

Masterless Men

Poor Whites and Slavery
in the Antebellum South

Keri Leigh Merritt



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Analyzing land policy, labor, and legal history, Keri Leigh Merritt reveals what happens to excess workers when a capitalist system is predicated on slave labor. With the rising global demand for cotton - and thus, slaves - in the 1840s and 1850s, the need for white laborers in the American South was drastically reduced, creating a large underclass who were unemployed or underemployed. These poor whites could not compete - for jobs or living wages - with profitable slave labor. Though impoverished whites were never subjected to the daily violence and degrading humiliations of racial slavery, they did suffer tangible socio-economic consequences as a result of living in a slave society. Merritt examines how these 'masterless' men and women threatened the existing Southern hierarchy and ultimately helped push Southern slaveholders toward secession and civil war.

Masterless Men Details

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From Reader Review Masterless Men for online ebook

Eric Bottorff says

A fascinating examination of racial formation and the tripartite class divide within the antebellum South and the extent to which the master class had to work to prevent their socioeconomic system from disintegrating at the hands of a coalition between slaves and poor whites. And though it touches on it only briefly, also very good on the ways in which the privileges of whiteness were extended to poor whites after the Civil War.

Jeremy Neely says

One of the most important books on 19th-century U.S. history to emerge in the past few years, *Masterless Men* has helped me to think about so many parts of American line—particularly in the antebellum era but also in our own time—in new ways. This is now *the* book to read on non-slaveholding Southern whites, but students of several other topics—land policy, labor, education, crime and punishment, and Civil War loyalties—would do well to consider Merritt's forceful interpretations.

Jessica ? says

It's usually paperback fantasy novels that keep me up reading late at night, but this book was fascinating and *un-put-down-able*.

With an exhaustive amount of research, it challenges the image of a Jacksonian utopia promoted by neo-Confederate apologists, painting a picture of a surveillance society plagued by vigilante miscarriages of justice and a blatant disregard for the most basic of Constitutional (not to mention basic human-) rights.

The author's basic argument (which is exceptionally well-supported by the evidence) is that poor southern whites inhabited a social strata significantly below true freedom but still nominally better than the life lived by the enslaved. Their freedom of speech was severely restricted, in some places even under threat of execution; even if they could speak their mind, they were purposely denied a basic education, so the illiterate majority had little access to ideas. Their freedom of movement was closely monitored. And, of course, it was virtually impossible to compete economically with enslaved laborers, who the slaveowning class struggled to keep separate from the poor whites lest they should socialize and conspire together. (They did anyway.)

This economy and society was not sustainable, and the slaveowning class lived in perpetual fear of 1) the enslaved population, 2) the large mass of poor whites who were bound to revolt once they became literate and noticed the score, and 3) those two groups working together.

Following the Civil War, these two classes each took a step up socioeconomically. It can be argued that the Civil War did more for poor whites than for former slaves. Poor whites, now able to compete for wages, go to school, or find a homestead out west, found themselves less separated from the rest of white society. Newly-freed blacks found themselves nominally free, but facing many of the perils that once plagued the poor whites -- increased surveillance, limited civil freedoms and educational opportunities, strict labor and movement controls, and rampant over-incarceration for minor (or imaginary) infractions.

I cannot stress enough how exceptional this book was, and how reading it has informed the way I consider the progression of lower-working class labor and race relations.

My review does not do it justice.

Highly recommended.
