare documents about one of the wealthiest free black planters in the slaveholding states. In a biography of William Ellison, a South Carolina cotton gin maker, Michael Johnson and James Roark unraveled the remarkable career of a former slave who became the South's only large-scale, pre-Civil War black manufacturer. In a detailed examination of free black slave masters in South Carolina, Larry Koger pointed to the entrepreneurial spirit among free blacks who held their fellows in bondage. And, in his probing analysis of urban race relations, Howard N.

³ Walter L. Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (New York, 1905); C. Mildred Thompson, *Reconstruction in Georgia: Economic, Social, Political, 1865–1872* (New York, 1915); J. G. De Roulhac Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina* (New York, 1914); James W. Garner, *Reconstruction in Mississippi* (New York, 1901); William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865–1877* (New York, 1907); Carter G. Woodson, *Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830; Together with Absentee Ownership of Slaves in the United States in 1830* (Washington, D.C., 1924); Woodson and Arnett G. Lindsay, eds., *The Negro as a Businessman* (Washington, D.C., 1929); Abram L. Harris, *The Negro as Capitalist: A Study of Banking and Business among American Negroes* (Philadelphia, 1936); Merah S. Stuart, *An Economic Detour: A History of Insurance in the Lives of American Negroes* (New York, 1940); Luther Porter Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830–1860* (New York, 1942); and "The Virginia Free Negro Farmer and Property Owner, 1830–1860," *Journal of Negro History*, 24 (October 1939): 390–489; John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790–1860* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1943); and "The Free Negro in the Economic Life of Ante-Bellum North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review*, 19 (July and October 1942), 239–59, 359–75; Vernon Lane Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865–1890* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1947).

⁴ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York, 1976); George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn., 1972); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1971); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); Arnold Taylor, *Travail and Triumph: Black Life and Culture in the South since the Civil War* (Westport, Conn., 1976); Charles Vincent, *Black Legislators in Louisiana during Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, La., 1976); Thomas Holt, *Black over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina during Reconstruction* (Urbana, Ill., 1977); David Rankin, "The Origins of Black Leadership in New Orleans during Reconstruction," *Journal of Southern History*, 40 (August 1974): 417–40. This has also been true for recent economic historians who have paid only slight attention to property ownership and have said virtually nothing about prosperous blacks. See Robert Higgs, *Competition and Coercion: Blacks in the American Economy, 1865–1914* (London, 1977); Stephen J. DeCanio, *Agriculture in the Postbellum South: The Economics of Production and Supply* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974); Ralph Shlomowitz, "Planter Combinations and Black Labour in the American South, 1865–1880," *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Comparative Studies*, 9 (May 1988): 72–84; Jonathan Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860–1885* (Baton Rouge, La., 1978); Jay R. Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty: The Southern Plantation Economy after the Civil War* (Durham, N.C., 1978); Gerald David Jaynes, *Branches without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862–1882* (New York, 1986); Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (London, 1977); Harold Woodman, "Sequel to Slavery: The New History Views the Postbellum South," *Journal of Southern History*, 43 (November 1977): 523–54. Although characteristic of a slightly later time, one exception to these trends was Walter Weare, *Black Business in the New South: A Social History of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company* (Urbana, Ill., 1973).

Rabinowitz noted the emergence of a small black business elite in five cities of the postwar South.⁵

Despite these recent studies, we still have only a vague understanding of blacks who reached the upper economic levels. We know comparatively little about how much land and other property they accumulated, how their wealth changed from one generation to the next, and how their holdings compared with those of other blacks and whites. We know even less about the group's socio-demographic profile—mulatto and black, male and female, rural and urban—and how it changed over time in various sections of the South. In addition, important questions remain unanswered. What effect did repressive laws and institutions have on prosperous blacks? What occupations did they follow? What were their social and cultural attitudes? Their relationship with whites? How did their position change as a result of the Civil War? In short, how and why did a small group of blacks rise to the top of the economic hierarchy, and what does their doing so tell us about antebellum black culture and its post-bellum consequences?

In describing this group, contemporaries and later historians have used such terms as “colored aristocracy,” “mulatto elite,” “free Negro elite,” “upper caste” free Negroes, and “upper-class” blacks. Such phrases often create more problems than they solve.⁶ While “prosperity” depends on time, location, and circumstance, perhaps the best way to analyze this group is by formulating a “wealth model” based on property ownership. This, too, presents special problems, since the value of land and other property fluctuated across the South during different periods, and the U.S. population censuses do not offer region-wide property estimates until 1850 through 1870. Generally, however, someone with at least \$2,000 worth of real estate was considered relatively prosperous during the entire hundred years under discussion. This essay therefore focuses primarily on those who reached this level of property ownership. For the period before 1850, only scattered information can be obtained on the group worth \$2,000 and more extrapolated from probate court records, estate inventories, tax assessment lists, and inferred from statistics on black

⁵ David Rankin, “The Impact of the Civil War on the Free Colored Community of New Orleans,” *Perspectives in American History*, 11 (1977–78): 379–418; Gary B. Mills, *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color* (Baton Rouge, La., 1977); David O. Whitten, *Andrew Durnford: A Black Sugar Planter in Antebellum Louisiana* (Natchitoches, La., 1981); Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York, 1984); and eds., *No Chariot Let Down: Charleston's Free People of Color on the Eve of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984); Larry Koger, *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790–1860* (Jefferson, N.C., 1985); Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865–1890* (New York, 1978). See also Whittington B. Johnson, “Free Blacks in Antebellum Savannah: An Economic Profile,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 64 (Winter 1980): 418–31; Philip J. Schwarz, “Emancipators, Protectors, and Anomalies: Free Black Slaveowners in Virginia,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 95 (July 1987): 317–38; Juliet E. K. Walker, “Racism, Slavery, and Free Enterprise: Black Entrepreneurship in the United States before the Civil War,” *Business History Review*, 60 (Autumn 1986): 343–82; Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., “Aristocrats of Color: South and North: The Black Elite, 1880–1920,” *Journal of Southern History*, 54 (February 1988): 3–20; Janet S. Hermann, *The Pursuit of a Dream* (New York, 1981); George C. Wright, *Life behind A Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865–1930* (Baton Rouge, 1985); Robert Engs, *Freedom's First Generation: Black Hampton, Virginia, 1861–1890* (Philadelphia, 1979); Loren Schweninger, ed., *From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur: The Autobiography of James Thomas* (Columbia, Mo., 1984).

⁶ Cyprian Clamorgan, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis* (St. Louis, Mo., 1858), 16, 19; Berlin, *Slaves without Masters*, 298; Koger, *Black Slaveowners*, 170; Gatewood, “Aristocrats of Color,” 4–5; Johnson and Roark, *Black Masters*, 142, 189, 208–18, 409; Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South*, 240–43, 248–52, 402; E. Horace Fitchett, “The Traditions of the Free Negro in Charleston, South Carolina,” *Journal of Negro History*, 25 (April 1940), reprinted in John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, eds., *Free Blacks in America, 1800–1860* (Belmont, Calif., 1971), 29; Robert L. Harris, Jr., “Charleston's Free Afro-American Elite: The Brown Fellowship Society and the Humane Brotherhood,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 82 (October 1981): 289–310.

slaveownership. Much more detail is available for the middle years. In both cases, a “wealth model” allows us to examine the black economic elite with a degree of precision not previously possible.⁷

The broad temporal and spatial dimensions of the pages that follow require a few comments about structure and organization. While any chronological demarcation is partially arbitrary, the article captures two important transitions—from the late 1830s to the early 1840s, and from the 1860s to the early 1870s. Similarly, while geographical groupings tend to minimize intraregional diversity, the dissimilarity between prosperous blacks in the Upper and the Lower South—in origins, average wealth, occupations, phenotype (black or mulatto), gender, and residency (rural versus urban)—lends itself to comparative analysis and forms a sub-regional context.⁸ Finally, to understand fully the changes occurring from one generation to the next—the rise, leveling, and relative decline in the lower states; the slow, early growth and rapid middle-period expansion in the upper states—it is necessary to examine the different social and cultural values among prosperous blacks in both parts of the South as well as their changing relationship with whites.

THE ORIGIN OF THE MOST PROSPEROUS group of blacks can be traced to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when some white men in the Lower South took black women as their sexual partners and bequeathed them, or their mulatto children, land and slaves. Along the Atlantic seaboard, where British traditions and racial prejudices prevailed, only a few dozen black families acquired landed estates in such a manner, but along the Gulf Coast, and in Louisiana, where Spanish and French customs (as well as the small number of white women) encouraged interracial unions, several hundred free black families received or inherited property from whites. While marriage between whites and slaves, or free blacks, was illegal in every state, mixed racial couples became so common in

⁷ In general, when the true value as opposed to the assessed value (usually, one-third to one-half of the actual value) of an individual's land can be determined, the lower limit of \$2,000 has been used throughout this essay. The comparative value of \$2,000 worth of land varied during different time periods, in the eastern and western states, during periods of inflation and deflation. It was worth comparatively more in the 1830s than the 1850s, and comparatively less in the 1860s than the 1850s. I made several attempts to create an adjusting-scale wealth model, analyzing those with one amount of real estate in one period, then adjusting that amount to what it would be worth during another period, or in a different section of the South. In 1870, for instance, \$2,034 worth of land was worth \$1,440 when adjusted to 1860 prices. But each time I tried such a scaled model, it foundered on the number of adjustments that would need to be made, the crudeness of nineteenth-century wealth statistics, and the paucity of comparative data for various sections of the South during various periods. I chose \$2,000 as a lower limit because it would be accurate to describe someone with at least that amount as entering a prosperous group during the period under study. In 1850, in the nation as a whole, where we do have relatively accurate comparative data for males aged twenty and over, those with \$2,000 in realty had reached the upper 13 percent of the population; in 1870, they were among the top 20 percent. There were blacks who controlled relatively large amounts of personal property (including a few slaves who owned property) and no real estate, but their numbers are few. When appropriate, I have examined personal and total estate (real and personal) holdings among prosperous blacks, especially with regard to slaveownership (listed as personal property except in Virginia and some Louisiana parishes). See Lee Soltow, *Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850–1870* (New Haven, Conn., 1975), 65, 186.

⁸ In this essay, the Lower South includes South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas; the Upper South includes Delaware, Maryland, the District of Columbia, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri. References to the Deep South and the Border South generally refer to the same demarcation. See Berlin, “Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society,” 45; and “The Structure of the Free Negro Caste in the Antebellum United States,” *Journal of Social History*, 9 (Spring 1976): 297–319; Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 186.

Louisiana that an institution called *placage*—white men contracting to live with black women and provide them with financial support—became firmly established. In addition, during the early 1800s, white (and free colored) immigrants from the Caribbean, often of French background, arrived in the United States with black spouses or, upon arrival, took free women of color or slaves as their partners.⁹

Whatever the specific circumstances, and despite the range of traditions across the Lower South, the vast majority of free people of color who reached the upper economic levels during these early years was of mixed racial ancestry. Most were children or grandchildren of white planters or merchants and slave women. They had received land, slaves, and other property from their white relatives. In South Carolina, the small group of prosperous artisans in Charleston during the 1790s, as well as those who in later years established successful businesses or became rice planters, were virtually all directly related to whites. The wealthiest free black in the state, James Pendarvis, who owned 3,250 acres of land, was the son of a white planter and a slave woman. Other prosperous free people of color, including John Holman, Jr., Elias Collins, Jehu Jones, William Penceel, William Ellison, and Margaret Noisette, were descendants of white men and slave or free black women. In Georgia, Anthony Odingsells, one of the largest black property owners, received his land and nine slaves from Charles Odingsells, an officer in the American Revolution. The most prominent “colored Creole family” in Florida, the Pons family, claimed descent from two Spanish officers. In Alabama, the two largest black landholders, Zeno and Basile Chastang, were the children of Dr. John Chastang, a prominent surgeon who had served as a medical consultant at the Spanish fort of San Esteban de Tombeche. Similarly, in Mississippi and Louisiana, prosperous free people of color were of mixed racial heritage.¹⁰

⁹ E. Horace Fitchett, “The Origin and Growth of the Free Negro Population of Charleston, South Carolina,” *Journal of Negro History*, 26 (October 1941): 425–26; Laura Foner, “The Free People of Color in Louisiana and St. Domingue: A Comparative Portrait of Two Three-Caste Slave Societies,” *Journal of Social History*, 3 (Summer 1970): 408–11; James Robertson, ed., *Louisiana under the Rule of Spain, France, and the United States, 1785–1807*; *Social, Economic, and Political Conditions of the Territory represented in the Louisiana Purchase*, 2 vols. (Cleveland, Ohio, 1910–11), rpt. edn., Freeport, N.Y., 1969), 1: 218–19; Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968), 77–81.

¹⁰ Fitchett, “Traditions of the Free Negro in Charleston, South Carolina,” 141; Harris, “Charleston’s Free Afro-American Elite,” 308; Koger, *Black Slaveowners*, 10–14, 23, 135, 165; Legislative Records, Petition of [John Holman] to the South Carolina General Assembly, October 3, 1791, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, S.C. [hereafter, SCDAH]; *ibid.*, Memorial of Thomas Cole, Peter Bassnett Mathews, and Mathew Webb to the South Carolina General Assembly, January 13, 1791, no. 181, SCDAH; *ibid.*, Petition of John L. Wilson [Jehu Jones’s guardian] to the South Carolina General Assembly, December 6, 1823, SCDAH; Records of the County Probate Court [hereafter, RCPC], Charleston Co., S.C., Miscellaneous Land Records, pt. 87, bks. R6–S6 (February 16, 1796), 161–62, in Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Winston-Salem, N.C. [hereafter, MESDA]; *ibid.*, pt. 88, bks. T6–U6 (October 11–12, 1794), 520–22, in MESDA; Brent H. Holcomb, ed., “1786 Tax Returns,” *South Carolina Magazine of Ancestral Research*, 9 (Spring 1981): 73; Philip D. Morgan, “Black Life in Eighteenth-Century Charleston,” in *Perspectives in American History*, n.s., 1 (1984): 191, 193, 205, 216, 222; Extract of the Will of Philip Stanislas Noisette, ca. 1830, in Noisette Family Papers, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, S.C.; RCPC, Effingham Co., Ga., Deeds, bk. G (January 1, 1806), 445–46, in Charles Odingsells Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.; David Thomas, “The Free Negro in Florida before 1865,” *South Atlantic Review*, 10 (October 1911): 336; Jack D. L. Homes, “The Roles of Blacks in Spanish Alabama: The Mobile District, 1780–1813,” *Alabama Historical Quarterly*, 37 (Spring 1975): 10–11; Legislative Records, Petition of L. Rowan, John Smith, *et al.* [concerning the Barland family], to the Mississippi General Assembly, ca. 1830, Record Group 47, box 19, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Miss.; *General Index of All Successions, Opened in the Parish of Orleans, From the Year 1805, to the Year 1846*, comp. P. M. Bertin (New Orleans, 1849), *passim*; Records of the Parish Probate Court [hereafter, RPPC], Pointe Coupée Parish, La., Successions, no. 176, April 5, 1839; Deed of Emancipation for Jean Meullion, February 21, 1776, in Meullion Family Papers,

Even with the advantage of inheritance, it took energy, industry, and business acumen for these people to maintain their property holdings. In towns and cities, free men and women of color took advantage of the continued demand for service businesses, the relatively small numbers of skilled whites and immigrants, and the general appreciation in city property values to expand their estates. In rural areas, they took advantage of the economic expansion in the West, rising prices for slaves, and increasing real estate values. Some speculated in city property or expanded their farm acreage, while others simply watched as the value of the land they had acquired years before appreciated dramatically in value. Improved farm acreage in Louisiana, especially along a river or bayou, went from \$2 an acre at the time of statehood in 1812 to \$10, \$25, \$50 or more during the 1820s and 1830s. They also witnessed a rise in the value of their personal holdings, including wagons, livestock, tools, machinery, and slaves. Those who astutely managed their businesses or expanded their farm acreage were able to increase their wealth substantially.¹¹

To sustain their economic activities, free people of color acquired increasing numbers of slaves. Urban artisans—carpenters, bricklayers, stonemasons, mechanics—purchased black apprentices, hod carriers, and helpers; merchants and business people bought haulers, carters, and stock boys; plantation owners purchased house servants, cooks, mechanics, and field hands. By 1830, approximately 1,556 free black masters in the Deep South owned a total of 7,188 slaves. Representing about 42 percent of the black owners in the South, they owned 60 percent of the black-owned slaves. In the Charleston District, 407 owners held a total of 2,195 slaves. In New Orleans, there were 753 free black owners, including 25 who owned at least 10 bondsmen and women and another 116 who owned between 5 and 9 slaves. Although some of these slaveholders owned members of their own families, or loved ones, unable to free them by law, in 8 rural Louisiana sugar and cotton parishes, 43 Creoles of color (1.2 percent of the black slaveholders in the South) owned a total of 1,327 blacks, or 1 out of 9 slaves owned by blacks. In St. John the Baptist Parish, 3 plantation owners held 139 blacks in bondage—an average of 46 slaves each; in Pointe Coupée Parish, 8 planters held 297 slaves, an average of 37 slaves each. In 1830, approximately 1 out of 4 free black families in the region was a slaveholder.¹²

In their attitudes toward their bondsmen and treatment of their slaves, these

Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, La.; RPPC, Natchitoches Parish, La., Successions, no. 375, July 26, 1839.

¹¹ Thomas S. Berry, *Western Prices before 1861* (Cambridge, Mass., 1943), 186; Last Will and Testament of Richard Holloway, October 19, 1842, in Holloway Family Papers, College of Charleston, Charleston, S.C.; Helen Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, 5 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1932), 3: 292, 589, 611–12; RPPC, St. Landry Parish, La., Conveyances, bk. H (March 22, 1830), 32–33; Herbert Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-bellum Louisiana* (Rutherford, N.J., 1972), 204–07.

¹² Koger, *Black Slaveowners*, 11–12, 20–21, 218–23; Johnson, “Free Blacks in Antebellum Savannah,” 423–24; Receipt, William Shipp to Jean Meullion, February 5, 1811, Meullion Family Papers; Mills, *Forgotten People*, 57; RPPC, Natchitoches Parish, La., Successions, no. 375, July 26, 1839; Woodson, *Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830*, *passim*; R. Halliburton, Jr., “Free Black Owners of Slaves: A Reappraisal of the Woodson Thesis,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 76 (July 1976): 129–35. Because not all free blacks who had slaves listed in the same household were owners of those slaves, several of Woodson’s listings are incorrect. The forty-three Creoles of color in Louisiana cited above have been checked in parish records. I have used Koger’s findings for South Carolina and the compilations of Halliburton, excluding the Arkansas Territory, for the other states in the Lower South. The debate concerning the extent of “benevolent” versus “commercial” ownership has generally focused on the entire South and thus minimized the diversity among black slaveowners in different regions during different time periods.

slaveowners differed little from their white neighbors. While occasionally freeing a slave as a reward for long years of service or purchasing blacks for personal reasons, free mulatto owners generally bought and sold slaves as a matter of economic necessity. Plaquemines Parish sugar planter Durnford, the mulatto son of English-born Thomas Durnford, an early settler in Louisiana, journeyed all the way to Richmond, Virginia, in 1835 to acquire a group of blacks. “I have two or three bargains on hand, butt so high, that I dare nott come to a conclusion,” he lamented, “women of 32 her daughter of 12, a boy of 7, a boy of 3 for [\\$]1350.” In Charleston, Savannah, Pensacola, Mobile, New Orleans, and in scattered rural counties and parishes, property-owning free people of color bought, sold, mortgaged, willed, traded, and transferred fellow blacks, demanded long hours in the workshops and fields, and severely disciplined recalcitrance. A few seemed as callous as the most profit-minded whites. South Carolina planters John and William Holman, African-born mulatto sons of English slave trader John Holman, established a “factory” on the Rio Pong River, north of Sierra Leone, and for nearly a quarter-century, reaped huge profits buying and selling fellow Africans.¹³

To protect their property, free people of color in the Lower South formed small, tightly knit social and cultural clans, linking their families through intermarriage. In South Carolina, the Holman and Collins families were related by ties of kinship and marriage, as were the Ellison, Weston, Holloway, Johnson, and Bonneau families. In Charleston, the same was true for the Cole-Seymour, Garden-Mitchell, Inglis-Glover, Lee-Seymour, and McKinlay-Huger families. The free black of “status,” one later observer noted, chose a marital partner according to three criteria: economic position, “cultural status,” and free, mixed-blood ancestry. In Mississippi, John Barland, a wealthy planter, married Mary Fitzgerald, the daughter of a prosperous free mulatto in Natchez. Among prosperous Creoles of color in Louisiana, endogamous marriages were almost universal. Antoine Decuir and Antoine Dubuclet, the richest blacks in Pointe Coupée Parish, signed formal contracts concerning their children. In the case of Decuir’s son, Antoine, Jr., and Dubuclet’s daughter, Josephine, they drew up a four-page document (in French) specifying the size of the dowry and arrangements for the distribution of property. Similar contracts, or verbal agreements, were made between the Donatto, Meullion, Simien [Simon], Guillory, and Lemmelle families in St. Landry Parish; the Conant, Metoyer, Rogues, and Llorens in Natchitoches; the Reggio, Oliver, and Leonard families in Plaquemines; and the Bienville, Ricard, and Turpin families in East Baton Rouge. One local court judgment described the Decuir, Deslondes, Honoré, and Dubucelet families in West Baton Rouge and Pointe Coupée parishes as being “all free persons of color, Relations & friends.”¹⁴

¹³ RPPC, Iberville Parish, La., Conveyances, bk. G (April 26, 1819), 19–20; Andrew Durnford to John McDonough, June 25, July 5, 1835, in David O. Whitten, ed., “Slave Buying in Virginia as Revealed by Letters of a Louisiana Negro Sugar Planter,” *Louisiana History*, 11 (Summer 1970): 239–40; Legislative Records, Petition of [John Holman] to the South Carolina General Assembly, October 3, 1791, SCDAH; Koger, *Black Slaveowners*, 110, 119, 254; Tinsley L. Spraggins, “The History of the Negro in Business prior to 1860,” (M.A. thesis, Howard University, 1935), 33.

¹⁴ Marriage Book, St. Phillip’s Church, Charleston, S.C., in Fitchett, “Origin and Growth,” 431–32; RCPC, Charleston, S.C., Estates, no. 229–6, December 30, 1874; William Hogan and Edwin Davis, eds., *William Johnson’s Natchez: The Ante-bellum Diary of a Free Negro* (Baton Rouge, La., 1951), 11, 43, 334, 399; Legislative Records, Petition of Andrew Barland to the Senate and House of Representatives of Mississippi, ca. 1824, Record Group 47, boxes 16–17, Mississippi Department of Archives and History; “A Contract of Marriage between JOSEPH METOYER and MARIE LODOISKA LLORENS,” January 28, 1840, Cane River Collection, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, La.; RPPC, Pointe Coupée Parish, La., Marriage Contract, February 26, 1835; U.S. Manuscript Population Census [hereafter, USMSPC], St. Landry Parish, La., 1860, *passim*. In 1860, census takers in St. Landry Parish listed the

Benefiting from their exclusive family and friendship networks, their close associations with whites, the French and Spanish traditions along the Gulf Coast, and the westward growth of the region's economy, prosperous mulatto families in the region greatly expanded their property holdings during the early decades of the nineteenth century. While precise statistics are fragmentary, a tax assessment list for New Orleans symbolized the extent of the growth: a small number of property owners early in the century had increased by 1836 to 855 free persons of color (approximately one-third of the free black family heads), who paid taxes on property worth a total of \$2,462,470, nearly \$3,000 per property owner.¹⁵

During the 1840s and 1850s, this early expansion slowed considerably, as prosperous free people of color experienced the effects of a prolonged depression (1837–1843), increased competition from native and foreign-born white artisans (who argued that blacks should not be allowed into skilled occupations because they undercut whites), and, in rural areas, from the perennial problems of drought, flooding, fluctuating prices, and currency depreciation. A series of new state and local laws was designed to curtail their activities. Coinciding with these economic and political problems, a number of free people of color who had acquired their holdings during the early years reached their sixties and seventies. As they died, their estates were broken up and distributed among heirs or sold to satisfy creditors.¹⁶

Despite such difficulties, the late antebellum era was not a period of decline for the region's most prosperous blacks. Although some areas, including Charleston, New Orleans, and a few Louisiana parishes, saw a drop in the number of black slaveowners and in the number of slaves they owned, in other areas, including Mobile, and several Louisiana cotton and sugar parishes, the opposite was true. Similarly, while the number of free blacks who controlled at least \$2,000 in real estate declined in the Orleans, Jefferson, Natchitoches, and St. John the Baptist parishes during the 1850s, in other parishes and outside of Louisiana, increasing numbers of free blacks were able to take advantage of the general prosperity during the decade and to enter the most prosperous group for the first time.¹⁷ In

surnames of spouses in most households. RPPC, St. Landry Parish, La., Marriage Certificate, March 25, 1796, Meullion Family Papers; *ibid.*, Natchitoches Parish, La., Successions, no. 344, September 7, 1838; *ibid.*, Plaquemines Parish, La., Successions, no. 167, May 12, 1840; *ibid.*, East Baton Rouge Parish, La., Successions, no. 640, August 14, 1855; *ibid.*, West Baton Rouge Parish, La., Successions, no. 176, July 18, 1829.

¹⁵ Robert Reinders, "The Free Negro in the New Orleans Economy, 1850–60," *Louisiana History*, 6 (Summer 1965): 280.

¹⁶ Richard Tansey, "Out-of-State Free Blacks in Late Antebellum New Orleans," *Louisiana History*, 22 (Fall 1981): 378; Koger, *Black Slaveowners*, 128–29, 226–27; USMSPC, Charleston, S.C., 1850, 320. In this and subsequent references to the USMSPC, I have used the printed or hand-written page numbers in the upper right-hand corner of the right-hand page. The unnumbered pages facing the numbered pages are cited as the same page. *Ibid.*, Chatham Co., Ga., Savannah, 1850, 324; RCPC, Chatham Co., Ga., Estates, no. M-395, April 6, 1857; Johnson, "Free Blacks in Antebellum Savannah," 424; USMSPC, Adams Co., Miss., 1860, 120; RPPC, Natchitoches Parish, La., Estates, no. 355, September 7, 1838; Estates, no. 692, July 25, 1851; Estates, no. 606, October 14, 1847; USMSPC, St. Landry Parish, La., 1850, 15, 17; Ira Berlin and Herbert G. Gutman, "Natives and Immigrants, Free Men and Slaves: Urban Workingmen in the Antebellum American South," *AHR*, 88 (December 1983): 1198.

¹⁷ Computed from USMSPC, 1850, 1860; Koger, *Black Slaveowners*, 20–21; Mills, *Forgotten People*, 218; USMSPC, New Orleans, La., 1st Mun., 7th Ward, 1850, 376, 396; Robert Reinders, "The Decline of the New Orleans Free Negro in the Decade before the Civil War," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 24 (April 1962): 95–96. In Charleston District, including the city and surrounding rural parishes, the number of free blacks who possessed slaves declined from 402 in 1840 to 137 in 1860, and the number of slaves they owned fell from 2001 to 544, or 73 percent. In other South Carolina districts, and in several Louisiana parishes, black slaveholders sold off some of their slave property. In the Crescent City, the

TABLE 1
Real Estate Holdings among Prosperous Free People of Color in the Lower South, 1850 and 1860 (those with at least \$2,000)

State	Owners		Average Real Estate Holdings	
	1850	1860	1850	1860
Alabama	12	32	\$3,817	\$ 3,691
Arkansas	4	**	2,500	**
Florida	2	8	4,000	3,825
Georgia	5	13	5,200	3,585
Louisiana	504	472	7,922	10,311
Mississippi	6	13	4,033	4,685
South Carolina	47*	162	4,411	4,723
Texas	3	6	5,667	5,133
Total	583	706	\$7,428	\$ 8,384

* = probable census undercount

** = none

SOURCE: Computed from the U.S. Manuscript Population Census, 1850, 1860.

Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas, while the free black population rose less than 10 percent between 1850 and 1860, the number of realty holders with \$2,000 or more rose from 28 to 72, or 157 percent, and the value of their real estate rose from \$121,000 to \$287,000. Even in areas where free blacks seemed to experience the greatest difficulties, some energetic and enterprising planters and business people substantially improved their economic positions. Between 1850 and 1857, New Orleans mortician Pierre Casenave, for example, quadrupled the size of his business operations.¹⁸ As Table 1 reveals, despite general economic difficulties and political turbulence, prosperous blacks in the lower states maintained a stable economic position during the tumultuous decade before the Civil War.

Although comparable data for whites are not available, some tentative conclusions can be advanced. First, the slaveholding regions of the lower Mississippi river valley where the wealthiest whites in the South resided were also where the most

number of free persons of color who owned at least \$2,000 in realty went from 311 in 1850 to 263 a decade later, and the value of their holdings, despite rising real estate prices, remained approximately the same (\$2,188,000 vs. \$2,317,300). The rise in city property values greatly exceeded the 6 percent valuation increase and did little to offset the 15 percent decline in the number of free people of color who had reached the upper wealth levels.

¹⁸ USMSPC, Charleston, S.C., 1850, 91, 98, 110, 118, 126–28, 186, 223, 288, 320, 347, 356; 3d Ward, 1860, 283; 4th Ward, 1860, 307–12, 327, 332, 334, 404; 5th Ward, 1860, 376, 385; 6th Ward, 1860, 432; 7th Ward, 1860, 466, 468, 475; 8th Ward, 1860, 493, 510, 523; *List of Tax Payers of the City of Charleston for 1860* (Charleston, S.C., 1861), 315–34; RCPC, Charleston, S.C., Estates, no. 289–25, June 15, 1876; Records of the Comptroller General, Free Negro Tax Book, Charleston District, S.C., 1843, SCD4H; USMSPC, Sumter Co., S.C., 1850, 285; 1860, 133. In 1852, Ellison paid \$9,560 for Keith Hill and Hickory Hill, plantations totaling 540 acres, bringing his total land holdings to more than 1,000 acres. I have therefore estimated Ellison's realty at \$15,000, rather than the \$8,300 listed in the 1860 census. Koger, *Black Slaveholders*, 37–38, 62, 121–23, 132, 136, 144–45; Johnson and Roark, *Black Masters*, 70, 124–27; USMSPC, Emanuel Co., Ga., 1860, 960; *ibid.*, Hamilton Co., Fla., 1860, 597; *ibid.*, Madison Co., Ala., Huntsville, 188; *ibid.*, Adams Co., Miss., Natchez, 1850, 14; 1860, 44, 120; *ibid.*, Jefferson Co., Tex., 1850, 481, 497, 499; Andrew Muir, "The Free Negro in Jefferson and Orange Counties, Texas," *Journal of Negro History*, 35 (April 1950): 186, 191, 206; Walker, "Racism, Slavery, and Free Enterprise," 354, 361–62; U.S. Manuscript Agricultural Census, Iberville Parish, La., 1850, 81; USMSPC, Iberville Parish, La., 1860, 261, 263–64, 267, 280.

prosperous free people of color owned their farms, plantations, and business enterprises. The average estate (real and personal property) among adult white freemen in Pointe Coupée Parish in 1860 was worth \$14,290, in West Baton Rouge \$18,830, in Iberville \$18,330, in Jefferson \$4,470, in Plaquemines \$8,570, in St. John the Baptist \$8,340, and in Orleans \$2,170. The average estate among free black heads of family in these same parishes included Pointe Coupée at \$5,528, West Baton Rouge at \$3,848, Iberville at \$17,503, Jefferson at \$2,270, Plaquemines at \$3,686, St. John the Baptist at \$3,568, and Orleans at \$1,567. It was the substantial wealth of affluent slaveowning whites and prosperous free people of color in these parishes that pushed these averages to such high levels. Indeed, it is remarkable that in New Orleans free blacks achieved an economic standing not much below whites in the city. Second, the proportion of free people of color in the lower states who owned at least some property—54 percent—was not too far below the 66 percent for whites in the South. And, third, the figure of \$1,500 mean estate among free black heads of household in the Lower South in 1860 was nearly two-fifths of the mean of \$4,000 among adult white male Southerners.¹⁹

Prosperous free people of color were able to maintain their high economic standing in large measure because they did not pose a threat to the South's "peculiar institution." Edwin C. Holland, a leading South Carolina editor, noted this as early as 1822, when he wrote that free mulattoes were industrious, sober, and hardworking artisans and farmers who had large families and considerable amounts of property: "so far as we are acquainted with their temper and disposition of their feelings [they] abhor the idea of association with blacks in any enterprise that may have for its object the revolution of their condition." In addition, free blacks who owned barber shops, butcher shops, mercantile establishments, and tailoring businesses or who worked as carpenters, coopers, builders, masons, cigarmakers, and bootmakers provided valuable services to whites in their communities. "Their labor is indispensable to us in this neighbourhood," noted James Rose, William J. Grayson, Benjamin Huger, and a group of other prominent whites in South Carolina in 1860. Not only did free blacks "command the respect of all respectable men" but they were also "good citizens" who demonstrated "patterns of industry, sobriety, and irreproachable conduct"; in Charleston alone, they owned property worth \$500,000. Thus, separating themselves from slaves and less fortunate free blacks, forming exclusive family and friendship networks, and aligning themselves with the planter aristocracy, affluent free people of color in the lower states pinned their hopes and their future prosperity on the very system that held other blacks in slavery.²⁰

¹⁹ Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 44, 166–68. Unfortunately, comparative data are available only for adult white males. To compare white male wealth holders with free black male wealth holders would exclude 30 percent of the black estate owners who were women. Consequently, for a rough comparison, I have used free black heads of households. Estimates of free black family heads are derived from the general population; I have estimated approximately one out of five in this group. Thus Pointe Coupée Parish, with a total free black population of 721, had approximately 144 families; West Baton Rouge, with a total free black population of 113, had 23 families; Iberville, with a population of 188, had 38 families; Jefferson, with a population of 287, had 57 families; Plaquemines, with a population of 514, had 103 families; St. John the Baptist, with a population of 299, had 60 families; and Orleans, with a population of 10,939, had approximately 2,188 free black families. In the Lower South, there were approximately 7,391 free black families. *Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington, D.C., 1864), 189, 191; Berlin, *Slaves without Masters*, 136. The total estates were computed from USMSPC, 1860.

²⁰ Legislative Records, Petition of James Rose, William Grayson, Benjamin Huger, *et al.*, to the South Carolina Senator, ca. 1860, SCDAH; Edward Holland, *A Refutation of the Calumnies Circulated against the Southern and Western States, Respecting the Institution and Existence of Slavery among Them* (Charleston, S.C.,

IN THE UPPER SOUTH, prior to 1840, only a tiny number of free blacks—fewer than one hundred families—acquired more than \$2,000 worth of real estate. Fewer still—not more than two dozen families—accumulated enough property to be considered affluent. Unlike the lower states, free blacks in the upper region had been part of a large-scale manumission during the 1790s and early 1800s. They entered freedom with few of the resources and skills required to accumulate significant amounts of wealth. Largely black, representing a much larger proportion of the total population of color (by 1840, 12.5 percent compared with 3.1 percent in the Lower South), and much more closely tied to the slave than to the white population, most free families of color in the Upper South had a difficult struggle to survive, much less to become independent landholders and property owners. As the free black population expanded from 30,158 in 1790 to 94,085 in 1810 to 174,357 by 1840 (compared with 2,199 to 14,180 to 41,218 in the Lower South), free blacks in the Upper South were forced to compete with one another as well as with native whites, immigrants, and slaves for even the most menial jobs. By 1840, four out of five free blacks in the South resided in the Upper South; among them, a significant portion had been born in slavery or had slave parents.²¹

The few free blacks who did accumulate several thousand dollars worth of real estate were similar to their counterparts in the Deep South: they were most likely to be of mixed racial origin; they were often the children or grandchildren of whites; they usually received some assistance from white benefactors. The two wealthiest farmers in Virginia, Priscilla Ivey and Frankey Miles, were mistresses of white slaveowners. Two others, Francis and Alfred Anderson, were children of a white planter and his slave. North Carolina barber-planter John Carruthers Stanly was the son of the prominent merchant-shipper John Wright Stanly and an African-born Ibo woman. Several other prosperous North Carolina free blacks—cabinet maker Thomas Day, merchant Louis Sheridan, and contractor James D. Sampson—had similar mixed racial backgrounds, while slave-born Robert Rentfro, a hotel owner in Nashville, was emancipated and given a bequest by his white owner. With its early Spanish, French, and Creole traditions, St. Louis was similar in some respects to the Lower Mississippi region, and the four most prosperous free families of color during this early period—the Clamorgans, Labadies, Mordecais, and Rutgers—were all descendants of early white settlers and black women. Louis Rutgers, who eventually amassed an estate of \$50,000, was the slave son of Dutch immigrant Arend Rutgers, who had received a land grant from the French government a few years before the Louisiana Purchase.²²

1822), 84–85; Olmsted, *Cotton Kingdom*, 132; Charles O. Screven to Anthony Odinsells, July 30, 1828, in Joseph Parsons, “Anthony Odinsells: A Romance of Little Wassaw,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 55 (Summer 1971): 210; John William De Forest to wife, September 29, 1862, in James H. Croushore, ed., *A Volunteer's Adventures: A Union Captain's Records of the Civil War* (New Haven, Conn., 1946), 47–48.

²¹ Berlin, *Slaves without Masters*, 46–47, 136–37.

²² Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, 123, 127, 217; Deed of Emancipation, David Ross to Christopher MacPherson, June 2, 1792, in Legislative Records, Petition of Christopher MacPherson to the Virginia General Assembly, December 10, 1810, Richmond City, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Va.; RCPC, Craven Co., N.C., Petition of Alexander Steward to Emancipate the Slave John, March 12, 1795, in *Slave and Free Negro File*, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, N.C.; Willard Gatewood, “‘To Be Truly free’: Louis Sheridan and the Colonization of Liberia,” *Civil War History*, 29 (December 1983): 332; Louis Sheridan to Joseph Gales, May 20, 27; June 1, 17; July 22, August 8, 1836, January 6, 13, 1837, in Records of the American Colonization Society, reels 26–27, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Julius Melbourn, *Life and Opinions of Julius Melbourn* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1847), 7–8, 11, 56–57; Legislative Records, Petition of [the] Inhabitants of Davidson County to the Tennessee General Assembly, no. 20–1–1801, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tenn.;

Yet, as was the case in the Lower South, those who received such assistance would not have been able to maintain their economic standing without a shrewd understanding of business affairs. Some benefited from rising property values or periods of general prosperity, but others aggressively expanded their holdings. In 1829, Joseph Jenkins Roberts and William Nelson Colson of Petersburg, Virginia, established a business partnership to trade in West Africa. They secured a schooner, obtained credit in Philadelphia and New York, and began purchasing finished goods to sell and trade for ivory, wood, and palm oil. Even as a slave, New Bern's John Carruthers Stanly, known as "Barber Jack," had acquired considerable real and personal property. Once free, he built up a large clientele, turned his barber shop over to his two most trusted slaves, and began purchasing rental houses and plantation acreage. Using similarly aggressive tactics, other Upper South farmers, merchants, cattle dealers, and business people expanded their property holdings during these early years.²³

Although black slaveholding developed quite differently in the upper states—in 1830, only one free black family in fourteen owned slaves, most of whom were members of their own families or loved ones—some who reached the upper levels of wealth, like their counterparts in the lower states, acquired gangs of black laborers. Virginia farmer Priscilla Ivey, North Carolina merchant Louis Sheridan, and Tennessee farmer Sherod Bryant bought, sold, mortgaged, and hired black workers on a regular basis. During the period 1820–1828, John Carruthers Stanly, despite his own slave heritage, increased the size of his slave labor force to 163 blacks (the largest total for a free black in the South at the time). A regular bidder at local auctions, he primarily bought young men to work on his cotton and turpentine plantations. One New Bern resident later recalled that Stanly was a "hard task-master" who demanded long hours in the field and "fed and clothed indifferently." By the late 1820s, Stanly had become one of the leading slaveholders and wealthiest property owners in his section of North Carolina. His total estate exceeded \$68,000.²⁴

But Stanly was highly unusual. During this early period, most of the wealthiest free blacks in the region owned only a few slaves or had not entered the slaveholding class. They also controlled relatively modest amounts of real estate. In 1825, the richest black in the District of Columbia, Charles King, owned real estate assessed at only \$4,088, while in other towns and cities of the border region—Baltimore, Richmond, Petersburg, Lexington, Louisville, Nashville—free black

Anita Goodstein, "Black History on the Nashville Frontier, 1780–1810," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 30 (Winter 1979): 412–13; RCPC, St. Louis, Mo., Deeds, bk. M (December 6, 1825), 421; *ibid.*, Estates, no. 637, July 29, 1825; Estates, no. 6301, March 2, 1863; Estates, no. 769, October 4, 1859; Lawrence Christensen, "Cyprian Clamorgan, the Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis (1858)," *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society*, 31 (October 1974): 5, 6, 13, 14, 16, 22; Schweninger, *From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur*, 102–03.

²³ Luther Porter Jackson, "Free Negroes of Petersburg, Virginia," *Journal of Negro History*, 12 (July 1927): 376; William Colson to Joseph Gales, July 24, September 16, 1834, Records of the American Colonization Society; RCPC, Craven Co., N.C., Deeds, bk. 33 (January 10, 1800), 495; Deeds, bk. 38 (April 10, 1811), 102; Deeds, bk. 39 (July 1, 1815), 503; *ibid.*, St. Louis, Mo., Deeds, bk. S3 (July 25, 1835), 304.

²⁴ Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, 122, 127, 205–06, 216, 224; Schwarz, "Emancipators, Protectors, and Anomalies," 323–24; Woodson, *Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830*, vi; Halliburton, "Free Black Owners of Slaves," 135, 142; J. Merton England, "The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Tennessee," *Journal of Southern History*, 9 (February 1943): 54n; RCPC, Craven Co., N.C., Deeds, bk. 45 (May 8, 1828), 440–45. The dollar amount of John Stanly's total estate is an estimate derived from various deeds. New Bern resident John D. Whitford's recollection is found in the *Raleigh Morning Post*, December 5, 1897.

coopers, blacksmiths, shoemakers, and grocers controlled similarly small estates. In 1842, the largest black property owners in Frankfort, Kentucky, included grocer John Ward, who owned a house and lot worth \$4,000; plasterer Harry Mordicai, who owned a house worth \$3,000; and drayman Tom Bacon, who was worth \$2,500. The same was true in rural areas. The largest free black farmers in Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee owned land valued at between \$3,000 and \$7,000. The wealthiest black farmer in Virginia, William Jarvis, for example, left an estate valued at \$6,656 in 1825, while his counterparts in other states, who usually worked the land themselves, were classified only as “middle-sized” farmers. In short, by the late 1830s, few free blacks in the Upper South could match the substantial wealth holdings among free people of color in the lower states, and even the most prosperous often possessed comparatively small estates.²⁵

During the 1840s and 1850s, the profile of prosperous blacks in the Upper South changed dramatically. A general upturn in the economy from the mid-1840s onward—improved roads and river transportation, rising industrial development, new techniques for replenishing the land, higher wages, and growth in the demand for skilled workers—was partly responsible, but it was not only the general prosperity that caused the number of prosperous blacks to rise more than 100 percent during the 1840s and nearly 200 percent during the next decade. Nor was this change reflected in the small (29 percent) increase in the free black population. A generation after their parents were in bondage, free blacks had acquired a considerable degree of experience in dealing with economic matters. Some shrewdly began purchasing land when prices were low and either sold or improved their holdings as land values rose. Others gradually added to their realty holdings. In towns and cities, they purchased lots, unimproved land, buildings, and business property; in rural areas, they expanded their livestock herds, diversified their crops, and increased their farm acreage. Although a few entered more highly skilled occupations or started new businesses, most continued their same farming or business operations but with a better understanding of how to expand their holdings.

Those who reached the upper levels of wealth during this period had usually spent many years expanding their estates. Baltimore barber Thomas Green, who had arrived from Barbados as early as 1813, opened a small barber shop on Light Street. During the 1830s and 1840s, he purchased seven rental houses, several vacant lots, and saved his extra earnings. By 1858, at the age of seventy-one, his estate—the largest for any free black in the state—stood at \$17,139, including \$5,923 in cash. While not as wealthy as Green, Virginia farmer William Epps made a similarly remarkable economic ascent during the late antebellum era. Beginning with virtually nothing in the 1820s, Epps gradually purchased real estate and added to his personal holdings, until, by 1850, he was listed in the census as a “planter.” He owned no slaves, but in 1860 his \$7,700 worth of property made him one of the most successful black farmers in the Upper South. Virginia bondsman John Berry Meachum purchased his own freedom, moved to Kentucky, and then to St. Louis,

²⁵ Letitia Woods Brown, *Free Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1790–1846* (New York, 1972), 139, 152–55; Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, 122, 127–28, 144–47, 321–22; “Pursuits &c of the Free People of Color in the Town of Frankfort,” July 16, 1842, Filson Club, Lexington, Ky.; RCPC, Davidson Co., Tenn., Wills and Inventories, vol. 9 (July 7, 1832), 596; *ibid.*, Deeds, bk. 2 (March 12, 1840), 389–90; J. Merton England, “The Free Negro in Ante-bellum Tennessee” (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1941), 49.

arriving there in 1815 with a few dollars in his pocket. Within a few years, he had opened a barrel-making establishment and begun buying real estate. At mid-century, he owned two brick buildings in St. Louis and a farm in Illinois. His \$8,000 in real estate placed him among the three largest black realty owners in the state of Missouri.²⁶

As the careers of Green, Epps, and Meachum suggest, those who reached the upper economic levels in the border states during the 1840s and 1850s were quite different in background, occupational status, and sources of wealth from affluent free people of color in the Deep South. At mid-century, according to the census, Epps was the only "planter" (among those with at least \$2,000 in realty) in the entire Upper South. A few farmers owned small work gangs of slaves, but they represented only a tiny segment among the most prosperous free blacks. Indeed, by 1860, in Delaware, Maryland, the District of Columbia, Virginia, and Kentucky, the phenomenon of free blacks owning slaves for profit had nearly disappeared. Among those with more than \$2,000 in realty in 1850, there were three times as many "laborers" as merchants. Next to "farmer," the largest single occupational category was barber: about 12.5 percent of the black economic elite owned barbershops. There was 1 grocer, 1 grain dealer, 4 "storeowners," and 3 livery owners; 17 prosperous free blacks worked as blacksmiths, bricklayers, carpenters, or shoemakers; 22 others labored as cooks, gardeners, painters, plasterers, laborers, porters, or stewards. Meachum was the only cooper listed as having large wealth holdings, and there was only 1 mechanic. By the eve of the Civil War, unskilled and semi-skilled workers still outnumbered store owners and skilled artisans, and farm owners and barbers still constituted more than half of the most affluent class.²⁷

SHARP CONTRASTS BETWEEN PROSPEROUS FREE PEOPLE OF COLOR in the Upper and Lower South existed in other areas besides occupational structure. At mid-century, nearly half of the most affluent group in the upper states was listed in the census as "black" (49.3 percent) as opposed to "mulatto," compared with about one out of ten (9.4 percent) in the lower states. While this was partly a reflection of the proportion of blacks versus mulattoes in the free black population in the two sections, the economic elite in the Upper South more nearly mirrored the free black population. At the same time, only a small proportion of the economic upper class was female (13 percent), often women who had purchased themselves out of

²⁶ *Condition of the Colored Population in the City of Baltimore* (n.p., 1838), 7, in Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.; RCPC, Baltimore, Md., Chancery Papers, 1858, Accession no. MdHr 40200-5988-1/2, Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, Md.; *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, May 18, 1864; *New York Herald*, April 1, 8, 1863; Spraggins, "History of the Negro in Business," 47; James Wright, *The Free Negro in Maryland, 1634-1860* (New York, 1921; rpt. edn., New York, 1971), 192. Wright's estimate of Green's total estate differs slightly from the inventory in his estate papers. USMSPC, Baltimore, Md., 9th Ward, 1850, 47; *ibid.*, Halifax Co., Va., 1850, 95; 1860, 877; *ibid.*, St. Louis, Mo., 4th Ward, 1850, 49; RCPC, St. Louis, Mo., Estates, no. 4173, April 12, 1854; Donnie Bellamy, "Free Blacks in Antebellum Missouri, 1820-1860," *Missouri Historical Review*, 67 (January 1973): 216, 224.

²⁷ Computed from USMSPC, 1850, 1860. Statistical percentages on occupations are the *valid percentages*, that is, the percentage of those whose occupations were listed. In 1850, census takers listed the occupations for 79 percent of the prosperous blacks in the Upper South; in 1860, this had risen to 89 percent. USMSPC, Baltimore, Md., 9th Ward, 1850, 47; *ibid.*, Henrico Co., Va., Richmond, 1850, 248; *ibid.*, Jefferson Co., Ky., Louisville, 4th Ward, 1850, 50; *ibid.*, Davidson Co., Tenn., Nashville, 3d Ward, 1850, 356; *ibid.*, Shelby Co., Tenn., Memphis, 7th Ward, 1850, 185; *ibid.*, St. Louis, Mo., 2d Ward, 1850, 222; 3d Ward, 352; 4th Ward, 54-55; Herbert A. Thomas, Jr., "Victims of Circumstance: Negroes in a Southern Town, 1865-1880," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 71 (July 1973): 268.

slavery and acquired tracts of land over many years. In contrast, more than one-third of the most prosperous group in the Deep South (36 percent) were free women of color, often mulatto women who had lived with white men or inherited estates from white merchants or planters. In both Upper and Lower South, the group was highly urbanized, but in the upper states prosperous free blacks were more likely to live in towns and cities (compared with the general urban-rural configuration of the population) than their counterparts in the lower states. About one-third of the free black population in 1850 lived in urban areas, while 53 percent of the economic elite lived in these areas. In the lower states, more than 50 percent of the free black population was urban, and 65 percent of the upper-wealth group lived in towns and cities.²⁸

Although only a tiny number of free black families in the upper states accumulated at least \$2,000 worth of real estate—one out of seventy-three in 1860, compared with one out of ten in the Lower South—during the 1850s, prosperous free blacks in the border states made considerable advances compared with their counterparts in the lower tier of states. Their numbers nearly tripled, from 213 to 619; they increased their total real estate wealth from \$845,000 to \$2,537,100; they slightly increased the average value of their holdings from \$3,969 to \$4,099. Most of those who entered the upper-level group during this decade owned relatively modest amounts of real estate or increased their holdings by only a few thousand dollars, but emerging in the Upper South was a group of truly wealthy free blacks—Baltimore caterer Henry Jakes, Georgetown livery stable owner and feed merchant Alfred Lee, North Carolina merchant-farmer Hardy Bell, Tennessee gardener Lewis Doxey, and St. Louis tobacconist William Deaderick—who owned between \$8,000 and \$50,000 worth of real estate. Despite limited opportunities, they made remarkable economic strides during the last decade before the Civil War.²⁹

They did so without forming exclusive social and cultural clans. The tiny number of prosperous free blacks, their wide geographical dispersal, the lack of opportunity in higher paying jobs, and the largely black compared with mulatto populations resulted in close ties with other groups of blacks—less affluent property owners, propertyless free blacks, and slaves. It was not uncommon for affluent free black and slave families to be interrelated, and it was practically impossible (except perhaps in St. Louis), given the small number at the top of the economic hierarchy and their rather modest means, for parents to insist that their children marry into families of similar economic circumstances. Consequently, prosperous free blacks in the Upper South mingled with other blacks—slave and free—at tipping houses,

²⁸ Computed from USMSPC, 1850; calculated from U.S. Census Office, *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850* (Washington, D.C., 1853), *passim*; *Statistical View of the United States . . . Being a Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington, D.C., 1854), 83; Berlin, *Slaves without Masters*, 136–37. At mid-century, the proportion of “blacks” in the free black population in the upper states was 61 percent and in the Lower South, 31 percent. Historians have long been aware of the problems of analyzing “black” and “mulatto” designations in the census returns, but the data do provide rough gauges for analyzing mixed racial ancestry. See Robert Brent Toplin, “Between Black and White: Attitudes towards Southern Mulattoes, 1830–1861,” *Journal of Southern History*, 45 (May 1979): 185–200.

²⁹ USMSPC, Baltimore, Co., Md., 1st Dist., 1850, 226; 4th Dist., 1860, 147; *ibid.*, Dorchester Co., Md., 1850, 421; *ibid.*, 9th Dist., 1860, 1019; *ibid.*, Alexandria Co., Va., Alexandria, 1860, 875; *ibid.*, Jefferson Co., Ky., Louisville, 1st Ward, 1860, 74; *ibid.*, Davidson Co., Tenn., Nashville, 1850, 94; *ibid.*, 6th Ward, 1860, 437; *ibid.*, Baltimore, Md., 11th Ward, 1860, 560; *ibid.*, District of Columbia, Georgetown, 1850, 186; *ibid.*, Georgetown, 1st Ward, 1860, 3; Henry Robinson, “Some Aspects of the Free Negro Population of Washington, D.C., 1800–1862,” *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 64 (Spring 1969): 52; USMSPC, Warren Co., N.C., 1860, 279; *ibid.*, Davidson Co., Tenn., 13th Dist., 1860, 225; *ibid.*, St. Louis, Mo., 7th Ward, 1860, 113.

TABLE 2
Real Estate Holdings among Prosperous Free People of Color in the
Upper South, 1850 and 1860 (those with at least \$2,000)

State	Owners		Average Real Estate Holdings	
	1850	1860	1850	1860
Delaware	13	38	\$5,000	\$3,076
District of Columbia	8	89	2,375	3,082
Kentucky	41	71	3,668	3,875
Maryland	53	167	3,857	3,825
Missouri	15	65	6,407	6,515
North Carolina	14	32	4,329	5,538
Tennessee	21	56	3,719	4,780
Virginia	48	101	3,581	3,601
Total	213	619	\$3,969	\$4,099

SOURCE: Computed from the USMSPC, 1850, 1860.

barbecues, sporting events, and slave dances. They attended the same churches, joined the same benevolent organizations, and whenever possible, enrolled their children in the same schools.³⁰

These demographic and cultural differences were also reflected in race relations. In both regions, of course, free blacks were confronted with repressive laws, periodic outbreaks of racial violence, and white hostility, but the close paternalistic ties of South Carolina and the Gulf region were largely absent in the border states. Whites in the upper states did provide "protection" to individual free blacks whom they deemed especially industrious, but rarely did they defend free blacks as a group. Nor did they believe that free blacks would side with whites in case of slave unrest or insurrection. Rather, they tended to view free blacks, including the most prosperous, as setting a bad example for slaves. Thus, while prominent South Carolina and Louisiana whites defended free people of color as "an industrious and honest people," slaveholders and planters in the border region, even those who allowed some of their slaves virtual freedom, castigated free blacks as "indolent," "thieving," "ungovernable," and "depraved."³¹ By the late antebellum era, in nearly

³⁰ Schweninger, *From Tennessee Slave to St. Louis Entrepreneur*, 6; Wright, *Free Negro in Maryland*, 250–51; Legislative Records, Petition of the Members of the African Benevolent Association to the Senate and House of Representatives of Delaware, January 1825, Delaware Hall of Records, Dover, Del.; Jackson, *Free Negro Labor and Property Holding*, 163n; Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., ed., *Free Man of Color: The Autobiography of Willis Augustus Hodges* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1982), xxiv, xxviii, 23, 25–26; RCPC, Alexandria Co., Va., Wills, vol. 1821–31 (November 25, 1829), 342, in MESDA; Luther Porter Jackson, "Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia from 1760 to 1860," *Journal of Negro History*, 16 (April 1931): 193–98.

³¹ Legislative Records, Petition of the Citizens of King William County to the Virginia General Assembly, January 20, 1842, Virginia State Library; *ibid.*, Petition of the Citizens of Hardeman County to the Tennessee Senate and House of Representatives, December 3, 1857, no. 94, Tennessee Department of Archives and History, Nashville, Tenn.; Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn., 1985), chap. 4. These generalizations are based on an analysis of approximately 1,595 petitions to state legislatures concerning race, slavery, and free blacks between 1777 and 1866. The states with the largest number of extant petitions (excluding those that were redundant or repetitive)—Virginia (425), North Carolina (154), South Carolina (599), Mississippi (102), Texas (62), and Tennessee (221)—are equally divided between the Upper and Lower South and give a clear picture of the different attitudes toward free people of color in the two sections.

every respect—average wealth, color, gender, residency, family attitudes, social and cultural values, and relations with the dominant race—prosperous free blacks in the Upper and Lower South lived as if in two different worlds.

JUST AS THE CIVIL WAR profoundly altered the status of former slaves, it also created a new environment for formerly free people of color. In the Lower South, the war and its aftermath spelled disaster for the great majority of free blacks who had, only a short time before, been among the most prosperous blacks in the nation. “When [the] war commence it [was] purty hard on folks,” a free black in St. Mary Parish, Louisiana, recalled. First came the Confederates, who swept up the slaves, including those owned by blacks, and took them away to build fortifications; then came the Yankee raiding parties, who rode through the countryside, burning, looting, and pillaging. “The road all the way to Natchitoches,” one observer said, describing the area where some of the wealthiest free people of color in the South owned their plantations, “was a solid flame.”³²

Following the war, the great majority of formerly free black slaveholders were unable to rebuild their antebellum fortunes. After three successive crop failures, South Carolina rice planter Robert Collins, who had once owned a 3,100-acre plantation and seventeen slaves, was forced to borrow money from the Freedmen’s Bureau to purchase supplies for his former bondspeople. In Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas, the Collins, Barland, and Ashworth clans experienced the same difficulties, while Louisiana’s Creoles of color not only lost their slaves, farm machinery, livestock, buildings, and personal possessions but also much of their land. Among those forced to sell their estates for non-payment of debts were St. Landry’s Josephine Decuir, who, along with her husband, had owned 112 slaves and had been worth approximately \$160,000; Plaquemines’s Andrew Durnford, Jr., whose father had been among the twelve wealthiest blacks in America at the time of his death in 1859; and St. Mary’s Romaine Verdun, who had once overseen a large, highly profitable plantation.³³

Statistical evidence reveals the extent of this decline. Fewer than one out of five (approximately 194 of 1,121) prosperous antebellum free blacks in the Lower South survived the war as realty owners, a persistence rate substantially lower than that for whites in the war-ravaged black belt of Alabama. Among the 194, 66 had dropped below the \$2,000 real estate level and 128 continued to hold at least that amount. During the postwar years, the new entry rate into the \$2,000-plus group also fell off sharply. Among antebellum free blacks who had held land and other property for at least a decade, the entry rate into the most prosperous group went from 131 in 1850 to 147 in 1860 to only 69 in 1870. The average realty controlled by the new entrants dropped in value from \$9,100 in 1850 to \$6,200 in 1860 to \$4,300 in 1870. Among free blacks who had entered the upper levels of wealth in 1860 and continued to be property owners after the war, including four who had

³² George Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 19 vols. (Westport, Conn., 1972), 5: pt. 4, p. 158; quoted in Mills, *Forgotten People*, 237.

³³ Petition for Relief of Antoine Meullion, December 1889, in Meullion Family Papers; Koger, *Black Slaveowners*, 120–24, 193–95; RPPC, Iberville Parish, La., Deeds, bk. 9 (July 15, 1868), 221–23; USMSPC, Pointe Coupée Parish, La., Successions, no. 203, July 11, 1865; *ibid.*, Natchitoches Parish, La., Conveyances, vol. 69 (December 20, 1873), 601–04, 637–39; *ibid.*, St. Mary Parish, La., 1870, 574; Loren Schwenger, “Antebellum Free Persons of Color in Postbellum Louisiana,” *Louisiana History*, 30 (Fall 1989): 345–64.

migrated from the Upper South, more than one out of three (58 of 151) had dropped below the \$2,000 level. The average real estate holdings of this latter group stood at less than \$800. By 1870, the affluent class in Louisiana and South Carolina, which had previously controlled \$5,632,100 worth of real estate, 44 percent of the black-owned property in the entire South, owned land worth only \$3,851,100, slightly less than 12 percent of the total holdings.³⁴

Even those who survived the war with their estates intact—primarily, urban free blacks who had invested heavily in real estate rather than slaves—found it difficult to adjust to the rapid changes occurring in the wake of emancipation. Saddened by the passing of the old regime, disheartened by the loss of their privileged status, angered at being mistaken for former bondsmen, they ignored their business obligations during the 1870s and allowed their real estate holdings to evaporate. Three of the wealthiest antebellum free people of color in New Orleans, for example, became so despondent during the postwar era that they committed suicide. While such extreme responses were rare, in Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, Natchez, Baton Rouge, and other towns and cities, those who had once been among the largest property owners quickly passed from the scene through death or the mismanagement of their holdings during a period of economic chaos.³⁵

With the rapid decline of their economic fortunes came the disintegration of the pre-war clans of free blacks. Members of various families drifted apart or, as was the case for the Verdun and Metoyer families in Louisiana, subsisted on small plots of their once-great plantations. As former slaveowners, landowners, and respected “citizens” in their communities, they longed to return to the past. Among them, perhaps no one expressed their feelings more poignantly than Catherine Johnson, the eldest daughter of the wealthy Natchez, Mississippi, barber William Johnson, who had been brutally murdered in 1851 during a boundary dispute. Part of her despair was personal—the lingering memories of her father, the growing insanity of her brother, the financial difficulties of her mother—but these problems seemed to be symptomatic of a deeper anguish, an anguish caused by the incomprehensible changes taking place as a result of the war. “[T]o the present the past seems so bright, so bright that I dare not call up its memories, for it makes me wretched to think that in reality I can never live them again,” she despaired in 1866, “and I know that it is wrong but sometimes I do long to die.”³⁶

The Civil War also transformed the antebellum pattern of race relations in the

³⁴ The persistence rate has been calculated as follows. The number of individual property owners in 1850 and 1860 who attained \$2,000 in realty (1289 minus 168 who appeared in both census years = 1121) was divided by the number listed in 1870 who also appeared in 1850 and/or 1860, or 194 “repeats.” Thus 194 divided by 1121 = .17, or 17 percent. The same procedure was used for the Upper South. The decline in realty holdings should be put in the context of declining postwar land values. In rural areas of the Deep South, the value of land dropped between 55 and 70 percent after the war. In the South as a whole, it declined 45 percent in real terms. In 1850 and 1860, in both sections of the South, a large segment of the most prosperous group was aged fifty and over. In the Lower South, in 1850, the fifty-plus age group constituted 41 percent of the elite property owners, and in 1860, 48 percent; in the upper states, in 1850 and 1860, 49 percent. A significant portion of these property owners died of natural causes during the 1860s. For comparative purposes, however, since the mean age—late forties—and proportion above age fifty were so similar in two sections, the death rate would have had a negligible effect on the comparative persistence rates in the two sections. See Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, “Capitalists without Capital: The Burden of Slavery and the Impact of Emancipation,” *Agricultural History*, 62 (Summer 1988): 133–60; Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 51; Soltow, *Men and Wealth*, 64.

³⁵ RPPC, New Orleans, La., Successions, no. 38,677, May 27, 1876, in New Orleans Public Library; Rankin, “Impact of the Civil War,” 403–06; USMSPC, New Orleans, La., 6th Ward, 1870, 235.

³⁶ Diary of Catherine Johnson, May 30, 1866, in William Johnson Papers, Library Manuscript Department, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, La.

Deep South. The old paternalism, which had governed the relations between prosperous free people of color and whites, rapidly changed. The worsening economic condition of former planters—both white and black—the racial tensions created by Reconstruction, the entry of formerly free people of color into the political arena, the ideological differences between whites and blacks over the Fourteenth (citizenship) and Fifteenth (franchise) amendments pushed formerly aristocratic whites and formerly free blacks away from one another. Of course, there were ideological and political differences among ex-free black business people and planters, but most of them realized that, as one Alabama Creole of color who had formerly held himself aloof from blacks said, “our future is indissolubly bound up with that of the Negro race.” As blacks moved into the Republican party, the party of Lincoln, their former “protectors,” who had previously signed petitions in their behalf, joined the Democrats. Whites in the Deep South could only lament that formerly prosperous free people of color proved to be nearly as “disloyal” as their former slaves.³⁷

As the position of property-owning free people of color in the Deep South declined, a new black economic elite began to emerge. Since census takers did not ask questions about former status (“Were you born a slave?” “Did you gain your freedom prior to the Civil War?”), only the vague outlines of this new elite can be discerned, but a number of indexes show that, as the antebellum group so closely tied to the white aristocracy lost economic status, former slaves and formerly propertyless free blacks emerged as leading property owners. For example, the total number of Deep South blacks who owned at least \$2,000 worth of real estate rose 81 percent between 1860 and 1870 (706 to 1,278). Before the war, 86 percent of the most prosperous group was mulatto and 32 percent female; during the postwar era, these two indexes had dropped to 56 and 19 percent, respectively. The mean realty holdings among mulattoes dropped from \$9,082 in 1860 to \$5,448 in 1870, but among blacks, who now comprised 44 percent of the upper-wealth group, it rose from \$4,056 to \$4,367.

NEARLY AS PRECIPITOUS AS the decline of formerly free people of color in the Lower South was the rise of free blacks in the Upper South during the Civil War decade. In contrast to the lower states, Upper South black slaveholders had owned few slaves; except in Virginia and North Carolina, they were often far removed from the fields of battle, and they did not experience the same severe depreciation in the value of their pre-war holdings as did free people of color in the lower states. Indeed, in some areas, especially the border towns and cities, property values actually rose during the 1860s. Formerly free blacks in the upper states also benefited from an increasing demand for skilled and semi-skilled workers, less fear by whites of “Negro domination,” at least compared to the regions densely populated by blacks in the lower states, and the short duration of political reconstruction, which in the lower states was marked by prolonged periods of racial strife and violence.

Their ability to improve their economic position varied in different sections of

³⁷ Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Tour of the Southern States, 1865–1866* (New York, 1866); rpt. edn., ed. by C. Vann Woodward (New York, 1965), 244; *Mobile Nationalist*, July 11, 1867; Adolphe Garrigues to Charles F. Benjamin, January 28, 1876, Records of the [Southern] Claims Commission, Records of the Treasury Department, Record Group 56, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

TABLE 3
A Profile of Prosperous Blacks in the Lower South, 1860–1870
(those with at least \$2,000 in real estate)

State	Number		Percent						ARP*	ARP*
			Mulatto		Female		Urban			
Alabama	32	149	91	46	25	13	47	48	\$ 3,691	\$4,401
Arkansas		61		41		7		38		4,641
Florida	8	22	100	36	50	14	50	36	3,825	4,977
Georgia	13	127	92	43	46	19	92	47	3,585	3,624
Louisiana	472	510	85	79	31	27	63	57	10,311	5,730
Mississippi	13	162	77	24	31	15	38	27	4,685	5,335
South Carolina	162	206	87	48	32	12	81	56	4,723	4,508
Texas	6	41	83	41	33	10	17	24	5,133	3,134
	706	1,278	86	56	32	19	66	49	\$ 8,384	\$4,971

* = Average Real Property Holdings

SOURCE: Computed from USMSPC, 1860, 1870.

the upper states, in rural and urban areas, and among occupational groups, but nearly everywhere, blacks who acquired at least \$2,000 worth of real estate enjoyed substantial increases in their wealth. In rural Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri, where wartime destruction had been slight and blacks represented a relatively small portion of the total population, there was a strong surge into the upper levels of wealth. Although only 37 percent of the Upper South's postwar rural blacks resided there, these three states boasted nearly half of the prosperous farmers in 1870. A significant number among them—including Dennis Lane, John Shaw, Alfred Ewell of Kentucky, Rubin Caldwell, Michael Archer, and Fleming Higgins of Tennessee, Moses Logan, Lewis Mitchell, and Samuel Smith of Missouri—had been free before the war.³⁸

In urban areas, those who had previously carved out a niche in the local economies as artisans, draymen, livery operators, stewards, and barbers, or who had managed small businesses, were often able to expand their operations. Opportunities in the professions and government service improved. In addition, the rapid urban population growth stimulated new demands for service-related employment. As in the rural western states, a significant proportion of those who controlled at least \$2,000 in real estate in the Upper South's towns and cities were formerly free blacks—Wilmington's Charles Agnes, listed as a laborer; Baltimore's Augustus Roberts, a barber; District of Columbia's William Cole, a coachman; Alexandria, Virginia's William Gray, a butcher; Richmond's James Woodson, a boilermaker; Shelbyville, Kentucky's Thomas Ballard, a merchant; and St. Louis's James Young, a steward. Typical of this group was Chestertown, Maryland, restaurant owner William Perkins, who increased the value of his property holdings from \$2,300 to \$5,500 between 1860 and 1867 and, by 1870, after establishing a

³⁸ Computed from USMSPC, 1860, 1870; *ibid.*, Mason Co., Ky., 1860, n.p.; 1870, 518; *ibid.*, Hancock Co., Ky., 1870, 212; *ibid.*, Braken Co., Ky., 1860, 221; 1870, 276; *ibid.*, Greene Co., Tenn., 1860, 368; 1870, 364; *ibid.*, Rutherford Co., Tenn., 15th Dist., 1870, 78; *ibid.*, Andrew Co., Mo., 1850, 59; *ibid.*, Andrew Co., Mo., Nodaway Township, 1870, 278; *ibid.*, Clark Co., Mo., Jackson Township, 1860, 780; *ibid.*, Clay Township, 1870, 467; *ibid.*, Carroll Co., Mo., Wakenda Section, 1870, 414.

popular oyster bar and ice cream parlor, again nearly doubled his property accumulations.³⁹

The number of postwar blacks who reached the higher economic level rose twice as fast in the upper states as in the Lower South, but the group's profile changed only slightly, suggesting stronger continuity with the past. The proportion of blacks and females among the most prosperous group remained relatively stable, while the mean holdings rose from \$4,099 to \$4,375. Both the persistence and new entry rate were higher in the upper states than in the Deep South. About one out of three prosperous antebellum free blacks in the region (approximately 197 of 634) survived the war as realty owners. Among them, 61 percent (120 of 197) remained at or above the \$2,000 level. Following the war, nearly five times as many formerly free black property owners in the Upper South, compared with the lower states, entered for the first time the most prosperous group (316 compared with 69); and, even with this large discrepancy, their average realty holdings stood at nearly the same level as their counterparts in the lower states (\$4,000 compared with \$4,300).⁴⁰ In all, by 1870, approximately 1,814 blacks in the region had acquired at least \$2,000 worth of real estate, a threefold rise in a decade and a figure that now exceeded the number of affluent blacks in the Lower South by a substantial margin.

At the same time, the changing profile among the most prosperous group in the region, especially city dwellers, suggests that some of them had recently emerged from slavery. Not only had the number of prosperous urban blacks risen sharply—285 to 978 or 243 percent—but nearly one out of five worked in menial occupations such as waiters, servants, porters, laborers, hack drivers, and laundresses. In addition, the portion of upper-level wealthy individuals listed by census takers as black had risen from 40 percent to 55 percent during the decade. Indeed, by 1870, there were nearly twice as many prosperous urban blacks in the Upper South as affluent blacks and mulattoes combined before the war. The percentage of this group listed as illiterate also rose during the decade, from 33 in 1860 to 43 in 1870 (including those listed as semi-literate). While none of these comparisons determines the pre-war status of postwar affluent blacks absolutely, and while some ex-free blacks could be found in each of the above categories, taken together, they strongly suggest that some members of the upper-wealth group had been antebellum slaves.⁴¹

The South's new population center for affluent blacks, surpassing Charleston and New Orleans, was the District of Columbia. During the postwar years, blacks obtained government clerkships and teaching positions, started small businesses or continued the enterprises they had managed before the war, and entered the professions as doctors, lawyers, and ministers. Profits were to be made in the building trades, as the city witnessed a rapid expansion of its population, which in turn stimulated growth in construction and home renovation. These new demands

³⁹ USMSPC, New Castle Co., Del., Wilmington, 1st Ward, 1860, 699; 1870, 303; *ibid.*, Baltimore, Md., 9th Ward, 1870, 409; *ibid.*, District of Columbia, 7th Ward, 1860, 887; 1870, 466; *ibid.*, Alexandria, Va., 1860, 841; *ibid.*, 5th Ward, 1870, 134; *ibid.*, Henrico Co., Va., Richmond, 1860, n.p.; *ibid.*, Richmond, Clay Ward, 1870, 422; *ibid.*, Shelby Co., Ky., Shelbyville, 1870, 415; *ibid.*, St. Louis, Mo., 9th Ward, 1870, 519; RCPC, Kent Co., Md., Land Deeds, Liber no. JKH-2 (1860), 230; Liber no. JKH-2 (1861), 456; Liber no. JKH-4 (1864), 445; Liber no. JKH-5 (1866), 359, in Maryland State Archives, Annapolis, Md.; USMSPC, Kent Co., Md., Chestertown, 1860, 1006; *ibid.*, Chestertown, 4th Dist., 1870, 172; A. W. Bolenius to the Freedmen's Bureau, May 31, 1866, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Maryland, Record Group 105, National Archives. I wish to thank Professor Richard P. Fuke for providing me with information on Perkins.

⁴⁰ Computed from USMSPC, 1850, 1860, 1870.

⁴¹ Computed from the USMSPC, 1860, 1870.

TABLE 4
A Profile of Prosperous Blacks in the Upper South, 1860–1870
(those with at least \$2,000 in real estate)

State	Number		Percent						ARPH*	
			Mulatto		Female		Urban			
Delaware	38	103	21	21	5	10	11	31	\$3,076	\$4,399
District of Columbia	89	350	54	44	15	18	93	97	3,082	4,962
Kentucky	71	259	51	44	13	15	44	60	3,875	4,051
Maryland	167	320	27	28	7	9	17	41	3,825	4,092
Missouri	65	172	65	26	26	12	91	52	6,515	6,100
North Carolina	32	89	91	39	6	15	13	43	5,538	3,238
Tennessee	56	292	61	36	21	9	50	29	4,780	4,011
Virginia	101	229	59	51	25	14	47	47	3,601	3,837
	619	1,814	49	38	15	13	46	54	\$4,099	\$4,375

* = Average Real Property Holdings

SOURCE: Computed from USMSPC, 1860, 1870.

drove real estate prices in the District upward. Free blacks who had acquired realty before or during the war, especially in the 1st Ward, saw a marked appreciation in the value of their holdings. Edward Crusoe, a grocer worth \$2,000 before the war, for example, established a mercantile grain store during the 1860s and increased the value of his realty holdings by 900 percent. While few business people experienced such a dramatic rise, a number doubled or tripled the value of their pre-war holdings. In all, the number of blacks in the District of Columbia with realty of at least \$2,000 (excluding a few listed in rural areas) shot upward 338 percent (from 83 to 339) during the 1860s, and the total value of their holdings jumped from \$261,300 to \$1,701,000, the largest increases in the South.⁴²

Unlike the antebellum period, when all but a few of the South's wealthiest blacks were residents of the Lower South, by 1870 a number of the region's richest blacks lived in urban areas of the Upper South. District of Columbia hotel owner and restaurateur James T. Wormley, who began as a steward and caterer, established one of the finest hotels in Washington in 1871. By then, his holdings exceeded \$87,000. Another hotel owner, slave-born Henry Harding, worth \$35,000 in 1870, lost a large portion of his wealth with the collapse of the Freedmen's Bank in 1874 but recouped much of it in subsequent years. Former bondsman and free black James Thomas, a barber in St. Louis who married Antoinette Rutgers, the daughter of the wealthiest black woman in Missouri, amassed a fortune speculating in real estate. Within five years after the war, Thomas owned nearly two entire blocks of downtown St. Louis, rented out forty-eight apartment units, and controlled real estate as far away as Memphis and Nashville. His real estate was valued at \$150,000, the third largest for a black in the South.⁴³

⁴² USMSPC, District of Columbia, 1st Ward, 1860, 217; 2d Ward, 1870, 231; 1st Ward, 1860, 318; 1870, 7; 2d Ward, 1860, 523; 1870, 268; 1st Ward, 1860, 335; 1870, 53; 2d Ward, 1860, 595; 1870, 227; 1st Ward, 1860, 333; 1870, 9; 1st Ward, 1860, 378; 1870, 67; RCPC, District of Columbia, Estates, no. 6605, March 2, 1895; *ibid.*, no. 3151, August 3, 1888; computed from USMSPC, District of Columbia, 1860, 1870.

⁴³ USMSPC, District of Columbia, 1st Ward, 1870, 1; RCPC, District of Columbia, Estates, no. 1700, October 31, 1884; Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South*, 88; USMSPC, Davidson Co., Tenn., Nashville, 5th Ward, 1870, 266; *ibid.*, St. Louis, Mo., 3d Ward, 1870, 196; RCPC, St. Louis, Mo., Deeds, bk. 405 (April 1, 1870), 69; *Tax Book for the Year 1879*; *State of Missouri*, 26–29; *New York Herald Tribune*,

Not only had prosperous Upper South blacks greatly improved their economic standing during the postwar era, but their family and cultural values also made it easier for them to adjust to new conditions. Most of them welcomed the general emancipation as a glorious day when they could be reunited with their loved ones, mingle freely with various groups of blacks, and establish churches, schools, and benevolent associations free from white control. While some of them became involved in politics, they identified more with freedmen than with their counterparts in the lower states. Despite various business activities, William Perkins of Maryland, for example, devoted much of his time to organizing schools, investigating ex-slaves' complaints of unfair treatment by whites, seeking redress for parents from the state's apprenticeship law (which allowed children to be bound out as laborers), and serving as a representative of the Freedmen's Bureau. Like other prosperous blacks in the region, he felt compassion for the masses of recently emancipated slaves.⁴⁴

In race relations, too, formerly free blacks in the upper states discovered that their independent status served them well during the postwar era. Most of those who owned farms or businesses still had contacts with whites or served white clienteles, but they had never felt the same connection with the white planter and slaveholding class as had their counterparts in the Deep South. Formerly free blacks in the upper states therefore were not tied to the fortunes of the white aristocracy. More self-confident, able to mix more easily with former slaves, and viewing the formerly dominant class with suspicion and skepticism, they could more easily build on their past experiences during the postwar era, to advance not only their own cause but the cause of freedmen as well.

Even though these regional differences reveal how property-owning antebellum free blacks adjusted to postwar conditions, the question of how significant numbers of lower-level free blacks and former slaves were able to enter the highest economic group during the postwar era remains. This development seems all the more remarkable since it occurred in the midst of declining land values, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and other such groups, the refusal of whites to sell land to freedmen and women, and the declining fortunes of the antebellum planter class. The paucity of scholarly works on black enterprise during the middle period makes answers somewhat tentative, but it appears that, ironically, some postwar difficulties may have actually been beneficial to blacks. Improved farmland sold for between \$15 and \$25 per acre before the war; it now sold for between \$2 and \$8 per acre. In addition, during the war, nearly one out of five Southern white males ages thirteen to forty-three had died, and tens of thousands of others had returned home physically disabled or mentally impaired. Free blacks and emancipated slaves also suffered during the war and its aftermath, but the comparative death rates, at least from what we know, paled by comparison. Moreover, with freedom came a new energy, a new enthusiasm for determining one's own fate in life and acquiring an economic stake. Black leaders urged their people to become economically indepen-

July 6, 1871. The richest black in the South was Mississippi's Benjamin Thornton Montgomery, the former slave of Joseph Davis, who owned \$350,000 worth of real and personal property. USMSPC, Warren Co., Miss., 1870, 131; Hermann, *Pursuit of a Dream*, 109–10, 148, 156–57, 160, 182, 201–03; RCPC, Warren Co., Miss., Estates, no. 3029, November 6, 1877.

⁴⁴ A. W. Bolenius to the Freedmen's Bureau, May 31, 1866; William Perkins to E. C. Kowner, May 4, 1868, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, District of Maryland, Letters Received by Assistant Commissioners, Record Group 105, National Archives.

dent and self-sufficient.⁴⁵ Although none of these conditions necessarily resulted in economic improvement, and the masses remained landless, in every section of the South enterprising blacks achieved a measure of prosperity by acquiring significant amounts of land and property.

During the 1870s, these trends continued. In the Lower South, the small group of free people of color who had owned large plantations and gangs of slaves—once the richest group of blacks in the United States—continued to decline in number and wealth. Even in Charleston and New Orleans, where postwar economic activity quickly revived, the value of the average holdings of blacks who had been at the top of the economic pyramid dropped sharply. With a prolonged depression beginning in 1873, continued violence and political unrest, and another generational change, which witnessed the death and breaking up of the estates of several surviving formerly free people of color, the number of prosperous pre-war blacks remaining as large property owners by the late 1870s could be counted on one hand.⁴⁶

Although affluent free people of color in the Lower South failed to maintain their unique status and economic standing in the postwar era, formerly free blacks and former slaves in the Upper South continued to gain entry into the most prosperous group of farmers, skilled artisans, and small business people. During the 1870s, despite the economic problems of the era, the most prosperous group continued to expand, especially in towns and cities. Compared with whites, who had twenty-two out of every hundred families at this wealth level, this group remained tiny even in the Upper South, with only about .5 percent of the region's black families having acquired such wealth. But remarkable shifts occurred following the war, and prosperous blacks in the upper states had significantly expanded their estates.

THUS, IN THE THREE GENERATIONS beginning in the 1790s and ending in the 1870s, significant changes took place among the most prosperous group of blacks in the South. During the early years, only a tiny number of free people of color, usually light-skinned mulattoes directly related to the slaveowner class, were able to achieve a higher economic standing. Their ranks included a substantial number of women, and two states in the Lower South—South Carolina and Louisiana—contained most of the economic successes. By the 1830s and 1840s, this distribution had begun to change, with the gradual emergence of an affluent group in the Upper South, largely urban and black, often with direct ties to slavery. Prosperous free blacks in the two regions developed different social and cultural values, maintained different relations with the dominant race, and engaged in different occupations. The Civil War accelerated the changes that had begun during the 1840s and 1850s, and, by

⁴⁵ Ransom and Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom*, 82; Maris A. Vinovskis, "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations," *Journal of American History*, 76 (June 1989): 38–39; Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (London, 1972); Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), 399–408; Howard Rabinowitz, ed., *Southern Black Leaders of the Reconstruction Era* (Urbana, Ill., 1982), 250, 285–90, 300–01, 370, 403.

⁴⁶ RCPC, Charleston, S.C., Estates, no. 243–20, December 26, 1876; no. 230–25, March 25, 1875; no. 250–24, May 4, 1878; no. 243–45, January 11, 1877; no. 220–26, July 8, 1873; no. 277–14, May 22, 1882; RPPC, New Orleans, La., Successions, no. 35,055, December 2, 1871; no. 41,626, November 19, 1879; no. 38,677, May 27, 1876, in New Orleans Public Library; *ibid.*, New Orleans, La., Successions, no. 37,326, July 28, 1874, in Louisiana Papers, 65–2, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.; Rankin, "Origins of Black Leadership in New Orleans during Reconstruction," 431–32.

the 1870s, a new black economic elite had emerged in the South, one that had forged its existence on the ruins of a vanquished civilization. Only a decade before this remarkable transformation, some of the most prosperous blacks in the South had been considered “a species of property” themselves.

A Note on the United States Population Censuses

In several sections of this essay, I have relied heavily on the U.S. Manuscript Population Censuses for 1850, 1860, and 1870. During these years, census marshals were required to “insert the value of real estate owned by each individual enumerated” and, from 1860 to 1870, the value of personal holdings including “bonds, mortgages notes, slaves, live stock, plate, jewels, or furniture.” They were to obtain this information in dollars by personal inquiry of each family head. Personal inquiry had its limitations, and, during the violent summer of 1870, census takers probably failed to canvas 6 or 7 percent of the South’s black population, although this was surely not the case for property owners, among the best-known and most stable members of their communities. Despite its limitations, the middle-period censuses are the only primary sources to connect racial identity with property accumulations for the region as a whole. Consequently, they are a remarkable set of documents for understanding the economic changes among prosperous blacks during the middle period of the nineteenth century.

To obtain data on the black economic elite—those with at least \$2,000 worth of real estate—the manuscript censuses for these years were perused and information gathered on each individual in this category—surname, given name, state, county, town or city of residence, age, gender, color, realty holdings, personal property holdings (1860–1870), state of birth, literacy, and the names and ages of those listed in the same household. These data were supplemented by biographical information on prosperous blacks missed by census takers but listed in local probate records, tax assessment records, and reliable secondary works (in 1850 and 1860, approximately 4 percent of the total). In some of the supplementary sources, the color or gender is not indicated; these “missing cases” were excluded in determining the total percentages. In eighteen cases, individuals listed as whites or Indians in one census were listed as mulattoes in the next. Since other evidence suggests that they were persons of mixed-Negro blood, I have included them as mulattoes.

For comparative purposes, I have obtained data on all black property owners listed in the 1850 and the 1860 censuses. The huge increase in the number of census-listed black families between 1860 and 1870 (from approximately 52,000 to 900,000), however, necessitated that I use a sampling procedure for property owners with total estates between \$100 and \$900 in 1870. For this group, data were taken from every twentieth page and its facing page of the manuscript volumes (total = 7,855). These were considered to be 5 percent of the total in 1870, and thus the data on the four antebellum elite blacks found in this group was multiplied by a factor of twenty. From the group with \$1,000 or more total estate holdings in 1870, all property holders were analyzed.

To analyze property owners who appeared in at least two censuses, I placed blacks in “elite categories,” depending on when they first entered the most prosperous group. These

individuals were then traced forward and backward in time. Those who first entered the elite group in 1850 and were found in the 1860 and/or 1870 returns were analyzed with average realty holdings in each decade, and those who entered the group in 1870 were traced backward to 1860 and/or 1850. While these realty owners were an extremely stable group, rarely moving from one state to another, there was some migration between various states. This method not only provides a “persistence rate”—an estimate of how many prosperous antebellum real estate owners survived the war as property owners—but also generates motion from one decade to the next, the ebb and flow of those entering the most prosperous group and those dropping below \$2,000 in real estate.