
Survival Strategies of Poor White Women in Savannah, 1800–1860

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The emergence of feminist historiographies since the 1970s has provided southern historians with the wealth of work on plantation mistresses and on slave women, but, at least initially, largely overlooked poorer white women. This was partly due to the source material, because poorer white women were rarely sufficiently literate to leave a written legacy. Gradually, however, scholars such as Victoria Bynum, Martha Hodes, Kathleen Brown, and others began to show how the lives of these women can be recovered through the use of a variety of quantitative records such as those of courts, churches, poorhouses, female asylums, and newspapers, as well the federal census. Much, however, remains to be done, and this article will examine specifically how poorer white women coped in slave societies where racial slavery constrained the amount and type of work available.¹

Savannah, antebellum Georgia's largest city, had a population that on the eve of the Civil War topped 20,000. Fairly evenly divided between black and white, and thus between slave and free, the city also boasted a noticeable free black population. Local planters with townhouses and

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1. For example, Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York, 1982) and Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985). Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992); Martha E. Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South* (New Haven, CT, 1997); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996).

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permanent-resident merchants and professionals constituted the civic elite, who generally resided in the center of the city in elegant and well-maintained dwellings. The eastern and western fringes of the city, by contrast, were characterized by densely packed, low-quality housing that proved affordable for the large immigrant population. In 1860 only about 10 percent of the adult white population was locally born, whereas roughly two-fifths were born overseas. Only a minority of taxpayers owned slaves in the antebellum era, and members of nonslaveholding families probably constituted two-thirds or more of the city's white population. A significant proportion of Savannah's white residents lived meager existences, where merely providing food and shelter could be difficult.²

Poor white women in Savannah used four principal strategies to ensure their own survival—charity, marriage, employment, and crime. These strategies were essentially the same for all poor women in the Americas in the early nineteenth century, but it is clear that southern women were able to use their particular position as white women in a slave society to their advantage. Although Savannah has retained relatively good antebellum records, the major issue facing any historian of poorer white women in antebellum America is the source materials. Low levels of literacy, perhaps only marginally above that of the enslaved population, meant that poor white women did not leave many first-hand documents, since comparatively few could do more than write their name. Unlike middle-class and upper-class white women, who were schooled either privately by tutors or in fee-paying schools, girls from poor white families were often given minimal schooling, at least before the 1850s. Of 750 white girls under the age of fifteen in 1820, for instance, only about a hundred were attending the Savannah Free School or Chatham Academy. By the mid 1850s, about 300 children (about 20 percent of those aged five to fifteen) were receiving free tuition at one of the city's public schools, but most white girls acquired little in the way of an education. Even if some poorer white women attained an education, Savannah's archives do not bulge with their personal diaries and correspondence since paper and ink were expensive items, as was postage.

2. See Herbert Weaver, "Foreigners In Ante-bellum Savannah", *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 37 (Mar. 1953), 1. Timothy James Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens, GA, 2001), 23-24.

Uncovering the lives of these “silent” women is not straightforward, as only rarely do we find their “voices” as recorded by those they encountered.³

Because qualitative sources are thin on the ground, attention inevitably falls on quantitative sources. In many respects historians of Savannah are fortunate, since the city’s records have survived the ravages of time very well. Major repositories have weathered hurricanes and the visit in late 1864 of Sherman’s troops; however, we are faced with inherent class and gender biases in the records that have survived. The federal census, for instance, records only the names of heads of household before 1850, nearly all of whom were male. Even when every individual is noted, the amount of information recorded for women is usually far less than for men. In 1850 for instance, occupations were recorded for nearly all heads of household but for few women. By 1860 this had been corrected to some extent, and the occupations of 1,578 white Savannah women—about a third of adult white females—were recorded for the first time. Tax digests, listing all the taxable property of residents, survive for the city of Savannah from 1809, but again only enumerate heads of households—mostly men. Women heading their own households, mainly widows, are listed separately in the tax records, but women living independently in rented accommodation with no taxable property to speak of could easily be overlooked by tax officials.

The records of the city charitable societies are crucial for the study of poorer white women of all ages, since by definition only poor white people were eligible for support. Women who appear as beneficiaries in the records of the Savannah Female Asylum, the Savannah Free School, the Needle Women’s Friend Society, the Widow’s Society, and numerous others can certainly be classified as “poor” since they would not have been able to gain access to charity without passing a means test of both their poverty and their character. The managers of these societies, women themselves, declined to support any but the most needy and most deserving, and therefore we can be confident that those receiving charitable help were among the poorest white women in Savannah.

Of course poverty is a relative rather than an absolute status, and

3. Savannah Free School Society Minutes, Jan. 5, 1820, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA (hereafter GHS); Chatham Academy Minutes, Feb. 15, 1820, GHS. Population figures from U.S. Federal Census, GHS.

simple financial resource can be an inadequate measure. White southerners were often quite willing to describe those who failed to conform to established social norms as “poor white trash,” even though some might have owned businesses or even slaves. Those who supplied alcohol to slaves illegally, participated in the southern culture of interpersonal violence, and lived in tumble-down shacks were “poor whites.” It was their behavior rather than their bank balance that earned them that particular moniker. Women engaging in illicit behavior, such as interracial sex or some other kind of overfamiliarity with the enslaved, or those who drank too much and earned a reputation for late-night carousing with little regard for the proper deportment southern society expected from a lady could also earn the label. Conversely, even women with very little money could avoid this label by working hard, by being thrifty, by caring selflessly for children, and perhaps most crucially by being perceived to be doing these things by the elite. These women were poor but they were not “poor white trash.”⁴

Poor white women’s lives in antebellum Savannah might be fairly described as a struggle for survival in a fairly typical southern city, where slavery was ubiquitous and opportunities limited. As women in a patriarchal society and as poor whites in a slave society, poor white women found it hard to carve out a niche for themselves in Savannah. Poor white women were socially and economically marginalized, treated as second- or third-class citizens, and presented with huge challenges to secure shelter, food, training, and education for themselves and their children.⁵

Poorer white women in Savannah did not just face the lifecycle of poverty common throughout the Anglophone world. Deprivation was more than something experienced principally by the young, lacking sufficient skills to earn decent money, or by the old, now lacking the

4. On the difficulty of defining poor whites see Lockley, *Lines in the Sand*, xi–xv. The term “poor white trash” dates back to the nineteenth century. See Eugene D. Genovese “‘Rather be a Nigger than a Poor White Man’: Slave Perceptions of Southern Yeomen and Poor Whites,” in *Toward a New View of America: Essays in Honour of Arthur C. Cole*, ed. Hans L. Trefousse (New York, 1977), 79–96.

5. Tim Lockley, “A Struggle for Survival: Non-Elite White Women in Low-country Georgia, 1790–1830,” in *Women of the American South: A Multicultural Reader*, ed. Christie Anne Farnham (New York, 1997), 26–42.

strength or the health to work for wages. For some unfortunates chronic poverty was almost impossible to escape at any stage in their life. Childhood for poor white girls could be marked by frequent unmedicated illness probably exacerbated by malnutrition. Any resources the family might have been able to spare for education and training were spent on brothers, and therefore girls were far more likely to rely solely on their mothers to impart life skills. If the mother was lacking in this regard, or had died, then a girl's prospects were grim indeed. Living in societies based around racial slavery meant that low or unskilled jobs were harder to obtain than in free-labor societies, and so poor white women adopted a number of differing strategies in order to survive.⁶



The obvious strategy for a poor white woman in antebellum Savannah, as it was in every other major American city, was to make use of the city's extensive network of state and private benevolence. The local court system doled out small sums to the truly desperate to stave off starvation, such as the five dollars per month granted to one family of "female children" understood to be "in a distressed situation." The sick could receive financial support from the Board of Health or care and shelter at the Poor House and Hospital, first opened in 1809. The few extant letters requesting admission to the Poor House provide us with a rare glimpse into the world of poor white women. In 1842 Mrs. Neville requested admission into the Poor House, stating, "that her health is so delicate and precarious as to deter her from using those exertions at her needle for her support . . . and therefore she wishes an asylum in the poor house." She asked for a prompt reply "as she has no home after next week, nor money, indeed very sick often, she sees no alternative." The managers agreed to admit her. Residency in the poor house came with strings attached, since pauper patients "capable of work" were expected to "assist in nursing others, washing and ironing the linen, washing and cleaning the rooms, and such other services as the steward or matron shall require."⁷

6. See, for example, Barry Stapleton, "Inherited Poverty and Life-Cycle Poverty: Odiham, Hampshire, 1650-1850," *Social History* 8 (Oct. 1993), 339-55.

7. Chatham County, Inferior Court Minutes, Feb. 26, 1859, Georgia Archives, Morrow, GA. Savannah Poor House and Hospital Minutes, Aug. 6, 1842, Georgia

Elderly women might be accepted as one of the residents in the Widow's Home as an alternative to the poor house. A typical entry in the minutes of the Widow's Society noted "Mr King recommended Mrs Wimpee (formerly a pensioner) to the board as being in a destitute condition & earnestly beg for relief on her behalf. Mrs Brower preferred receiving house rent to any other aid, it was granted by the board. Mrs Nagle living with Mrs Rahn, received a supply of sugar & coffee, she is evidently a worthy object & would be grateful for occasional aid from the society. It was noted that she should be relieved." For those not in need of residential care the Clothing and Fuel Society, founded in 1838, could provide some of the necessaries of life such as "medicine and nourishment" including "sugar, tea, coffee, grist rice" as well as basic clothing and wood for stoves.⁸

Charity in the city was not limitless—both state and private benevolence operated within certain budgetary constraints which inevitably meant that many needy women were overlooked. The number supported by the Widow's Society rose slowly from five in 1830 to nine in 1840 and seventeen by 1860, while the amounts spent on relief by the Clothing and Fuel Society rarely amounted to more than \$200 a year. These efforts, while highly significant to recipients, were hardly enough to supply all those in want. At the same time, however, women had far better access to these funds than men. White women, no more than a quarter of the population, received a disproportionate share of all charitable aid dispensed in antebellum Savannah. Besides the societies specifically aiding women such as those mentioned above, ethnic benevolent societies such as the Hibernian Society or the Hebrew Benevolent Society assisted both men and women, while mutual associations such as the House Carpenter's Society or the Workingmen's Association spent significant sums helping the widows of deceased members. In fact men had exclusive access to only a very small number of charities, such as the Sailor's Home managed by the Port Society.

Sometimes charitable aid for women was indirect; for example, taking children into a free school or residential home that relieved mothers'

Archives. *Rules and Bye-Laws of the Savannah Poor-House and Hospital Society* (Savannah, GA, 1810), 24.

8. Widow's Society Minutes, Sept. 1849, GHS. *Daily Morning News* (Savannah, GA), May 12, 1854.

financial burdens and liberated them to work. Widowhood in particular could spell disaster for a poor white woman, especially if she had young children that prevented her from working full time. Widows were often reduced to taking in seamstressing work that could be done at home, but the financial rewards for such work were slim. Some young widows turned to the Savannah Female Asylum for help. Mrs. Carr, for instance, “petitioned [sic] the board of the Female Asylum to admit her two children, Adeline Carr aged 7 years, and Harriot Carr aged 6 years, into the asylum, as she was left a widow with six small children, without the means of support.” The petition of another “poor woman” who was “afflicted with fits” and who had been left with nothing “but the labor of her hands” to support herself and her two daughters evidently elicited considerable sympathy from the managers of the Female Asylum, since “it was unanimously agreed, that her situation is a most deplorable one, and her petition could not be rejected.”⁹

Such steps were not to be taken lightly, however. The Savannah Female Asylum was a long- rather than a short-term solution, as surrendering a child to the care of the Asylum meant poor mothers had effectively given away their future rights over their children. Mothers who wished to have their daughters returned to them found the directresses of the Female Asylum extremely reluctant to give back a girl unless they were sure the mother’s circumstances had changed. Mrs. Gibbons’s petition for her children was refused “as it was thought more to the advantage of the children to be under the protection of the female Asylum than of there [sic] mother.” Mrs. Atkinson’s petition was similarly refused “the ladies knowing her character to be very bad.” Not all applications were refused: Mrs. Norris received her children back as the board accepted “she was now in a situation to provide for them,” but sometimes mothers were required to sign a bond “authorising the directresses to take the child back if they hear any thing prejudicial to the future welfare of the child.”¹⁰

Adopting the charitable strategy, therefore, was something of a double-edged sword. Charities might relieve widows of extra mouths

9. Savannah Female Asylum Minutes, Oct. 1, 1818, and August, 19, 1817, GHS.

10. Savannah Female Asylum Minutes, Dec. 4, 1817, and Apr. 7, 1825, GHS. Savannah Female Asylum Minutes, Oct. 2, 1811, and Nov. 14, 1822, GHS.

they could ill afford to feed, and provide the clothing and education that children would otherwise not have received. But it also required mothers to abdicate any future control over their children unless they were able to prove their circumstances had considerably improved. Moreover, all charitable societies provided aid on a conditional basis and withdrew it from those deemed unworthy. When the board of the Widow's Society heard of the "gross misconduct" of Mrs. Norris, for example, they resolved that she had "forfeited her right to receive and further assistance" and ordered her to leave the widow's home. Poor women who adopted this strategy therefore had to make sure they continued to behave in a manner deemed appropriate by those dispensing largesse. For a small number of poor white women benevolence could be a means of survival, but it was always conditional.¹¹



A crucial strategy for poor white women was marriage to an up-and-coming young man who would lift a young wife out of desperate poverty and provide a decent household income that was enough to feed and clothe the two of them. Marriage had the potential to improve markedly the living standards of poor white girls, and for a fortunate few it resulted in financial security, domestic happiness, and even slave ownership. Mary Ann Kemp for instance, who had been admitted as a "really indigent" pupil at the Free School in 1817, married lumber merchant Augustus G. Boulineau in 1829. Boulineau's business grew slowly, and by 1860 he owned real estate in Savannah valued at \$11,000, while Mary herself was credited with owning \$7,000 of real estate.¹²

More commonly marriage to a man of similar background led to a reasonably comfortable lifestyle where the husband worked in an artisan trade and the woman cared for children and supplemented household income where she could. White women were in a relatively fortunate position in Savannah. Adult white men outnumbered adult white women throughout the antebellum era—in 1850 for instance there were 949 white women in their 20s, compared with 1,163 white men of the same

11. Widow's Society Minutes, Sept. 1860, GHS.

12. Data on marriages and deaths comes from *Marriages of Chatham County, Georgia*. Vol. 1, 1748–1852; Vol. 2, 1852–1877 (Savannah, GA, 1993); and *Register of Deaths in Savannah, Georgia: 6 Vols. 1803–1847* (Savannah, GA, 1989).

age. Since legal and social barriers prevented white men marrying non-white women (though of course many men had long-term intimate relationships across the color line), most young white women who wanted a husband could find one.¹³

Marriage could be a source of love and support, but it could also be a curse. Mary Wade's tavern-keeper husband gave "himself up to drunkenness [and] not only neglected to provide for his wife and children, but pawned sold and destroyed those articles which had be[en] furnished by charitable people." Penelope Irwin sought a divorce after her husband Edwin subjected her to "harsh and cruel treatment." In particular his "profligate course of life" meant that he had never "furnished any support or maintenance for your petitioner or her said infant, but has forced her to depend upon the bounty of her parents, without whose assistance both she and her infant must have become the victims of misery and want."¹⁴

Some husbands progressed from neglect to violence. Mary Ryan's husband "beat, calumniated & in other ways illtreated" her, ultimately "driving her from her home, compelling her to seek her personal safety by flying to her friends, leaving her at divers times unprotected & houseless, an object of the bounty and tenderness of an aged & infirm mother." Ryan was lucky; she was granted her divorce and escaped a drunken and violent relationship.¹⁵

Mary Connor, on the other hand, was not so fortunate. She clearly had a tempestuous relationship with her husband, but when she woke him up by striking him with a stick he lashed out, killing her with "one blow" to the head. At his trial for manslaughter, neighbors testified that "the deceased was in the habit of drinking, heard she had been under

13. Tim Lockley, "To Train Them to Habits of Industry and Usefulness": Molding the Poor Children of Antebellum Savannah," in *Children Bound to Labor: The Pauper Apprentice System in Early America*, ed. John E. Murray and Ruth Wallis Herndon (Ithaca, NY, 2009), 144–45.

14. Chatham County, Superior Court Minutes, Oct. 1, 1785, Georgia Archives. Divorce Petition of Penelope Irwin, wife of Edwin W Irwin, Apr. 2, 1850, Keith Read Collection, Box 4, Folder 51, Chatham Co. Court Records, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, GA.

15. Petition of Mary Ryan, Keith Read Collection, Box 4, Folder 51, Chatham Co. Court Records, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, GA.

the influence of drink that day—the prisoner was an industrious man and did not drink.” The doctor who attended Mary Connor countered that he believed Patrick Connor was in fact “drunk” and stated “that the blows Connor described were unlikely to have caused her death—that hammers in the room were more likely.” Given the professional testimony, the jury sentenced the twenty-nine-year-old Irish-born laborer to three years in the state penitentiary.¹⁶

The marriage strategy was naturally popular: Most young women married and some married several times following the deaths of their husbands. Remarriage was a lifeline for young that the blows Connor described were unlikely to have caused her death - that hammers in the room were more likely.’ Given the professional testimony the jury sentenced the 29-year-old Irish born laborer to three years in the state penitentiary.¹⁷

The marriage strategy was naturally popular: most young women married and some married several times following the deaths of their husbands. Remarriage was a lifeline for young widows who risked being thrust back into poverty with extra mouths to feed in the shape of their children. As a woman aged, however, and accumulated more and more children to care for, marriage prospects gradually diminished, and for a significant proportion of older poor white women marriage became unviable as a survival strategy. As a woman aged however, and accumulated more and more children to care for, marriage prospects gradually diminished and for a significant proportion of older poor white women marriage became unviable as a survival strategy.



If marriage was rarely an option for elderly women, other strategies were also impossible for certain types of poor white women. Those who were young, healthy, and lacked dependent children, for instance, did not qualify for charitable aid since it was deemed that they should be supporting themselves by working. There was little understanding of finer workings of labor markets and such things as cyclical or natural rates of

16. Chatham County, Criminal Testimony, Jan. 1849; State Board of Corrections, both Georgia Archives.

17. *Savannah Republican* (GA), 4 Mar. 1820; Savannah Female Asylum Minutes, Dec. 1, 1825.

unemployment. It was widely believed that those who physically could work should work, regardless of their skills or suitability for employment, and the unemployed were thus “lazy” and lacked “industry.” Indeed the reason such large sums were directed toward the education and training of poor children was that those taught the “habits of regular industry” while still young were intended to be able to support themselves as adults. The employment strategy remained open to many women, since most possessed at least rudimentary needle skills or could work in domestic service.¹⁷

A specific problem faced by all white workers in Savannah, and indeed in all societies where slavery was entrenched, was competition from the enslaved. Many domestic positions in elite households, such as cooks and housemaids, were filled by enslaved women, and there was simply no reason for wealthy whites to employ poor white women. A small number of up-and-coming families, lacking the capital to purchase a slave, might have employed white domestic servants, likewise those who only wished to employ temporary servants, but neither of these possibilities offered long-term prospects. Young poor white women might have started out in the lowest paid professions but many realized they needed to move to more specialized occupations if they wished to earn enough to live on. The girls who were placed out by Savannah’s Female Asylum, for example, were nearly all apprenticed initially as domestic servants, but the education and training they had received while in the asylum adequately equipped them for employment in various respectable trades, and most had progressed to millinery, seamstressing or keeping boarding houses by the time they reached middle age.

Caroline Bexly, for instance, left the asylum in 1827 and married a wheelwright, and while life was never easy by 1860 she was running her own boarding house and her family’s personal estate was estimated at \$450. In general the former inmates of the female asylum were broadly in the middle strata of the working female population of Savannah in 1860, rarely to be found among the most menial domestic positions or among the most specialized and highly skilled positions of teacher, nurse, or businesswoman.¹⁸

18. Savannah Female Asylum Minutes, Jan. 2, 1827; Caroline married Henry Gnann in 1829; the couple were listed in the Savannah Tax Register of 1844 as

The former inmates of the Savannah Female Asylum almost certainly possessed higher levels of literacy and numeracy than their peers who had not been in care. In 1860 the federal census listed occupations for fifteen hundred white women, just over a third of all the white women in the city, suggesting that this was the proportion who needed to work for financial reasons. This conclusion is reinforced by the knowledge that two-thirds of all working white women were either unmarried or widowed, and thus were the main breadwinner for themselves and any dependent parents, siblings, or children. About 40 percent of all working white women were engaged in clothing trades such as seamstress, dress-maker, or mantua-maker; a further 35 percent were employed in some form of domestic service. American born and older women were more likely to be in the clothing trades while younger immigrant women, especially from Ireland, more readily found work as domestic servants.¹⁹

These differences can partly be explained by the large-scale immigration of poor people from Ireland in the late 1840s and 1850s in response to the Irish famine, and their willingness to undertake menial work that native-born women would have shunned. Another explanation for the appearance of so many Irish women in positions that would formerly have been filled by slaves is the willingness of Irish-owned businesses to employ them. Irish-born Johanna Cass, proprietress of the City Hotel, hired Irish girls as chambermaids instead of either hiring or buying slaves.²⁰

Although more than fifteen hundred white women were listed with an occupation in the 1860 federal census, employment did not necessarily bring a comfortable standard of living. Domestic servants who lived with their employer may have received little in the way of cash wages if board and lodging were docked from their pay. Piece rates for women working as seamstresses from home were often low, except for all but the highest quality clothing work, and we know from other southern cities that the

having no property. 1860 Federal Census, Chatham County, Georgia Archives. Lockley, "To Train Them to Habits of Industry and Usefulness," 144-45.

19. For an extended discussion of employment patterns, see Lockley, "'Spheres of Influence': Working White and Black Women in Antebellum Savannah," in *Neither Lady, Nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South*, ed. Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), 102-120.

20. Irish-born Johanna Cass employed three Irish girls as chambermaids, aged between eighteen and twenty-five.

wages women could earn as seamstresses sometimes failed to cover their living expenses. In New Orleans, for example, “the stinted pittance, granted as the reward of woman’s labor, is soon exhausted by the unceasing demand for food and shelter” It is unlikely that the situation for seamstresses in Savannah was any better. The lack of training and expertise of some seamstresses meant that they were “unable to do other than coarse and plain work,” and therefore female employment societies were formed by elite women to try to assist poor white women who wanted to work. In 1829 the short-lived Benevolent Society was formed with the aim of “furnishing employment to the industrious poor” by offering to “receive needle work, put it out, and superintend its execution.”²¹

Twenty years later the Needle Women’s Friend Society was formed along similar lines but failed to garner the popular support that normally characterised female benevolent initiatives in Savannah. The aim was laudable, aiding those “who have not the faculty of making good engagements or of enforcing their demands for a fair compensation from those for whom they labor,” but the economics of the society simply did not stack up. In some years the amount paid to the women was far in excess of what their work sold for, and even when sales were good additional costs such as the rent of the sales room, raw materials, and agent’s fees pushed the society into debt. The quality of the work completed was low, “needy women seldom being fine seamstresses,” and was clearly not deemed suitable for the white residents of Savannah since the managers were reduced to advertising completed clothing as being for “servants.” Nevertheless, about eighty poor women benefited from the largesse of the Needle Women’s Friend Society every year, and the average annual income each received from this source exceeded \$100. For some this income staved off destitution.²²

The employment strategy was a hard way to ensure survival, involving long hours and relying on luck as much as anything else. The evidence suggests that even women who remained healthy and who had a degree

21. *Annual Report of the Managers of the Ladies Benevolent Society, New Orleans* (New Orleans, LA, 1855), 5. *Daily Georgian* (Savannah, GA), Jan. 10, 1829.

22. *Daily Morning News* (Savannah, GA), Mar. 18, 1854, May 23, 1857, and Mar. 5, 1857. *Daily Morning News*, Mar. 5, 1857; in that year eighty women were paid \$1,100.

of skill in their profession earned fairly meager amounts and were always just one illness away from real hardship. Based on census estimates of wealth, the occupation that offered most in terms of security was boarding house-keeper. Women engaged in that profession enjoyed median personal estates of \$300, and some owned personal and real estate valued at several thousand dollars. The clothing trade was far less profitable, the median personal estate of dressmakers for instance being \$150, but they were in substantially better circumstances than the lowest rated occupations. The median personal estate of domestics was \$100, while that of washer women was only \$50 and probably amounted to little more than a few items of cheap furniture and kitchen utensils. The estimates of personal estate in the federal census almost certainly overestimate the wealth of all working women. Only a small percentage of women were recorded with a personal estate in the census, since married women and young women still resident with their families were not listed with any personal estate at all. Thus only 24 percent of boarding house-keepers, 4 percent of dressmakers, and 44 percent of washer women were accredited with personal estates, and most of these were older widows who managed independent households. Younger women, both married and unmarried, would most likely have had smaller personal estates.²³



For some women the world of work gradually led them into a life of crime, a strategy that was risky but could be extremely profitable. Not only could certain types of crime pay well, but limited policing in the city meant that being caught was unlikely. It should be noted that female criminals were far outnumbered by their male counterparts, or at least that is what the records of Savannah's jail suggest. In 1856 just twelve women were confined in the city jail, compared with more than 350 men. The records of the state penitentiary note only two women from Chatham County being imprisoned between 1817 and 1860. Female

23. For example, boarding house-keeper Emma Bliss was recorded in the census as having a personal estate worth \$1,000 and real estate valued at \$4,000. All figures are taken from the Federal Manuscript Census for Chatham County, 1860, GHS. Median rather than mean averages were used to reduce the effect of the small number of wealthy working women on the figures.

criminals were most likely to be taken up by the police for public drunkenness, vagrancy, and disorderly conduct, and some were notorious and habitual offenders. Forty-three-year-old Irish-born Catherine Ryan was jailed eighteen times between 1857 and 1860, most often for drink-related offenses, but once for larceny. Thirty-year-old Betty McLane, also Irish-born, was jailed more than twenty times between 1855 and 1860, mainly for being drunk and disorderly or for vagrancy. On some occasions she was rearrested the same day she was released. In 1861, finally tiring of sending her to jail for a week at a time, the mayor ordered Betty McLane prosecuted by the Superior Court for vagrancy. The court heard that Betty had led an “idle, immoral, and profligate course of life without any means of livelihood, often going through the streets bare-headed.” She had “no property. . . . she has been for the last year, alternately in the jail, hospital, and guard house’ and was ‘in the habit of laying about the street when drunk.’ She was apparently healthy and could work if she wanted to, one witness had heard that she is a married woman and think she is of sound mind when not drinking.” The jury found her guilty, and the judge sentenced her to three years at hard labor in the state penitentiary in Milledgeville.²⁴

Drunkenness might have been some women’s way of coping with their hard lives but it hardly put food on the table. The way in which such women earned the money to drink, however, was often illicit. Betty McLane, for example, earned the money for her drinking from prostitution, a profession that was well established in Savannah. In 1808 the local Grand Jury abhorred “the various houses of ill fame in our city from which issue many of the mischiefs that interrupt our peace. It is here our youth are corrupted. It is here that the sacred ties of marriage are forgotten, and the foundation of diseases laid, which shall continue to be felt to the third and fourth generations.” As in many other port cities Savannah’s prostitutes found a ready clientele in the crowds of

24. Savannah Jail Register, 1855–1862, GHS; Board of Corrections Register, 1817–60 Georgia Archives; Federal Census, Georgia Archives. Chatham County, Criminal Testimony 1851–1860, State vs. Betty McLean, January Term 1861, Georgia Archives. Chatham County, Superior Court Minutes, January Term 1861. Betty McLean was indicted on Feb. 2, arraigned on Feb. 20, tried and sentenced on Mar. 2, 1861. She arrived in Milledgeville on Mar. 24 and was discharged on Jan. 16, 1864. Board of Corrections Register, Georgia Archives.

visiting sailors who spent their wages while on shore for a few days in the bars and brothels of Bay Street and Yamacraw.²⁵

The city authorities seem to have been fairly phlegmatic about prostitution. In 1855 the chief of police noted in his annual report that easternmost wards of the city were home to “five large houses of ill fame, besides numerous small ones” while the western part of the city contained “four noted houses of ill fame.” Nothing in his report suggested that the chief of police intended to take action against these establishments. The following year the mayor replied to a request for information on prostitution in Savannah from New York physician William Sanger. He reported that “In this city there are fifteen houses of prostitution, three assignation-houses, ninety-three white, and one hundred and five colored prostitutes.”²⁶

The only women recorded as prostitutes in the 1860 census were those who were in jail, but it seems clear that brothels often masqueraded as ladies’ boarding houses. Mary Thorpe and Fannie Fall, for instance, were both indicted for “keeping and maintaining a lewd house” by the Superior Court in 1860, yet the census listed them as operating ladies’ boarding houses. Few cases of “keeping a lewd house” actually came before the Chatham County Superior Court, and those that did most often resulted in acquittals or mistrials. Perhaps the weak policing of brothels encouraged their spread, since the Grand Jury complained in 1864 about “the intrusion into the more public and respectable streets of the city, of houses of ill fame . . . subjecting our families to sights and scenes which disgrace their presence and outrage their feelings.” The large numbers of Confederate soldiers in the city in 1864 no doubt increased demand for the services of prostitutes, while the absence of breadwinners and the pressure to make ends meet probably increased the number of women who adopted this survival strategy.²⁷

Prostitution did not adhere to a color bar—white and black prostitutes plied their trade in the streets and brothels of the city without regard to the color of their clients. While one might expect white men to frequent black prostitutes, it is more surprising to learn that white prostitutes

25. Chatham County, Superior Court Minutes, April Term 1808.

26. *Savannah Daily Journal Courier* (GA), Mar. 24, 1855. William W. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes and Effects Throughout the World* (New York, 1869; repr. 1937), 612.

27. Chatham County, Superior Court Minutes, January Term 1864.

would accept black clients. Yet in 1814 a warrant was issued for an unnamed woman, “who is in the habit of passing through town at all times, and holding improper conversations with persons of colour,” and in 1856 Sarah Hoyt spent eighty-five days in the Chatham County Jail for “drunkenness and adultery with a Negro.”²⁸

If prostitution was one desperate criminal strategy used by poor white women to earn money, another highly profitable one that also violated racial boundaries was illicit trading. Tight restrictions on what goods could be sold legitimately, as well as when and where they could be sold, were enacted by Savannah’s City Council. Trade was not permitted in the evenings, on Sundays, or any place other than the established market or a shop. Those wanting to retail liquor needed a special license from the council, and violating any of these ordinances could lead to an appearance before the mayor’s court and a fine. Eighty women were fined by the mayor’s court between 1790 and 1848 for offenses such as “violating the Sabbath ordinance,” “retailing spirituous liquors without a license,” “entertaining negroes on Sundays,” “keeping a disorderly house,” or “employing a slave without a badge.” These were just the people who were caught; no doubt others successfully evaded detection by the use of “private doors” out of sight of passers-by.²⁹

Customers of unlicensed bars included other poorer whites, but most frequently it was slaves who regularly spent the small sums they earned from the informal economy on liquor, tobacco, and other luxuries that made their lives just a little bit more bearable. The local Grand Jury constantly complained that the trading laws were “habitually violated” and that “the number of Negro groggeries in Savannah and their flourishing condition, indicate a state of society that is alarming and deplorable.” The profitability of this trade was clear: Slaves paid over the odds for alcohol, either in cash or in bartered goods, and the fines levied by the city council barely dented profits.³⁰

Not all women fined by the city council for illicit trading can be classed as economically poor. Some, of course, had few or no assets and

28. City Council Minutes, May 13, 1814; Chatham County Jail Register, 1855-58, both GHS; Sarah was jailed on Sept. 20, 1856 and released on Dec. 13, 1856.

29. Chatham County, Superior Court Minutes, January 1808.

30. Chatham County, Superior Court Minutes, January Term 1852, May Term 1851.

sold alcohol to slaves from their own back doors, but others owned businesses and even slaves and used the profits from illegal trading to add to their personal and real estate. Mary Garnett, for instance, one of the most notorious violators of the trading laws, gradually accumulated a substantial estate that included nine slaves and land in several different counties. Garnett merited the label “poor white” not because of penury, but because she consistently ignored southern social norms and gender conventions. Women who “entertained negroes” or who kept a “lewd house,” especially one that served enslaved or free black clients, were exactly the sorts of “low” or “mean” white people whom the elite thought were “trash.” The criminal strategy, and women who were fined repeatedly clearly were acting deliberately, could therefore be a speedy route out of poverty, and while the risk of legal repercussions was relatively low, social ostracism was an almost inevitable by-product.³¹



The four survival strategies outlined here intersected and overlapped in complex ways. Poor white women could quite possibly try all four strategies at once: being married and working from home for the Needle Women’s Friend Society while selling liquor on the side to urban slaves. Similar strategies were available to a wide cross-section of poor white women in nineteenth century American cities and were probably being adopted by poor women throughout the western world. Yet it is also clear that some poor white women in slave societies used their peculiar situation to their own advantage. The informal economic activities of slaves, particularly vibrant in Savannah and Charleston due to the prevalence of the task system in the lowcountry, provided an opportunity for trade that poorer white women were able to exploit. Similar conditions prevailed to a greater or lesser extent in every slave society in the Americas. Those selling at the market in Kingston, Jamaica included “low Frenchmen and Spaniards and people of colour . . . some selling their bad rum, gin, tobacco, etc.; others salt provision and small articles of

31. Tim Lockley, “Trading Encounters between Non-Elite Whites and African Americans in Savannah, 1790–1860,” *Journal of Southern History* 66 (Feb. 2000), 34–35.

dress, and many bartering with the slave or purchasing his surplus provision to retail again.”³²

The willingness of slaves to trade, and especially to pay over the odds for alcohol, allowed some women to make ends meet. The fact that it was illegal simply made it more profitable since traders factored the risk of an appearance before the mayor’s court into their prices. In this sense the tight restrictions imposed on the activities of the enslaved created an opportunity for some poor white women. This is perhaps the most marked difference between the experiences of poor white women in the South and the Caribbean with their counterparts in the northern United States. Legal restrictions on what slaves could and could not purchase did not mean that slaves never had access to luxury items or alcohol. All things were available, for a price. Female shopkeepers and tavern owners could make relatively easy money by supplying alcohol and tobacco at inflated prices to slaves, knowing that the risk of detection was fairly small, and even if caught and prosecuted the fine was minimal. In the North, where there were no similar trading restrictions, prices reflected demand and supply in a competitive marketplace. In the South, high demand from slaves and constrained supply pushed prices, and therefore profits, up.

Another way in which the existence of slavery actually aided poor white women was to persuade elite women of the need to provide charitable aid to alleviate the “suffering of our own sex.” The benevolence of the Savannah Free School, the Savannah Female Asylum, the Widow’s Society, the Clothing and Fuel Society and Needle Women’s Friend Society was racially exclusive. Recipients of aid were “snatched from want and ruin and . . . by a judicious education and strict attention to morality, to move in community with credit to themselves and benefit to the country.” It was never the intention of the benevolent that the free black poor should be helped to “move in community”; instead they were left to scrape by as best they could.³³

The same was also true in nearly every other locale where slavery flourished. When the Ladies Benevolent Society of New Orleans

32. Richard Bickell, *The West Indies As They Are, or, A Real Picture of Slavery: But More Particularly As it Exists in the Island of Jamaica* (London, 1825), 66.

33. “The Savannah Female Assylum,” *The Georgia Analytical Repository* 1 (July/Aug. 1802), 69; *Savannah Republican* (GA), Dec. 3, 1816.

expressed its desire “to put into the hands of poor women the means of supporting their families” or when the Raleigh Female Benevolent Society sought “the relief of aged widows and other distressed females who may be considered fit objects of charity,” all knew this applied only to white women. Many female benevolent societies operated a visiting system, whereby managers visited poor neighborhoods seeking out the most needy. Inevitably elite women spent time in “frail and unsheltered tenements of this city, where poverty, sickness and wretchedness dwell” observing “scenes of haggard wretchedness” and “sorrow which are [sic] eyes have seen, over which our hearts have bled.” Put simply, this was not how white people were supposed to live.³⁴

Even when aid for the needy came from the state rather than private sources, it was often overwhelmingly aimed at the white female poor. Female inmates of the Williamsburg, South Carolina, and the Granville County, North Carolina, poorhouses in 1860, for instance, outnumbered males two to one. In Barbados the St. John School for Female Industry admitted its first girls in 1792. All came from families in receipt of public relief and received several years of schooling followed by a period of indenture to a local elite family. These poor white girls were provided with key skills that would aid them in adulthood, while simultaneously receiving inculcation in the behavior expected of white people in a slave society. No similar specialist institution existed for boys.³⁵

Gendered benevolence was common to many Atlantic societies in the

34. Annual Report of the Managers of the Ladies Benevolent Society, *New Orleans (New Orleans, 1855)*, 3. *Revised Constitution and By-Laws of The Raleigh Female Benevolent Society, adopted July 23d, 1823: with the Reports of the Society from its Commencement* (Raleigh, NC, 1823), 1. By contrast, the Association for the Benefit of Colored Orphans was founded by Quaker women in New York in 1837. See also Lockley, *Welfare and Charity in the Antebellum South* (Gainesville, FL, 2007), 112–14. “Second Annual Report, Of the Board of Managers to the Ladies Benevolent Society, 15th Sept. 1819,” *Southern Evangelical Intelligencer* 1 (Sept. 1819), 213–15; Female Charitable Society of Charleston Neck, Minutes, July 21, 1825, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, SC; *Richmond Whig* (VA), Nov. 22, 1845.

35. Commissioners of the Poor, Williamsburg District List of Paupers, Aug. 6, 1860, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, SC; Granville County, Minutes of the Wardens of the Poor, Feb. 14, 1860, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC. Cecily Jones, *Engendering Whiteness: White Women and Colonialism in Barbados and North Carolina, 1627–1865* (Manchester, UK, 2007), 36–40.

nineteenth century, but was particularly acute in slave societies because it coincided with racialized benevolence. Poor white females in the South and the Caribbean drew a disproportionate share of the assistance provided by state and private organisations because they were female—and thus deemed less able to support themselves via work—and because they were white. There was widespread acceptance that whites should not be reduced to living like slaves. After all, white people begging in the streets hardly supported notions of innate racial superiority.

Poor white women residing in slave societies clearly faced numerous obstacles in their quest to survive. Many lacked skills, training, and a little slice of good fortune, and therefore struggled constantly to put food on the table and a roof over their heads. For these women the hard work they endured, the meager diet, and the poor living conditions made them vulnerable to infection and an early grave. Clearly many struggled to balance the demands of childcare with earning sufficient money to feed, clothe, and house themselves. A high proportion of them did it alone without the financial and emotional support of a husband. Yet despite these problems, and the peculiar challenges caused by slavery, poor white women in Savannah adopted viable strategies to survive. Being white in a society based on racial slavery always brought some small advantages, and poor women maximized these advantages to the full.