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Gold, Access and Contemporary Conceptions of Antebellum Poverty

In 1825, former Yale professor of chemistry and mineralogy Denison Olmsted struck out from Chapel Hill, N.C., to investigate recent discoveries in the hills and streams above the Rocky River, a snarled branch of the Pee Dee that twists its way into backcountry northeast of Charlotte. Later, he described the region in a letter to colleagues back at Yale:

*“A geographical description of the gold country, would present little that is interesting. The soil is generally barren, and the inhabitants are mostly poor and ignorant. The traveller passes the day without meeting with a single striking or beautiful object, either of nature or of art, to vary the tiresome monotony of forests and sandhills, and ridges of gravelly quartz. Here and there a log hut or cabin, surrounded by a few acres of corn and cotton marks the little improvement which has been made by man, in a region singularly endowed by nature.”<sup>1</sup>*

This region where “the inhabitants are mostly poor and ignorant” was the richest gold producing region in the United States until 1849, a region that – with a boost from Olmsted’s letter, excerpted worldwide – would host the first of America’s 19<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>1</sup> Denison Olmsted, “On the Gold Mines of North Carolina,” in *The American Journal of Science and Arts*, ed. Benjamin Silliman, vol. IX (New Haven: E. Littel, 1825), 6.

Gold Rushes.<sup>2</sup> Despite the appearance of poverty, on its own terms, the region was overflowing with wealth, and wealth not just as locals saw it, but in the form of specie, gold.

The poverty that Olmsted was referring to cannot be understood to stem from a lack of wealth. In two decades, the backwoods mine he was on his way to visit had become a slave-capitalist enterprise that produced tens of thousands of dollars in 23-carat gold.<sup>3</sup> White miners worked the area with a mystic zeal (they said the large nuggets “had been seen by gold hunters at night” with “some supernatural appearance”) under a profit-sharing system, and African-Americans were made to dig as slaves, with the profits going to their owners. Others, “gold hunters” and “a new race of alchemists” prowled the surrounding ridges, with “the mineral rod, charms, and other follies” “torturing” local rocks, in hope of replicating Reed’s fortune.<sup>4</sup>

Instead of wealth, it is tempting to explain Olmsted’s observation of “poverty” in cultural terms. Coming from the relatively wealthy, industrious and luxurious climes of Connecticut, Olmsted appears to have viewed backwoods North Carolinians from a cultural remove, one which led him to understand them as impoverished and benighted. However, it is unlikely that his view would have extended further, for instance, to the commercial towns and ports of North Carolina, where planters and merchants conducted their business. After all, he had agreed to move to the state to teach science at the new University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, hardly a move of disdain.

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<sup>2</sup> Letter from Col. Samuel N. Wales to Rep. Thomas F. Foster, Dec. 15, 1830. *Reports of Committees of The House Of Representatives at the First Session of the Twenty-Second Congress, Begun and Held at The City of Washington, December 7, 1831.*, vol. 1 (Washington: Duff Green, 1831), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Olmsted, “On the Gold Mines of North Carolina,” 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

An investigation of account books in the North Carolina Archives covering the years 1790-1830, the most active years of the Reed mine, suggests, an alternative explanation. Poverty in the antebellum south, may indeed have a universal index, but one that does not correlate perfectly with wealth. Rather, poverty seems to correlate with access, access to the Atlantic markets for goods and credit that would have allowed men like Reed to demonstrate wealth to men like Olmsted.

In order to index relative wealth and poverty to access, a distinction must be made between wealth and money. Money, this evidence suggests, does not equal wealth in all cases. Instead money equals access. Not having access to money did not mean that backcountry traders were unable to do business. They did not “revert to barter.” Instead, as Akinoba Kuroda has observed in quite different environment, “the inflexibility of the currency supply must also have been made up for by credit supply.”<sup>5</sup> Credit, while it allowed for complex financial arrangements between individuals within a community, was not a universal panacea because, to a lesser degree than money, credit has a location. Whether that location is New York or Fayetteville matters. Each location has access to different signifiers of wealth, credit arrangements and transactional scales. In short geography matters, and therefore access matters. And it is lack of access, not lack of wealth, that signifies poverty.

For example, let’s compare the transactions from three different account books, those of John Carson, a back-country cattleman from Pleasant Gardens, N.C., John Hogg and Company, a trading company with operations in several towns through the Piedmont, and Ebenezer Pettigrew, a planter from the state’s coastal plain.

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<sup>5</sup> Akinobu Kuroda, “What Is the Complementarity Among Monies? An Introductory Note,” *Financial History Review* 15, no. 01 (2008): 14.

Carson, though a local notable and successful trader, had few recorded interactions with the broader Atlantic world, monetarily or physically. His first transaction, recorded on July 20, 1793, was a trip to Charleston, S.C., and back for £8, paid for with “three steers.” This transaction sets tone for much of Carson’s business over the next several decades. He often dealt in cattle, and rarely dealt with cash. Occasionally debts would be settled with a personal “note in hand” as in one transaction marked down on May 23, 1794. Cash, however, is almost completely absent. Instead deals are settled for hogs, gallons of brandy and “sundry credits.” A few shillings do change hands occasionally, cash, when it does appear, is treated as just another credit or debit, with no special allowances made for it.

Was Carson impoverished? On an absolute scale surely not. He had land and cattle and goods for sale. He was referred to locally as “Col. Carson,” and his son Samuel P. Carson served in Congress. Evidently he was a man of status, but relatively speaking he could not be considered wealthy. His dealings with the outside world were minimal; limited to irregular cattle drives to Charleston. Much of what he consumed is likely to have been locally made, and of poorer quality than what men like Olmsted would have been used to. He might very well have been considered one of Olmsted’s poor and ignorant, regardless of his son’s rise in station.

The Hogg books represent a somewhat different picture. These accounts for the most part are from established towns and are clearly written by a professional hand. Hogg dealt with all kinds of goods, catering, likely, to men like Carson and Reed, who would come into market towns seasonally to conduct their business. The principal partner, John Hogg, is little mentioned in these books, though he likely reaped a substantial portion of the

benefits there recorded. The Hogg books, however, seem to exist in a kind of liminal space, intermediating between the vernacular credit economy of the backcountry and the more cash-driven economy of the coast. Consequently, Hogg is working in a much complex financial world. For Hogg, cash is a commodity, but a more common one. Accounts are settled in cash of various sorts a letter dated Sept. 2, 1803, lists the kinds of money Hogg and his partners in Hillsboro, had been forwarded by their men in the field, including “1 parcel hard money marked Adw & Hogg \$180,” and another “To Hogg & Adie 80,” in addition to “paper money 330” and “230 Bank bills 132.” But he also deals in kind, offering credit on the books for goods and services received.<sup>6</sup>

From the amount of goods and cash that change hands over the years in the account books of Hogg and his partners, it would seem clear that he was a very successful individual, moreover, one with access to the Atlantic markets that facilitated displays of the hundreds of pounds sterling worth of “sundries” and “merchandise” he purchased for his customers. His access was greater, as implied by his operations directly on the coast in Edenton, and his perceivable wealth was also greater.

Finally, we come to Ebenezer Pettigrew, a congressman and planter from the coastal plain. Pettigrew sold wheat and timber directly on the Atlantic market, transporting his crops to a factor in New York, who, in turn, purchased luxury commodities on his account and shipped them back to North Carolina. It was a risky business, his papers show, but also one that afforded the trappings of real Atlantic wealth. In 1818, Pettigrew was planning a new house and sent away his agent with an order of goods to be charged to his account. In addition to a “Tea table of a tolerable size and fashionable” a dozen “best quality Windsor Chairs” and “2 fair and fashionable candlesticks brass,” Pettigrew

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<sup>6</sup> “Mesrs. Hooper & Mitchell, Hillsboro”, September 2, 1803.

asked his agent, if any credit should be left over, to send along “Demijohns of French Brandy & good wine as far as it may go be it more help.”<sup>7</sup> These, unlike Hogg’s sundries and Carson’s cattle were the fruits of direct access to the Atlantic world, and direct trade opportunities with cities like New York and London. These were luxuries, surely that even Olmsted would recognize.

Investigating these accounts and others in the North Carolina State Archives, has allowed me to begin to trace spheres of exchange, and, perhaps, corresponding spheres of relative wealth and poverty in the antebellum South that will help us begin to better understand the systems of economy at work in the young United States as a whole. Reed, Carson, Hogg and Pettigrew were all elites, but even so their very different lives and spheres of experience could present very different pictures to the outside world in terms of relative wealth and poverty. As we attempt to come to grips with the economic history of poverty, it is important to bare those differentiations in mind. All poverty is relative, but not all is what it appears.

Archives Consulted:

North Carolina State Archives  
109 E. Jones St.  
Raleigh, N.C. 27601

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<sup>7</sup> Ebenezer Pettigrew, “Bonarva - Mrs. Mollan Rankin & Galloh”, November 15, 1818.