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# Confederate Lane:

## Class, race, and ethnicity in the Mississippi Delta

### ABSTRACT

In the Mississippi Delta of the United States, class developed as a racial relationship. Propertied blacks, immigrants, and old-stock poor whites destabilized an ideological discourse pursued by the planter elite. In this article, we examine shifting class processes through the history of poor white people who have settled in a largely white school district located in Washington County, Mississippi, and we consider how ethnicity, religion, and kinship have inflected those processes and political relations. We also trace the role of the federal government in altering social relations. Today in the Delta, black political elites maintain black racial solidarity as the key to electoral success. White elites, largely shorn of political power, are forming alliances with the emerging blacks. Working-class whites, having lost of many privileges accrued during the segregationist period, find themselves adrift. [*Mississippi Delta, poor whites, planters, black, race, class, religion, ethnicity*]

Driving through Washington County on one of our field visits to the Mississippi Delta, we turned down L&W Fish Farm Road between Wayside and Arcola. A subdivision of single-wide and double-wide trailers, stretching perhaps three-quarters of a mile, appeared in the cotton fields. Each manufactured home sat in the middle of a one- to two-acre lot. A gravel lane, fronted with a row of mailboxes, gave access to another tier of houses. A flutter of flags flew above the dwellings, many of them the Confederate battle flag. We saw white families on the porches and in the yards. Our curiosity raised, we explored more widely and quickly found many comparable settlements nearby. The areas looked raw. Some of the housing clusters appeared to our eyes like fortified villages in the countryside, with only one road in and out.

For most of the Delta's history, blacks predominated in the countryside, their sharecropper shacks dotting every roadside and cotton field. Except for a few farmers and a scattering of "poor whites," most white people lived in towns. Why, then, was this rural area white? And working class?

We spoke with a young white man, Buddy Ferguson, who was trenching a ditch at a new subdivision created with used trailers, or manufactured homes. He, along with his wife and father, were developing the property. Buddy said that his family was fleeing from the nearby town of Greenville after their long-integrated neighborhood had been infested with drug dealers. We learned from him that the people in his development had had similar experiences in the town. "They don't want to be there any more. Their children aren't safe and the schools have gone to hell." We learned from his wife, Pam, that a predominantly white school, Riverside, was the magnet drawing young white families to the area. We asked Buddy whether everyone in the subdivision was white. Yes, he said, mostly white laboring people. But Mexicans lived in several of the houses and, in one house, a woman had a black child. "But nobody messes with her. They don't mind."

Buddy's family operated a scrap yard and repair shop for farm equipment. He lived in one of the houses on the property. A next-door neighbor was a long-distance trucker who had grown up in a farming family near Marks in Quitman County.

Deeply intrigued, we rented a double-wide to live in during our summer 2003 field season.<sup>1</sup> We were situated a short distance from Confederate Lane, just south of Wayside, Mississippi, and less than a mile from the Mississippi River. Our surrounding neighbors appeared to be white, working-class families. Our next-door neighbor Chris flew the Confederate flag, the Mississippi state flag, and the U.S. flag. He also had a collection of boats, four-wheel-drive trucks, and a 48-inch-wide riding lawn mower. When we met Chris, we were surprised that he was southeast Asian. His thick southern accent complicated his story of being a war orphan who had grown up in Iowa and Minnesota. He had longed, he said, for the "southern way of life." And now he had it. He ran his own business, a muffler shop in town, and had been married to a local white, working-class girl. She had two boys from another marriage. But now that he and his wife were separated, the boys often stayed with him. Confused by his ethnicity, we asked, "What does the Confederate flag mean?" pointing to his tall flagpole. "It means southern, family, loyalty, and respect," he said. His home was often crowded with working-class white men from the area.

In this article, we focus on poor whites within a region where blacks form large majorities, and we reveal important contradictions entailed in the conflation of class with race—in the racialization of class. Everyone in the Delta lives a life permeated with class processes (Gibson-Graham et al. 2001) in which race has always been one of the primary operators. Race and class were central to the social relations that members of the cotton planter class and their associates attempted to install. The repopulation of this historically black-majority rural area of Washington County by white families can be understood through an analysis of the ways that class developed in the Delta, as throughout the plantation South, as a relationship between races. Dispossessed white smallholders and laborers—along with immigrants from abroad—struggled to make their lives in this racialized regime.

Most southern historiography takes race as the entry point to understand the reimposition of white supremacy after the Civil War (Du Bois 1962; Foner 1988; McMillen 1990; Woodward 1971). Class is viewed largely through the lens of race. This perspective has yielded important knowledge about the plantation South. These histories, however, have created narratives that are largely blind to those class processes that do not operate as relations between races. Studies of the southern white working class generally focus on regions in which whites are an overwhelming majority (Hahn 1985; Hall 1987), thereby sidestepping the complex interrelationship of race and class.

In both popular and scholarly work, white sharecroppers who lived and worked among the black majority in the Delta have been largely ignored except as racist villains (Adams and Gorton 2004).<sup>2</sup> This view is echoed by many elite whites in the Delta. Early in our fieldwork, we asked a Greenville attorney, the son of a planter, about the people living in the area around Confederate Lane. "Oh, them? That's Jurassic Park," he said, laughing. Even the supervisors who represent the region on the county board were unsure of how to describe them: They thought they were "unchurched" . . . "they are poor" . . . "they don't vote."

### The Yazoo–Mississippi Delta

The Yazoo–Mississippi Delta, where our research was conducted, begins south of Memphis, Tennessee, and extends to approximately Vicksburg, Mississippi. Bounded by the Yazoo drainage on the east and the Mississippi River on the west, the area popularly called "the Delta" encompasses some 7,000 square miles of alluvial floodplain. To the east of the Delta are the uplands and hills where, since Mississippi statehood in 1817, most of the white population has resided. Primarily smallholders before the industrialization of agriculture and the consolidation of marketing, these whites represent one side of an enduring political and cultural division between the "hills" and the Delta.

Swampy, pestilential, and malarial, the Delta was thinly settled before the U.S. Civil War. After the war, the area's former slaveholding planters lost much of their land through taxes, politics, and bad markets (Brandfon 1967; Cobb 1992; Saikku 2005; Willis 2000). Strong demands for cypress timber and hardwood lumber in the United States and abroad from the 1870s through the early years of the 20th century fueled the opening of the region. As the interior was deforested, some of the capital realized in timbering was plowed back into the soil. Gradually, planters developed vast cotton plantations, acquired from timber companies and from failed smallholders.

The work of clearing the land of timber and cane, draining the swamps, and building levees to restrain the annual floods required enormous amounts of labor (Hamilton 1992; Willis 2000). Blacks from the older slave states, Irish and other immigrants, and old-stock whites, largely from the upland South, were recruited. Many of the black immigrants, and some whites, bought small farms carved out of the swamps and forests. White Americans and immigrants from Europe, Syria, and China established themselves as merchants, planters, lumbermen, and tradesmen in the developing towns along the rivers.

In 1870, two-thirds of the land in the Yazoo–Mississippi Delta was in forest and swamps, but by 1900 well over half the land was improved. The cotton plantations were farmed by black renters and croppers, whose population grew dramatically after 1870.<sup>3</sup> White population increased, as well, but

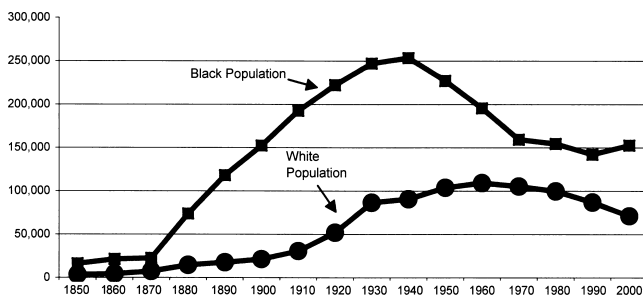


Figure 1. Population in core Delta counties by race, 1850–2000.

far more slowly (see Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Blacks sought to own farms on this land. In 1900, over two-thirds of the owner-operated farms in Mississippi's Delta belonged to blacks.

Cotton production required large amounts of labor, which was unevenly distributed during the year. Planting in the early spring and hoeing the growing crop to remove weeds during the early summer required all available hands, and picking the cotton in the fall often required planters to import seasonal workers. During off seasons, planters might hire laborers to help with the subsistence crops, particularly corn and hay for the livestock, and to lay in wood for heating and cooking. Farmworkers also worked in timber and found other employment during the winter.

During this period, a new order congealed, one in which agrarian capitalists—and, to a lesser extent, lumbermen—linked their fortunes, and their lives, to the developing towns and the petit bourgeoisie who operated the commercial, financial, and transportation enterprises. Many of the townspeople differed ethnically from the largely Protestant landowners. Jews who had immigrated from Alsace-Lorraine and eastern Europe dominated the merchant class of the towns, quickly branching into finance, wholesale distribution, and plantation ownership. Lebanese Syrians, Sicilian Italians, and Cantonese Chinese were also represented in significant numbers. In 1880, an astounding 24.9 percent of the residents of Greenville appear to have been Jewish (tabulation from Latter Day Saints n.d.). In 1910, the percentage of “whites” who were foreign born or children of foreign born was over 25 percent in Washington County (University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Center 2004) and perhaps as high as 40 percent in the town of Greenville (*Greenville Times* n.d.; see also *Mississippian* 1918), which was the center of the cotton-growing region.

Membership in the planter class was dynamic despite attempts at endogamy. Jews, Italians, Chinese, and blacks owned and operated cotton plantations. Nathan Goldstein of Greenville owned Lakeport Plantation, where he employed Alberto Pierini as overseer of his black and Italian sharecroppers. The historian and novelist Shelby Foote, whose Jewish grandfather was a partner of aristocratic planter, lawyer, and powerful politician Leroy Percy (see Baker 1983; Barry 1997;

Wyatt-Brown 1994), told of plantations being won at card tables by poor men who were cunning “cardsharks.” He recalled bankruptcies and murder that changed the ownership of land.

In addition to its unexpected ethnic diversity, the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta differs in other important ways from the more easterly “black belt” in Georgia and Alabama as well as from the hills that form to its east. Although the black-belt regions were characterized by large black rural populations and a plantation culture centered on cotton, the Mississippi River and its tributaries allowed easy mobility in the Delta and beyond, to New Orleans, Kansas, and the major cities along the Ohio River. This mobility, and the constant shortage of labor, initially afforded checks on the unbridled power of the planters. In response, planters used “Black Codes,” as well as debt and vagrancy laws, in their attempts to create a pliable and dependable workforce.<sup>5</sup> They were largely unable, however, to enforce debts and thereby fix sharecroppers on the land (Cobb 1992:103–104; Daniel 1990; Kester 1997; McMillen 1990; Willis 2000).

Competition among the planters was intense, especially in regard to labor. Prisoners were used by planters, their labor first substituting for incarceration (Daniel 1990; Oshinsky 2004; Willis 2000), then, after the establishment of prisons, appropriated through systems of leasing. In the early 20th century, a political alliance that included poor whites, who were priced out of the labor market by cheap convict labor, and planters, who believed unfair political decisions underlay the convict labor system, converged with a widespread public revulsion at the conditions in which convict laborers lived to outlaw the practice (Berardinelli 1909; Cobb 1992; Daniel 1990; Quackenbos 1907; Wayne 1993; Willis 2000).

Planters ultimately created a sharecropping system with black workers that stretched into the mid-20th century (Foner 1988). The labor regime grafted slavery-based paternalistic relations to the new relationship between white employer and black worker. In the process of creating reliable laborers, the white elites created an ideology in which all “whites” constituted the “employing class” and all “coloreds” the “working class.” This ideology was, in many respects, an extension of theological and popular justifications for slavery. It was reformed and reworked during Reconstruction and the white Redemption that overthrew Radical Republican rule in the South.

The 1890 Constitution of the State of Mississippi effectively disenfranchised black male voters and many poor male whites as well. Women were denied the vote altogether. A provision stated that a voter had to be able to read any section of the Mississippi constitution, understand any section when it was read to him, or give a reasonable interpretation of a section. With the later addition of poll taxes, even more potential voters were discouraged. Disenfranchisement meant that blacks lost virtually all access to the political system,

including the courts. They retained only the ability to negotiate at the point of production and were able to retain that limited power only through constantly moving from plantation to plantation and because of the chronic shortage of labor, particularly during the crucial planting, hoeing (weeding), and picking seasons.

The U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1892 gave a federal imprimatur to legal segregation. All public accommodations were to be “separate but equal.” From this decision, a byzantine code of etiquette between whites and blacks emerged that was enforced by law and custom until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. An all-white school could be maintained as long as a “separate” but “equal” black school existed. A bus or train station had to provide both white and colored waiting rooms. Once on board a bus or train, people were seated in areas that were restricted to each race. Privately owned businesses such as restaurants or theaters could be racially exclusive. Theater owners, however, frequently constructed balconies, known as “peanut galleries,” where blacks could attend films.

Whites could break the code if they chose to, attending a black church service or a black high-school football game or even patronizing an all-black bordello. Blacks were not accorded the same privilege, although funerals were an exception. Grieving blacks were a staple of planter funerary ceremonies.

Commerce, however, was integrated in the sense that consumers were often not restricted on account of their race. No special hours or overt restrictions were imposed at establishments such as grocery stores that sold to the public, although whites would generally be served first. Businesses such as barber shops, restaurants, and other places that people sit down together were segregated. Sitting down sequentially was deemed acceptable, as in a lawyer’s office. Courtrooms were divided down the middle. If blacks and whites were together in an area that had seating, blacks stood. Blacks and whites, however, could not stand in line together. They had to form separate lines. As Neil R. McMillen observed, “This was a social code of forbidding complexity. Largely unwritten and subject to widely varying individual and local interpretations, it was nevertheless enforced in uncounted and often trivial ways. . . . For the most part, the code assured white control without the need for more extreme forms of coercion” (1990:28; see also Dollard 1957; Loewen 1988; Powdermaker 1993).

Violence had been endemic to establishing white control in the Delta between the 1880s and World War I. Between 1883 and 1930, 97 lynchings, the most extreme form of extralegal violence, were recorded in the core Delta counties. Lynchings diminished sharply around World War I, with nine recorded in the core Delta counties and none in Washington or Coahoma County after 1914.

All whites, including poor whites, were privileged on the white side of the color line. Nevertheless, poor whites were

pushed to the margins of the codes. They were expected to defer to their “betters,” although there are no known instances of poor whites grieving at planter funerals.

The racial etiquettes were central to the installation of labor discipline. They were predicated on elite white belief that blacks were intellectually and morally inferior to whites, and blacks were required to consistently perform this inferiority. Shelby Foote, who grew up in the Delta, told us in a 2003 interview that it was a “terrible thing, but it was just something you knew” that “blacks were caught in the predicament of being half human.”

The dominant ideology that defined blacks as laborers and whites as managers and employers excluded people who were neither “colored workers” nor powerful whites—propertied and professional blacks and poor whites.

Propertied and professional blacks, such as schoolteachers, morticians, and farmers, were, in class terms, comparable to white elites. Although they were not subject to the class domination encoded in the racial etiquette, they were forced to enact the practices of subordination. They, therefore, experienced that etiquette as solely based on their race, not class, and the insult was, for many, unforgivable (see, e.g., Dollard 1957; Powdermaker 1993).

Poor whites shared much with their black neighbors and coworkers, as sharecroppers and laborers. As descendants of freeholders, they sought economic independence and autonomy and resisted the disciplines and subordination required as wage workers. Because of their whiteness they could not, and because of their desire for autonomy they would not, perform the elaborate etiquettes of subordination through which blacks and their white bosses carried out their daily interactions. Neither could white bosses use these etiquettes, through which whites established their racial as well as class superiority on other whites.<sup>6</sup> Poor whites, therefore, had no accepted role inside the racialized class processes when they competed with black labor, as far fewer codes of dominance and subordination had been developed to regularize the class relationships between the planters and the poor whites. They were feared and despised by the elites for their potential to disrupt the plantation regime and treated with suspicion and disdain by many middle-class blacks, who viewed them as “failed” or powerless “white trash” (Cohn 1948; Dollard 1957; Doob 1937; Powdermaker 1993).

With the increase of the white working-class population after the Turn of the Century, the racial codes that governed labor became problematic. Whites moving in from the surrounding hills saw themselves as “good as any man” and were fiercely independent, having formerly run small farms and enterprises. Moreover, with the increased black out-migration to the northern United States during and after World War I and the subsequent labor shortage, elite ideology was even more challenged as poor whites came to be more central to the plantation economy.

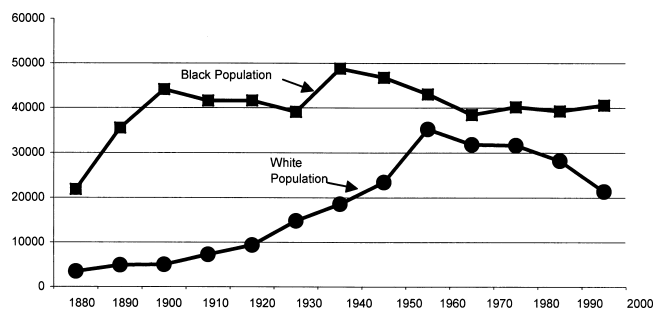


Figure 2. Washington County population by race, 1870–2000.

In the core Delta counties, the white population increased, especially after 1910. Often redundant sons and daughters of upcountry smallholders and, after World War I, small farmers ruined by the sustained agricultural depression, they encountered a world in which a rapidly industrializing agricultural system saw them as a potential destabilizing factor.

Washington County, where we came across Confederate Lane and the surrounding rural settlements, was the site of the sharpest increase in white population (see Figure 2). From a minuscule white presence in the antebellum period (546 counted in the 1850 census), the county reached 5,000 whites by 1900, most of whom lived in the town of Greenville. By 1930, that number had nearly doubled. Far more blacks than whites had always lived in the county: Nearly 8,000 slaves were counted in the 1850 census and more than 44,000 blacks in 1900. Washington County varied from regional trends, with white population tripling between 1900 and 1930 while black population declined. Washington County's variation from most other Delta counties reflects, in part, strategies by key planters and other Washington County elites to create an accommodation with immigrant groups in the business class and to promote the New South through manufacturing and industrial forms of agriculture.

Periodically, planter exploitation led white sharecroppers to be allies of blacks. Often these alliances were highly local and personal, entailing reciprocities between neighbors and coworkers.<sup>7</sup> But sometimes these alliances developed as political solidarities in deep conflict with the planters. Typically, the elites resolved the threat posed by interracial movements with a call to white racial solidarity and intense racist agitation (Kester 1997; Kirwan 1964).

The other circumstances that threatened planter hegemony entailed black militancy such as occurred during the Reconstruction era, the period immediately following World War I, and the civil rights era. In all these cases, elite whites called on white racial solidarities to defeat the black insurgencies. In the Reconstruction era, the Republicans were eventually defeated. During his administration, Democratic President Woodrow Wilson instituted federal rules that effectively banned blacks from serving in the government. In

the civil rights era, however, federal power shifted decisively against white supremacy.

In the Delta, during periods when their hegemony was not threatened, white elites neglected poor whites and in some cases left them to literally starve to death.

### Theoretical and analytical propositions

The concept of class processes, as developed by J. K. Gibson-Graham, Stephen Resnick, and Richard D. Wolff (e.g., 2001), provides a way to analyze the complex social dynamics we found in the Delta. They argue that class is an “entry point,” rather than an “objective” determinant (Gibson-Graham et al. 2001:5). Drawing on Karl Marx's dialectic, read through Louis Althusser's work, they argue that “the dialectic entails not only the co-implication of political, economic, natural, and cultural processes in every site or occurrence but also the resultant openness and incompleteness of identity/being” (Gibson-Graham et al. 2001:4). Because historical processes always “overdetermine” any particular arrangement of power, one could take a different dimension of domination and exploitation, such as racial or gender processes, as the “entry point.” *Class*, as used in this article, refers to relations regulating labor processes (Wolf 1982).<sup>8</sup> Capitalist class relations entail the specific labor relations through which those who own productive property employ, and extract value from, people whose “property” is their labor, which appears as a commodity. The concept of “class” also entails the whole set of practices through which people recognize themselves as employers and employees and legitimate authority is accorded to employers. These identities are collective as well as individual and, therefore, implicate political and other institutions. In the Delta, relations based on race and class have, historically, been the most important bases for political solidarities. These two powerfully institutionalized relationships have, however, been complicated by ethnicity, religion, and kinship. These local relationships are part of larger polities, particularly, the state of Mississippi and the United States, as well as regional, national, and global economies and cultures. A straight line cannot, therefore, be drawn from the dominant labor process to the class and other processes that form what appears, at specific historical periods, as a hegemonic or dominant regime.

The formation of working classes out of former farmers, peasants, and craftsmen has always been a dynamic and explosive process. During the latter half of the 19th century and the first three decades of the 20th century, mine owners, timbermen, manufacturers, and industrial farmers throughout the United States called on state and paramilitary or vigilante violence in their efforts to weld unruly and unreliable immigrants and dispossessed farmers into a disciplined labor force. Throughout the United States, laws were passed outlawing vagrancy and enforcing temperance (Gutman 1977). The plantation South was subjected to similar efforts. Race,

however, entered as a central aspect of the developing class relations.

### Complicating the narrative: Ethnicity

The account sketched above tells a fairly well-known story: of the rural South in which whites are divided by class but sometimes bound together by race and in which white solidarity enforces the subordination of blacks of all classes. In this narrative, *white* refers to old-stock, white Protestant Americans. The area around Confederate Lane appeared to be populated largely by people who fit this description. The real-estate developers' signs on house lots, however, often have ethnic Italian names, and the only realtor's office on the south side of Greenville is that of Charles Azar, a Lebanese American. Our neighbor, Chris, as mentioned, was southeast Asian.

These are clues to a complicating factor: a relatively large population on the white side of the color line who descend from Turn-of-the-Century immigrants, particularly Chinese, Jews, Italians, and Syrians–Lebanese. These immigrants carved out niches in the rapidly developing cotton economy: the Jews as Main Street businessmen and financiers (*Greenville Times* n.d.; Turitz and Turitz 1995.); the Chinese as grocers, largely serving black customers (Loewen 1988; Quan 1982; Shepherd 1999); the Syrians–Lebanese in a variety of small businesses, including entertainment and real estate; and the Italians as farmers and mechanics (Canonici 2003; Whayne 1993). All these groups came from deeply class-divided societies, and both Jews and Lebanese emigrated from polities in which religious identification formed the basis of politically institutionalized communal distinctions. But none of these groups came from a heritage of white supremacy or of slavery. For these immigrants, the white southern narrative of an antebellum florescence overthrown by the “War between the States” and Reconstruction had little resonance in family history.

The status of these immigrants as “white” was sometimes problematic. The eastern and southern Europeans were not Protestant, and their foodways and other cultural patterns did not conform to Anglo-American norms. The Chinese, although Protestant, were legally classified as “colored.” The eastern European Jews had an easier entry because prosperous Jews from Alsace and the German-speaking principalities were among the early post–Civil War settlers in the region and had tended to merge with the developing planter and business elites.

Most of these immigrants, like most pre-1920 native-born white immigrants, began a rapid acquisition of property with their establishment of commercial enterprises. They developed widely varying relationships to the local white elites. In several communities, Jews quickly established solid ties with Protestant planters and businessmen, creating the institutions of the modern Delta town: country

clubs, chambers of commerce, and so forth (author interviews with Ben Lamensdorf, July 29, 2003; Maureen Lipnik, June 22, 2003; Benjamin Nelken, various discussions, 2002, 2003; Stanley Sherman, June 28, 2000; see also Cohen 2002; Solomon 1972; Turitz and Turitz 1995); in others they became respected members of the business and professional classes but were denied entry into the social clubs, which were restricted to Protestants. In Greenville, Jews were important organizers of the Greenville Country Club. In Clarksdale, they were originally barred from membership.

Planters recruited Italians from Ancona and other areas of northeastern Italy as agricultural laborers. The Italians quickly adopted sharecropping patterns common to other poor whites and blacks: moving often and maintaining extended kin linkages (Canonici 2003, interview with authors June 25, 2003). They were also particularly “land hungry” and bought acreage as soon as possible. Other Italians, largely from Sicily, established restaurants and small businesses in the towns. Despite significant anti-Italian (and anti-Catholic) sentiment among old-stock whites, many Italians quite quickly gained the respect of and support from key patrons, some of whom were Jews. Some of the largest landowners in the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta in 2005 are Italian Americans and Jews.

Old-stock Protestant whites varied, as well, on the basis of both ancestry and time of entry into the Delta. As the region developed after the Civil War, whites came in from all over the United States. Some came to extend or solidify family businesses. Others came in with the railroads and timber crews and found work as plantation managers, bought land, and became planters themselves or worked for established businesses. These were the middle and upper-class whites who governed the Delta and who Hortense Powdermaker and John Dollard wrote about in the 1930s. Additionally, Greenville had been one of the major ports for the myriad riverboat people who had plied the Mississippi in the 19th century, some of whom remained as fishermen into the 20th century. They were commonly called “river rats” and lived on the fringes of settled life (Vernon Hammond, interview with authors, July 10, 2005; Hubbard 1953).

Those who came in the second and third decades of the 20th century were often drawn from the same stock as the earlier migration, but two factors distinguished them. First, the decline of the agricultural economy had ruined many of their families, so they and their siblings had lost the possibility of becoming independent landowners. Second, the Delta, also subject to economic hard times, had filled up, leaving them little possibility of moving up the agricultural or occupational ladder.

### Complicating the narrative: Religion

Religious institutions bind people together in durable communities and separate them from others. Religious beliefs

also give powerful guidance to people's choices and, therefore, life chances.

Catholics have congregations that cross class and ethnic lines. Protestant denominations track class status, and adherents to one denomination sometime excoriate or look down on other denominations. The communities established by Protestant churches are more voluntaristic and fluid than those established by Catholics or Jews.

The Episcopal Church is identified with the upper-class planter elite. Methodists, Presbyterians, and Southern Baptists make up the great bulk of white middle-class congregants in the region. The Pentecostals, many Baptists, and other fundamentalists and evangelicals are identified with the working classes.

Virtually every white Protestant minister with whom we spoke stressed his desire to recruit black members, an apparent sea change since the days of legal segregation. We note, however, that the Southern Baptist Convention overwhelmingly supported the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 by a vote of 6,000 to 54 (Chappell 2004) and that many white Methodist ministers strongly supported racial integration (Chappell 1994, 2004; Ed King, interview with authors, 2002; Marsh 1997).

The Pentecostal appears to be the only Protestant denomination that effectively integrates its congregation. We attended the United Pentecostal Church near Confederate Lane south of Greenville and found that the congregation was almost equally divided between blacks and whites. Its services, like those of many "praise-and-worship" churches, are characterized by extraordinarily accomplished musicianship and are emotionally charged.

Some ministers specifically target the working class. Rip Noble, founder of Emmanuel Baptist Church, describes his outreach in marketing terms, as directed to "lower and middle S.E.S.," referring to socioeconomic status. Wendy Taylor said that her neighbor in the next trailer, a 32-year-old mother of five children, had become addicted to methamphetamines. Emmanuel Baptist Church paid her rent, water, electricity, and grocery bills. According to Wendy, "She's kind of sold [herself] to the church." When we visited Emmanuel Baptist, we were astounded at the size of the "megachurch," which resembled Wal-Mart in its architectural style. Numerous buildings devoted to child care, substance abuse, marriage counseling, and other services surrounded the central church. Wendy disapprovingly said that the senior minister's son was gay and that he attended the church, sitting in the front row. "The minister said [from the pulpit] that was fine, that was how he was made... and that was his choice in life. They have a lot of gay members that go to that church." Wendy concluded, "Just about everybody you meet on the roads go to that church." When we attended the church, we found it had significant black participation as well.

Churches also divide people one from the other. Two Italian American women in Shaw said that in the 1950s their priest forbade them to attend Protestant weddings and funerals. They experienced both the sting of discrimination from some of their "American" Protestant classmates and the enforced insularity of their church.

Many fundamentalist Protestants view Catholicism as a false religion. In some cases, such attitudes may reinforce class position. For example, Pennie Roncali French recounted that, after the Catholic diocese discovered that her father's Italian sharecropper family was related to Pope John XXIII, the Catholic Church brought family members new clothes, food, and other donations and sought to bring them into the parish. Her father was willing to accept the church because he had been raised a Catholic. Her Irish-ancestry mother, however, belonged to the Church of God (Pentecostal) and refused the help. Had the Roncalis acceded to the church's requests, they would undoubtedly have achieved far more materially than they did.

Few accounts of anti-Semitism in the Delta have been related to us. Status distinctions existed between Jews from Alsace and German-speaking principalities and those from eastern Europe and Russia, between wealthy and poor, and between Reform and Conservative. Their jobs ranged from mailmen to bank presidents, with the heaviest concentration in retail trade. The Hebrew Union Temple in Greenville had over 200 families on the rolls in the 1950s. They appear to have assimilated to the norms of other town businesspeople regarding class and race (Powdermaker 1993). Notably, some Jews, especially small-town merchants, joined the (white) Citizens' Councils (author interviews with Melvin and Maureen Lipnik, June 22, 2003; Benjamin Nelken, summer 2002; Robert Patterson, July 18, 2003; Stanley Sherman, June 28, 2001). As a group, however, they did not survive the transition from the old economy to the new, with its mass marketing, chain stores, and the virtual elimination of their plantation-based customers. Most Jewish children born after World War II, like the children of the Chinese grocers, have left for professional jobs in urban centers.

In contrast, the Catholic Lebanese and Italians, who were less clearly "white," appear to have maintained a strong presence in the region. They operate numerous establishments, especially restaurants and liquor stores, and work in various governmental positions. Because blacks control most political offices, their ability to work alongside blacks is crucial.

### Complicating the narrative: Kinship

Families establish culturally specific sets of expectations and obligations that shape individual life chances. Working-class whites that we met tended to live among extended family

groupings. Each time the William French family moved, following William's riverboat job, several siblings and other relatives would follow, at one point relocating 22 people. William got two brothers-in-law employment on the towboats. When he became disabled by diabetes and returned to the area near Confederate Lane, three of his four adult children and their families, along with two of his wife's sisters and their families, moved into the same area. In 2003, his daughter, Wendy, operated a day-care center in her double-wide. She relied on her relatives to help look after the day-care children when she needed to run errands or was sick. Her brother-in-law helped get her brother and her husband jobs in his machine shop. Her 15-year-old son, Allen, often worked for his uncles. William and his wife, Penne, took care of the grandchildren. Their son was planning to donate a kidney to his ailing father if the medical tests determined that he was a match.

In a pattern described by Halperin (1990) for Kentucky, such white working-class people incorporate within their tight-knit kin network a great deal of "social capital." Working-class people we interviewed often spoke of their "clan," particularly when reminiscing about their childhood (e.g., Emmett T. Smith, interview with authors, July 23, 2003). These kin networks also provided the basis for sometimes effective labor processes. In her work with southern Illinois orchardists, Adams (1996) found that extended families came from the Missouri and Arkansas Delta to pick the crops. These crews, operating through family-based hierarchies, established durable relationships with specific growers. Coming from the same background as the "poor whites" excoriated by planter elites in Mississippi, southern Illinois growers praised them for their efficient and reliable work habits.

We also found that virtually all the working-class whites we interviewed spoke of having black ancestors and relatives, generally Cherokee or Choctaw; one man was married to an Indian woman. Particular ethnic inflections in "poor white" or "redneck" culture may derive from southeastern Indians.

These kin networks provide considerable social security. As Stack (1997) noted for the urban blacks she studied, however, kin ties can restrict upward mobility. Families must be free to move and must have time available to maintain the reciprocities entailed in family membership. Wealth gets distributed to maintain family bonds, rather than being individually accumulated. By contrast, as research on the transitions to capitalism reveals, kinship relations can sometimes allow the development of incipient class relations mediated through the idiom of kin. Our initial research suggests that several of the immigrant groups, particularly the Chinese, Lebanese, and Italians, have used kin-based labor processes to accumulate wealth and to expand their business enterprises.

### **Class processes in the ordering of race, ethnicity, and religion**

The people of the Delta region comprised a racially divided working class and a governing class largely led by Protestant planters inflected by factions and disagreements. These groupings gave rise to five logically distinct types of divisions and alliances. Specific cases illustrating each of these types are presented below.

#### *Racial or ethnic competition within classes*

*Working-class competition between races.* Jeannie M. Wayne (1996:48) writes that "whitcapping" was common in the Arkansas Delta. The nightriders, who drove blacks from the area, "were rooted in competition between blacks and whites over [land] rental contracts with plantation owners" (Wayne 1996:48; see also Du Bois 1962; Jaynes 1986).

A. J. Cowart who lives near the town of Rena Lara, recounted the following story from his childhood in the Arkansas Delta just before World War I (interview with authors, July 25, 2003). His family was recruited to settle on "new ground" by a timber company, along with a considerable number of other white sharecroppers. A rumor swept through the settlement that blacks in the surrounding area were going to attack them, and, in fright, they armed and waited in the neighboring scrub for an attack that never materialized. Cowart's childhood recollection suggests that blacks sometimes acted—or were perceived by poor whites as acting—as aggressors in these competitive situations (see also Berardinelli 1909).

*Ethnic competition among the propertied classes.* A flyer circulated in Greenville in the 1930s by an Italian fruit seller named Lamas tried to mobilize grocers against Chinese competition.<sup>9</sup> His efforts seem to have had little effect, for the number of Chinese grocers in Greenville continued to increase. Ethnically based social clubs, like the Olympian Club in Greenville (Jewish), the Italian Club, and the Lebanese Club in Clarksdale, were established. In some communities, old-stock white Protestants claimed exclusive rights to the country club, but in others, like Greenville and Indianola, Jews were among the founding members. The Delta Debutante Cotillion, however, has been exclusive to the Protestant elites, a source of resentment among some Jews and Italian Americans.

#### *Racial or ethnic solidarities across class lines*

Economic and political elites sometimes mobilized racial solidarities, linking all "white" people or all "black" people regardless of class. During the "red summer" of 1919, black sharecroppers near Elaine, Arkansas, aggrieved by the prices they received for their cotton, attempted to form a labor union. White vigilantes led by planters and their overseers,



along with federal troops, killed large numbers of blacks. This action was apparently precipitated by the shooting of several whites during a black union meeting (Stockley 2001; Whyne 2002). Nineteenth- and 20th-century populist politicians frequently linked social and economic programs that would benefit the poor with a virulent white supremacy.

Blacks have created a corporate identity, inclusive of all classes. In the contemporary period, these solidarities have given black elites control of most of the political offices in the Mississippi counties that lie within the Delta. The town of Mound Bayou was established after the Civil War as a specifically separatist community for former slaves. It has continued to the present as an all-black community.

#### *Class solidarities across racial or ethnic lines*

*Working-class solidarities that cross racial or ethnic divides.* Populist Party organizers in the 1880s and some labor unions promoted class unity between black and white workers. The Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU), an interracial movement of sharecroppers in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta, campaigned for better conditions in the fields in the 1930s. Delta Cooperative Farm in Coahoma County was founded in 1936 as an interracial farming enterprise based on the Rochdale Principles of Cooperation. The farm housed black and white sharecroppers who had been evicted from the lands they farmed during labor struggles in the Delta (Campbell 1992).

In Greenville, black and white workers refused union organizing at the largest industrial plant in the region, Greenville Mills, a carpet-weaving factory. The Frenches' son-in-law, Bobby Brown, was a foreman at Greenville Machine Works and a graduate of Riverside High School. When his nephew, Allan, received an athletic scholarship offer from the elite Washington School in Greenville, Bobby urged him not to take the offer. He counseled Allan to remain in a school where he would know black kids, especially if he wanted to compete in sports. In addition, the virtually all-white Washington School children were from the upper class, and Allan was working class. Allan eventually chose to remain at Riverside School.

*Elite class solidarities across racial and ethnic lines.* During Reconstruction, white elites allied with people of African ancestry, both former slaves and free people of color. In some areas of the Delta, blacks held political office until the late 1880s. In what was known as a "fusion ticket," white and black elites divided up political offices.

After Reconstruction, elites from a variety of backgrounds—old-stock southerners, Yankees, German (Alsatian) Jews, and other European immigrants—hammered out the means through which they achieved racial, political, and economic dominance. In 1890, Mississippi was the first state to successfully disenfranchise

blacks by requiring, among other things, that potential voters be able to interpret the state constitution. In the late 19th century, elites' successful attempts to disenfranchise blacks simultaneously allowed them to disenfranchise poor whites and pass temperance legislation that both black and white workers opposed (Sillers 1976:213–222; Whyne 1996:2–3). In the 1970s, following the loss of their political dominance, white elites began to ally politically with the ascendant black political elites. Mike Espy was the first black elected to Congress from Mississippi since the Reconstruction era. A child of a prosperous Delta family with interests in mortuaries and land, Espy attended Howard University and Santa Clara Law School. He was supported by many in the white Delta elite. Fund-raisers for his candidacy were held at the home of a prominent towboat family in Greenville. Espy was elected in 1987, served three terms in the House, and was appointed secretary of agriculture by President Clinton. He was forced to resign during an investigation by an independent counsel, although he was later cleared of all charges by a jury. His vocal defenders during the period included many Delta planters as well as local Republican organizations in Mississippi.

#### *Alliances that conjoined groups across class and racial lines*

Planters and other white elites cultivated paternalistic bonds with their black laborers in opposition to other whites. Many planters, who depended on black labor, viewed the competitive relationship between poor whites and blacks as destructive to labor discipline. In daily actions as well as politically, they sometimes opposed groups like the Ku Klux Klan to keep their black labor from fleeing (Carter 1953; Kirwan 1964; Percy 1941; Whyne 1996:48–54; Wyatt-Brown 1994). Planters often interceded with legal authorities on behalf of their valued black laborers even if other, lower-class, whites had been harmed by those laborers. In the late 1990s, Pam, a white female store owner was caught in a cross-fire between several blacks in the parking lot of her country store in Chatham, a few miles from Confederate Lane. Wounded by the pistol fire, she reported the assailant to the Washington County Sheriff, who arrested the suspect. The following morning, the suspect was bailed out of jail by his planter boss, who explained that the shooter was "his best tractor driver" and that he needed the driver in the field. The criminal charges were later dropped.

#### *Racial and class separation and exclusivity*

Responding to competition from blacks for housing and schools, some working-class whites developed explicit programs of racial separatism. Betty Furness of Walls, Mississippi, described her childhood in a sharecropper family who lived among blacks. In the 1970s, having moved to Memphis, Tennessee, she led an exit of working-class whites back into Mississippi after their children's school

was targeted for interracial busing. She founded an all-white private school. Many upper-class whites have also created institutions, particularly private schools, that maintain white racial separation.

This analytic schema, by itself, cannot explain the existence of extensive, white, working-class settlements in rural southeastern Washington County around Confederate Lane. To do that, we turn to look at the changing fortunes of different classes and racial groupings and how they responded to their situations through time.

### **Riverside School District and the Farm Security Administration (FSA)**

The proximate nexus of the new developments we came across, according to almost all accounts, is the predominantly white, K–12, Riverside School (District 1 Washington County Supervisor Paul Watson, interview with authors, July 9, 2003). It is something of an anomaly—a rural, white, public school created during the consolidation movement of the early 1950s. At that time, the rural parts of the Yazoo–Mississippi Delta were overwhelmingly black, whereas the towns tended to be majority or near-majority white. Consolidation, therefore, usually concentrated white children in the towns. How had this district come to have a large enough white population to support a consolidated school in a rural area?

Before the Great Depression, the area now served by Riverside School appears to have differed little from other areas of the Delta. The New Deal, however, brought major changes, in the form of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's FSA.

The FSA, starting in the mid-1930s, took control of many failed Delta plantations and divided them into 40- to 60-acre plots. Houses with three to five bedrooms were built on each "unit," along with outbuildings and a water supply system. The resultant farms were sold to carefully selected applicants from among a pool of sharecroppers. The projects were segregated by race, with over two-thirds of the units reserved for whites, even though over 75 percent of farm tenants in Mississippi were black (Baldwin 1968:196–197). Of the 168 units that we researched in Washington County, we identified only 62 sold to black families. Many more projects, both white and black, were built just south of the county line (Issaquena County Chancery Clerk 1941–45; Washington County Chancery Clerk 1939–43). Greenfield Plantation south of Confederate Lane was one of the larger of the projects in Washington County. Driving through the area today, one still sees the FSA houses spread far and wide on the landscape. This is the area that is served by the Riverside School District.

The New Deal agricultural programs, such as the FSA, addressed multiple, often deeply contradictory, problems. Many intellectuals, including people involved with New

Deal agricultural programs, were concerned by the sharp increase in tenancy that had occurred in the 20th century and by the reversal of the "agricultural ladder" that had previously allowed people to move from wage labor to renting to farm ownership (Conrad 1965; Daniel 1980; Fite 1984; Johnson et al. 1935; Kirby 1987; Mertz 1978; Raper 1943; Raper and Reid 1941; Woofter 1936).

Following World War I, but especially in the 1930s, commodity prices, including cotton, fell precipitously. On the basis of the theory that low prices resulted from over production, in 1933, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal established the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), which paid "farmers" to plow up or not plant their crops. This was class legislation based on the proposition that "farmers" and "landowners" were synonymous. In the Delta, however, "farmers" were almost always sharecroppers. Many planter landowners threw tenants and sharecroppers off the land and pocketed the payments from the AAA. The former sharecroppers and tenants were converted into wage laborers (Mertz 1978:15).

In response to evictions caused by AAA programs, sharecroppers in the lower Mississippi Delta organized on the basis of their class position. In 1934, white and black sharecroppers near Tyronza, Arkansas, founded the STFU (Conrad 1965; Grubbs 1971; Kester 1997; Mitchell 1979; Whayne 1996). The union spread quickly throughout the Delta regions of Arkansas and Mississippi and north into the Missouri Bootheel. Despite widespread racist agitation and violence on the part of planters, the interracial union grew stronger. The STFU affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and began a national campaign on behalf of cotton workers. In January 1939, the STFU organized a dramatic strike of evicted white and black tenants in the Missouri Bootheel. The dispossessed sharecroppers lined the highways, shivering in makeshift tents. National media descended, and the president's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, visited the strikers. The federal government quickly funded construction of a series of ten rural communities, called collectively the "Delmo Project," housing nearly 600 dispossessed white and black tenant families (Stepenoff 2003). This project, like all other New Deal resettlement programs throughout the Delta, put a band-aid on the gaping wounds of class.

By the 1930s, white supremacy had been solidified and, particularly with Democratic control of the White House and Congress, appeared absolutely secure from legal and other challenge. Interracial class alliances now appeared the greatest threat to elite control.<sup>10</sup> The author of the 1937 legislation enabling the FSA to acquire, subdivide, and sell land to sharecroppers, Alabama Senator John Bankhead, promoted it as an antidote to communist and socialist agitation (Baldwin 1968:134–135).

The FSA had incorporated the Resettlement Administration (RA). The RA, and the early FSA, had sought to

establish cooperative communities throughout the country. By 1941, the “radicals” in the FSA had been defeated by conservative politicians who opposed its socialist agenda. Despite ideological opposition from many Delta planters (Nelson 1999), however, bankrupt planters and their lenders welcomed the FSA interventions. The FSA program also had the effect of defusing the growing interracial labor militancy in the fields.

The FSA land distribution program was also congruent with poor white farmers’ demands. These smallholders, with their history of opposition to monied interests, had sometimes acted as a powerful political force. Unlike the way they treated disenfranchised blacks, ambitious politicians sometimes catered to poor whites. After the defeat of the Populist Party in the late 19th century, which had developed an interracial movement of the poor, Mississippi politicians linked populist class demands to racism. In the first open Democratic primary for governor of Mississippi in 1903, James K. Vardaman, who shrewdly understood that poor whites hated the planter and resented the blacks who made the planter’s existence possible, urged a pogrom: “We would be justified,” he said, “in slaughtering every Ethiop on the earth to preserve unsullied the honor of one Caucasian home” (Kirwan 1964:146–147). But his real appeal to working-class whites was the confiscation and redistribution of the rich Delta land. As governor, he vetoed a bill that favored the huge timber interests, saying he would like to see “the great delta plantations cut up into small farms and owned by white men who till the soil” (Kirwan 1964:166). The race-baiting Mississippi Senator Theodore K. Bilbo, an avid New Deal Democrat, appealed to many of the same constituents, combining an appeal to white solidarity with vicious antiblack demagoguery.<sup>11</sup>

The white people who populated most of the projects formed the foundation for the Riverside School’s unique demographics. But actions by the Washington County elite and by the towboat industry helped to solidify white presence after World War II. The biographies of two families capture the changes that occurred, that of William and Pennie French’s family and that of Mattie Franklin Monteith’s family.

William French’s father came to the Delta in the 1920s. He was a “Tennessee Redneck,” that is, a “cross between an Indian and an American from the Hills” (William French, interview with authors, July 2003). William’s grandmother was a full-blooded Cherokee, his grandfather mostly Irish. William grew up with his paternal grandfather and an uncle on Poor Baby Plantation, in Sunflower County. They moved to Possum Ridge, in the Riverside School district, in 1954. Pennie Roncali French’s mother’s family came to the Delta from the southern pine hills in the late 1920s as well. Her father, an Italian American, as noted earlier, was from Shaw.

Mattie Monteith’s parents, Edward and Jewel Christine (Mullins) Franklin, came to the Delta in 1931 from the hills

of Tallahatchie County, where they had been sharecroppers. Some of her ancestors were ruined, Mattie recalled, by the Civil War, whereas others held onto or married into land. By the 1930s, however, none of her family owned land. Mattie recalled that a man who “had stayed with my grandmother and grandfather and helped work crops” found her family a place to work in the Delta. “My uncles, my mother’s brothers, were young men then, and they were very able to work, and so they came . . . to Sunflower County, Sunflower River.”

They entered into a land hostile to the white sharecropper.

We heard repeatedly, from former sharecroppers and planters, as well, that planters preferred black to white sharecroppers. We asked Robert “Tut” Patterson, who had been a plantation manager and a founder of the (white) Citizens’ Councils, why this was so.<sup>12</sup> He said, “White sharecroppers, really, when I was coming along, farmers didn’t want a white, . . . they preferred black sharecroppers . . . because they were better physically and they can stand the heat better . . . and they’re happy people.” We pressed him to explain the difference to us.

**Patterson:** [W]ell, they [white croppers] just didn’t get along as well doing that kind of work . . . working for a white boss as the blacks did. . . . I’ve . . . worked blacks all my life, and I never had any altercations with any of them. Violent altercation. Even serious altercations . . .

**D. Gorton:** What about with whites?

**P:** Yeah, I have had a lot of them with whites.

He told us a story about an 18-year-old sharecropper who exemplified the problem:

I was building a fence one day, and I had these white sharecroppers there working, . . . I had blacks working there too. And the white one was not putting nails in, putting the staples in there. He was hitting it wrong, didn’t have the grains, you know? When you drive a staple, you’re supposed to catch two grains, put them in the same grain they’ll split, and I said something to him about it. . . . He turned and looked at me, threw the hammer down and left. Left right away. Left his debt, left everything. Left the plantation, just because I told him how to . . . and I didn’t holler at him, I didn’t cuss at him, I just told him how to do it. And so the black man now, when he left said, “Well that’s good riddance.” Said, “You know what he told me a while ago? I told him, I said, ‘That staple is not going to hold,’ he said, ‘It’ll hold ‘til I get to the house.’” . . . I’ve had blacks that was just as good and faithful and they do something right and wanted to do it right. But that, I hate to use the word, that class of white people that we were having to work, just wasn’t as good a people as the blacks . . . in terms of their work. . . . They weren’t as good, as honest either. They steal you blind.

Former sharecroppers who were white told us of several violent altercations between their relatives and planters, and, although we did not hear of outright theft, we were told stories of white workers leaving in the middle of the night just before planting, after having been supported by a planter during the winter.

The whites we interviewed had all worked hard, as William French recounted: "Seems like the old people back in my daddy's days, they were brought up to work. I don't know if that had anything to do with the Indian part in them. But they worked from sunup to sundown and they never quit. They didn't take an hour break—work an hour and take an hour break. They walked behind a plow all day long."

French began picking cotton as soon as he could put cotton in his mother's sack.

What poor whites apparently lacked were the dispositions appropriate to an agricultural employee—dispositions that had been developed as relations between black laborers and white bosses.

Mattie Monteith's family heard about an FSA project being carved out of Greenfield Plantation in 1941. The plantation had failed because the previous owner could not pay the debt on it, a debt acquired, according to local lore, in a poker game.<sup>13</sup> According to Mattie,

Mamma has told me that they went to the courthouse in Issaquena County down at Meyersville. There were a lot of people had come to sign up for these places, and she said that when they broke for lunch, they had carried, . . . probably some biscuits and sausage or something, . . . and she and daddy went out and had their lunch and held hands and prayed, and said they came back, and their name was the first one called. So, they got a place. This was not the place my mother wanted, she wanted up on the lake [Lake Washington]. She said when she saw the lake that was the prettiest thing she'd ever seen.

You know, being in the hills, the red clay and all that, there were no lakes. But the home demonstration agent told her, said, "Now, the war is starting, you need to go ahead and take what you can because they would not be building anymore." Some of the places we understand were not built, but they already had the materials to do it. And so they went ahead and finished the other houses. . . . At that time, I had one brother. I was about six, he was about two. . . . And then in '42 I had a sister that was born, and then had a little brother born later on. So were five of us that grew up, threes of the children, let's see, one-two-three-four children grew up in this house.

Mattie also had a baby sister, Billie Dove, who died of malnutrition as the impoverished family waited to be selected for the FSA project.

As landowners, the Franklins hired black laborers to help harvest their cotton crop, although as smallholders,

members of the family labored in the fields alongside their workers.

Mattie graduated from high school, and her parents scraped together the money that, with grants and student work, allowed her to go to Delta State Teacher's College for a one-year business course. She then got a job and married a "flyboy" from the nearby Greenville Air Force base and moved to Mobile, Alabama. She returned to her childhood home on retirement.

William and Pennie French, whose parents had remained sharecroppers, followed a similar trajectory out of farming and into the industrial working class. Pennie's uncle arranged for Pennie's father to get work in the factory where he was employed, and for two years her family lived in the Atlanta area. With her father's health failing, however, they returned to her father's Italian kin in the Delta and farmed for one year. They then moved to Rosedale for factory work. Her mother found work in a sewing factory in Drew, a nearby town.

William French's family also left farming for factory work after having worked at a chicken farm in Avon in the mid-1950s, where, William recalled, they first had regular meals. His father was disabled in an accident, and his mother found work in a garment factory in Greenville. William dropped out of Riverside High School to help support his nine siblings and worked as an agricultural laborer. A relative helped him find work on the Mississippi River towboats, which in the 1960s hired almost any white man who could stay sober for the four-week runs on the river. He eventually worked his way up to become a captain, the highest rank on the boat.

These working-class jobs were not widely available elsewhere in the Delta. Even though most of the better-paying jobs in factories went to whites, many planters opposed manufacturing and other employment opportunities, believing they would create wage competition for their black workers. The Washington County elite, however, sought to find work for the agricultural workers, black and white, who were being displaced by mechanization.

## The development of industry

Somewhat unusual in the larger Delta, the Washington County business elite was composed not only of planters but also of the descendants of immigrants who had disembarked at its port of Greenville in the 19th and 20th centuries. Jews and Protestants, supplemented by Italians, Syrians, and Chinese, wanted to ensure a steady clientele for their retail businesses. Some of the most influential planters, such as the Percy family, had varied interests in manufacturing, timbering, shipping, and finance. Additionally, the professional classes, particularly attorneys and accountants, sought the business that new industries brought to the community.

They aggressively used Mississippi's development program, Balance Agriculture with Industry (BAWI), to attract

manufacturers from the North. They provided community-backed bonds to construct industrial plants and offered tax forgiveness and other incentives, especially a nonunion labor force and right-to-work laws (Hodding Carter III, interview with authors, November 7, 2003; Cobb 1982; Vernon Hammond, interview with authors, July 10, 2005). At the same time, local riverboat families developed a booming towboat industry that expanded the town into one of the principal ports on the lower Mississippi River. At its height, in the 1950s through the 1970s, Greenville became the home port for over 50 towboat and barge companies (Hodding Carter III, interview with authors, November 7, 2003; William French, interview with authors, July 15, 2003).

These new jobs not only recruited whites more than blacks but they also instituted new labor relations that white workers respected. Vernon Hammond (interview with authors, July 10, 2005) told us that those recruited to work in the Alexander Smith carpet mill that relocated from Yonkers, New York, in 1952 were an interracial mix of virtually all military veterans. Many of the whites came from the hills to the east, and Italian Americans came from Shaw. Hammond himself was the son of a Nabisco salesman and grew up in Greenville. He quickly became a foreman in the new plant because of the mechanical and supervisory skills he had developed as a navy chief and "hard hat" salvage diver. His first task at the training center established by the factory was to repair looms that had been "sabotaged" by union laborers in New York. He was promoted to foreman after his skilled and swift repair of the machinery.

The machinery was over 80 years old at the time the plant opened in Greenville, and, according to Hammond, the former farm boys and mechanics kept it running smoothly for the next 40 years. Greenville Mills of the Alexander Smith Carpet Company was a vertically integrated enterprise, dyeing Argentinian wool with the soft water available near the Mississippi River, weaving and shipping complete custom carpets to the chain restaurants and motels that developed in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

At its peak, the carpet mill employed 1,200 workers, running three shifts. It paid competitive wages with medical care and pensions—benefits earlier won by northern unions. Blacks initially were relegated to the lower-paid positions. Hammond recalled that, after the "integration program" (in the late 1960s), about half the workers eventually were black. The interracial workforce repeatedly refused to unionize, although the Textile Worker's Union made numerous attempts to organize the plant. Many of the FSA farmers and their children found work in factories like this one as small farms became less and less viable.

In 2001, Greenville Mills was bought by an English consortium that placed new equipment in the 70-acre factory. Three years later the plant was closed, a victim of foreign competition. Referring to the corporation, one retired mill-

worker said bitterly, "They came in on a trailer and they left on a trailer."

The towboat industry was developed by white riverboat families and drew, Hammond told us, from a "different breed of people," presumably the "river rats" and other fishermen and river men of the region. Entrepreneurs such as Jesse Brent and his family, who created the industry, discovered that the engine transfer gears used in war-surplus Navy LSTs and other watercraft, along with war-surplus Caterpillar engines, could be used to create cheap, reliable towboats. The frames of the boats were built by interracial crews of ex-servicemen who welded them on the muddy banks of Lake Ferguson and pushed them into the water with bulldozers. Barges were built in the same low-tech fashion.

We have not yet studied family histories of those involved in the towboat industry, but our initial evidence suggests that this sector drew on old kin networks and traditional understandings of discipline and authority for both its business and employment practices. It was a strictly segregated industry on the water, allowing only whites in the close quarters of the boats. In a similar manner, the long-distance truckers, off-shore oil workers, and heavy-equipment operators that we met on Confederate Lane appeared to be part of extensive kin networks. All of these occupations were characterized by periods of intense time on the job (often a month of 24-hour-a-day shifts for towboat and off-shore oil workers and several weeks on the road for truckers and equipment operators) and extended lengths of time off the job spent at home. Kin networks helped with children and monitored the behavior of members of the family during the extended absences of the men.

The booming economy, and especially towboat operation and manufacturing, opened up opportunities for men to develop work skills as well as independent businesses. Buddy Ferguson, whom we had met while he was developing a subdivision near Confederate Lane, was the son of a welder who ran a wrecking yard that recycled agricultural and other heavy equipment. For these rural whites, now one or two generations away from owning their own farms and achieving independence, establishing one's own business remains a persistent goal.

Building on New Deal programs, government monies became increasingly central to the economy of the Delta, as in the rest of the rural United States. Government bureaucracies provided both blue- and white-collar jobs. Federal transfer payments, from agricultural subsidies to social security, became increasingly important to the region's economy. In 2003, direct federal expenditures or obligations in the core Delta counties amounted to over \$1.6 billion (U.S. Census Bureau 2003, 2005), an average of \$7,000 per resident.<sup>14</sup> Many of these funds are administered through federal agencies such as the Fish and Wildlife Service and go directly to farmers and other individuals and, therefore, are not controlled by local politicians. Substantial federal

monies, however, are directed through local offices and have become increasingly important as political patronage. State and local governments also support many programs and personnel. Our landlord had been a groundskeeper at the federally funded but state-administered agricultural experiment station at Stoneville.

Government monies showed up in other ways, particularly in relation to medical care. Several of the white working-class people we met south of Greenville worked in the medical system in jobs such as receptionists, technicians, and home health workers.

The post–World War II agricultural economy drove commodity prices so low that small farmers, like the FSA clients, could not make a living from the land. Betty Mosely Fisher's family owned a farm on an FSA project, Nunnery Plantation, on Possum Ridge. She told us that Buddy Cochran, son of an original FSA purchaser, had bought up most of the farms on the project and become a big planter. "Most of them [the original purchasers] moved away," she told us, "because everything was hard and hard work, and people wanted to go out and get better jobs and have more." Cochran rented Mosley's family land. He operated a cotton gin in Avon, the center of his agricultural enterprises. In 2001, Cochran was elected president of the Mississippi Cotton Ginners Association (Brandon 2001).

Most FSA projects can still be recognized because a considerable number of people remained on inherited plots with family members nearby. The old Delta plantations, in contrast, have been swept entirely clean of habitations, except for a cluster of housing near the farm owner's or manager's house and the operation's sheds. We discovered in county records that our double-wide sat on Unit No. 1 of Loudon Plantation—a former FSA project that is now entirely residential (Washington County Chancery Clerk 1939–43:78).

Riverside School District was created because of a specific concurrence of events: FSA projects that allowed relatively large numbers of poor white families to buy farmland and rapidly expanding industry in Washington County after World War II that employed former white sharecroppers and laborers. The FSA projects formed a stable core of occupants around which other whites settled, creating a population large enough to support a consolidated rural K–12 school. But other factors enabled the district to not only maintain but also increase its population in the 1990s—a period when rural school districts throughout the country were closing their doors.

### Race and class

The FSA projects and subsequent industrial development shifted the relative proportions of black and white among the area working classes, and they revealed previously obscured ways that class regulated relations between whites as well as between whites and blacks. The poor white fami-

lies moving onto the newly divided FSA plantations caused considerable discomfort for their planter neighbors. Matty Monteith and Jean Jones recalled that the old planter families refused to allow the poor whites to be buried in their antebellum graveyard, Greenfield Cemetery. A former sharecropper family that had acquired the FSA unit adjacent to the cemetery donated some land for a graveyard. In turn, the overseers of Greenfield Cemetery erected an iron fence to mark off their ancestors' graves from those of their poor neighbors (Matty Monteith and Jean Jones, interview with authors July 15, 2003).

In the post–World War II period, conditions shifted. Not only were whites a larger proportion of the working class, but blacks began to successfully challenge white supremacy, both locally and nationally. In 1948, President Harry Truman issued an executive order integrating the U.S. military. The election of a Republican president, Dwight Eisenhower, and his subsequent appointment of Earl Warren to the U.S. Supreme Court led to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* "separate but equal" decision. Segregation was effectively declared unconstitutional. In September of 1957, Eisenhower sent troops into Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce a court desegregation order. In the same year Eisenhower and the Republicans pushed successful civil rights legislation in Congress for the first time since Reconstruction. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 focused on ensuring the right to vote for all Americans, but it was especially targeted at blacks in the South. The bill created a Commission on Civil Rights that was authorized to hold public hearings under oath and a Civil Rights Division in the Department of Justice, and it carefully outlawed any attempt to threaten or coerce voters or otherwise interfere with their right to vote. Senate Democrats filibustered the civil rights bill. Bitterly opposed to the federal government's changing stance on racial questions, white elites began pushing for total white solidarity.

### Schools as a locus of racial solidarity

The public schools in Greenville were a key stage for consolidating white racial unity. In the 1920s, public school funds were directed almost exclusively to the building, maintenance, and staffing of the white schools.

Prior to World War II, all "white" children, except for the Chinese (Loewen 1988; Quan 1982; Shepherd 1999, interview with authors, March 13, 2002; Thornell 2003), were welcomed into these schools. Poor and working-class whites, Italians, Syrians, and Jews attended as well as middle- and upper-class white children. Class and ethnic divisions among the children were blurred. Although some of the planter's children went on to boarding schools, lifelong friendships across class lines were sometimes established. Marriages across class and ethnic lines increased.

In the classrooms, an unproblematic history of the "Lost [Confederate] Cause" was taught. Annual trips were made to

sites of Civil War battles, and tales were told of Confederate soldiers' valor, sacrifice, and nobility in the "War of Northern Aggression." Working-class and ethnic histories were subsumed in this environment.

After World War II, Greenville's governing elite, aware that "separate but equal" segregated schools would be challenged in court, built new schools for both white and black children. The Greenville Country Club and its golf links, located in the wealthiest white neighborhood in town, was re-created as a campus for the white secondary school, four mainline churches, and a community center. Coleman High, the black high school on the other end of town, built at roughly the same time, was held up as a model black educational facility. In the surrounding rural area, O'Bannon consolidated students from the black schools and Riverside consolidated students from the white schools. White children from the area around the small town of Glen Allan, on the south county line, consolidated with the Glen Allan school. The three schools became governed through Western Line School District. The Greenville elite assumed that they would always have neighborhood schools, thereby assuring that they would remain overwhelmingly white in the event of integration.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the acceptance of Catholic children into the larger white community, Greenville Catholics built St. Joseph High School in 1950 and Our Lady of Lourdes Elementary School in 1964, replacing St. Rosa of Lima, which had been established in 1888. The departure of the Catholic children from the public schools had long-term implications for class and ethnicity.

The Catholic Church is attended by coreligionists regardless of class. Sacred Heart Catholic Church, however, was a black parish and St. Patrick's was white. The Catholics, influenced by the Second Vatican Council of Bishops (1962–65), promoted racial equality and integrated their schools in Washington County.<sup>15</sup> Several of the older Catholics we interviewed told us about discriminatory treatment by "Americans," which, they said, sensitized them to the wounds of prejudice. Nonetheless, the Catholics were not immune to the divisive political currents of the civil rights era. Some Italians who ran stores inside the black neighborhoods in towns like Leland were burned out in what appeared to be arson by their black neighbors (Robert Landi, interview with authors February 9, 2002). Many Italian Americans allied with strongly segregationist Protestant whites.

Whites began to implement massive resistance to desegregation. The first white Citizens' Council was founded in Indianola in 1954. Virtually all of the town's businesspeople joined, including Italians and the Jewish merchants and wholesale grocers. Both sides in the desegregation struggle prevailed on ethnic groups. Chinese American John Quon describes the experience as "a tightrope that we had to walk." Quon recalls his father giving money to both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the

Citizens' Council. Sam Chu Lin remembers his grandfather being a good friend of Senator James O. Eastland, a staunch supporter of segregation, while also making interest-free loans to numerous black friends (Thornell 2003). A prominent Jewish businessman from Shaw named Chiz wrote an anti-integration pamphlet, "A Jew Looks at Segregation," and circulated it at the Hebrew Union Temple (Robert Patterson, interview with authors, July 1, 2003).

Greenville did not embrace the Citizens' Councils. Greenville *Delta Democrat Times* editor Hodding Carter Jr. won a Pulitzer Prize for editorials on race and desegregation. The state representative from Washington County, Joe Wroten, was one of only two legislators to vote against racist legislation in the Mississippi House (Joe Wroten, interview with authors, 2003; see also Mitchell 2001; Smith 1967).

In 1969, the U.S. Supreme Court, in what U.S. District Judge William C. Keady, a native of Greenville, termed a "blistering decision written by Justice Hugo Black . . . ordered the immediate desegregation of the public schools" (1988:106). Ironically, Keady, the son of an Irish saloonkeeper in Greenville, had been the chief counsel of the school board in Greenville. The U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals enforced the U.S. Supreme Court's dictate that there be no "racially identifiable schools" when school resumed after Christmas in February 1970 (Keady 1988:106, 113).<sup>16</sup> Keady had been Washington County chairman for segregationist Governor Ross Barnett and had been appointed as the federal judge for the Northern District of Mississippi by Lyndon Johnson. He had been supported by white supremacist Senator Eastland. Ironically, it was Keady who was given the duty of carrying out the Fifth Circuit's orders. Over Christmas break, 1969–70, public schools in the Delta were massively and uncompromisingly integrated. When school resumed, black children streamed through the streets of the white residential areas of Greenville on their way to the newly integrated schools, a profoundly traumatic development for the white residents in the Delta.

Many whites in the region had long been preparing for this event. Robert "Tut" Patterson recalled (interviews with authors July 1 and July 18, 2003) that the Citizens' Councils had established plans to rent hotels, churches, and other buildings to serve as temporary private schools.<sup>17</sup> The "Academy Movement," as it was known, set up facilities in every town and region of the Delta. Greenville parents began Washington School, which soon rivaled the most elite preparatory schools in the South in educational excellence. Another group founded Greenville Christian School, and other white parents sent their children to St. Joseph's Catholic parochial school, which was and remains integrated.

Despite the U.S. 5th Circuit Court's order forbidding racially identifiable schools, Riverside School wound up predominantly white and O'Bannon majority black. At least a part of the accommodation appears to have come from crafty legal maneuvers by Greenville attorney William

Robertshaw. We also discern that the district that includes Confederate Lane was seen by the elites as “redneck,” and, thus, the ferocious reputation of the poor whites forced this unusual arrangement (Hodding Carter III, interview with authors, November 7, 2003; Larry Green, interview with authors, June 6, 2003).

The Greenville elite, led by the Percy family, attempted to maintain the white presence in the public schools through the organization Parents for the Public Schools. But the effort withered in the face of a decline in the quality of education, racial animosity, unruly and violent students, and poorly prepared teachers (Johnston 2002). In the years that followed desegregation, most white parents who could afford the tuition chose to send their children to private academies. Many others homeschooled. The public schools dramatically declined in enrollment, from 14,964 at the time of the 1969 court order to 7,033 in 2002, largely because white enrollment plummeted. Only 223 white children attended the Greenville public schools in 2002 (Greatschools.net n.d.); in the 2003–04 school year only one percent of students at Greenville High were white and only two of the town’s 11 elementary schools had greater than five percent white attendance—Akin with 22 percent and Carrie Stern with 12 percent (Greatschools.net n.d.).

With the collapse of segregated public education and the implementation of voting rights, white unity dissolved. The white elites send their children to the exclusive Washington School, which has several South Asian and East Asian students but almost no blacks. The white middle classes send their children to parochial schools—St. Joseph’s Catholic school and Greenville Christian Academy. Many members of the black middle and upper classes send their children to St. Joseph’s; its student body has consistently been approximately half Catholic and 40 percent black.<sup>18</sup> Those who cannot afford the private schools, black and white, attend the public schools.

### Postsegregation period

In the 1980s and 1990s, the political economy changed once again. One by one, the manufacturing plants closed down. Many moved overseas, seeking cheaper labor. Some relatively well-paid jobs were gained in the new riverboat casinos that dot the lakefront. In 2005, only U.S. Gypsum and Uncle Sam’s Rice remained as major industrial employers. During the same period, a powerful black political machine developed, electing blacks to increasingly important political office. In the 2004 election, blacks won all but two political offices; whites were elected supervisors representing the southwestern section of Washington County where Riverside School is located. In Greenville, black-controlled drug trade and gangs developed, bringing new levels of violence into the schools and neighborhoods (Glanton 2004; Heinzmann 2004). White families increasingly moved out

of the city and into the area south of Greenville—the area around Confederate Lane.

As in previous eras, however, working-class and poor whites once more find themselves cut loose.<sup>19</sup> Their erstwhile elite white allies have withdrawn into gated communities and expensive private schools that reinforce their class status. Our white neighbors on Confederate Lane and their children at Riverside School are products of the class and race dynamics of the 19th- and 20th-century Delta. Now, conditions have changed once again.

### Conclusion

We have argued here that race was a central dimension of class processes in the Delta. We have also distinguished between labor processes and class processes. Labor processes have to do with the specific sets of relations through which work is carried out. In the Delta, as we have demonstrated, in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, the relations between white planters and their black workers entailed both racial and class elements. The cultural codes that routinized planter authority in the labor relation simultaneously ritualized racial supremacy and inferiority. This labor regime largely excluded whites as agricultural laborers, both ideologically and culturally, and demeaned blacks. Alongside and eventually supplanting this dominant labor relation, however, whites worked as wage laborers in timbering, on the levees, and in other nonagricultural jobs. The labor relations developed in these workplaces were translated into the industrial workplace that supplanted agricultural work in the post–World War II period and then again into the service economy that became predominant after integration.

Class processes involve a broader set of social actors, institutional as well as individual. They appear historically as political relationships, as people, motivated by their economic interests, form solidarities and alliances. People’s interests, however, transcend purely economic motivations. In the Delta, Main Street businesspeople often came from ethnic and religious backgrounds quite different from those of the planters. Jews, Italians, Lebanese, Chinese, and old-stock whites emigrated from the upland South, the North, and overseas, areas with widely different systems of hierarchy and authority, none of which entailed race as a central feature. Although they participated in the system established under planter hegemony insofar as they observed the racial codes of etiquette and employed blacks only in menial positions, many of these late 19th- and early 20th-century arrivals did not—and, by ethnicity, most could not—become party to the entire ideological apparatus that justified white supremacy, which was rooted in an ancestral experience of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Redemption.

Neither are class processes purely local. All of the economic elites were embedded in national and international economic systems. They depended on financing from



outside the area, and largely outside the South; they acquired goods from national and world markets, and the planters and manufacturers sold their goods throughout the nation and the world. The commodity chains varied considerably. These economic ties brought people in the Delta into association with people from all over the world: Children from the planter elites often completed their education by study in New York, New England, and Europe. Blacks were able to establish a degree of autonomy because of the job opportunities and mobility afforded by the Mississippi River and by easy access to the industrial North through the railroads, in both cases, availing themselves of strong kin networks. Poor whites coming into the area retained kin networks in their natal areas as well as in locations where their out-migrating kinspeople settled. A static schema of class and race relations localized only in the Delta or, more broadly, the South, therefore fails to capture the actual fields within which people created their lives.

Political institutions are central to class processes because they create the legal framework within which people must operate. Law fixes relationships and provides the institutional means to enforce them. When the 1897 U.S. Supreme Court approved the "Mississippi Plan," embedded in the 1890 Mississippi Constitution, to disenfranchise blacks, the federal government effectively removed blacks as a political force. Following on the 1892 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision permitting legal racial segregation, white supremacy was guaranteed. Blacks lost access to the legal system, particularly the courts, except at the sufferance of the whites who controlled these institutions. People in localities could moderate the enforcement of racist state laws, as happened when the legally "colored" Chinese were admitted to public schools in the Delta. But these decisions created a political universe in which race would necessarily be a central factor because blacks had now lost all ability to appeal to authorities outside of their immediate locale. These laws ensured that no white would seek blacks as allies; the political universe became virtually all white. In this environment, poor whites had a degree of influence when politicians needed their votes, although they were often disenfranchised under many of the same laws that applied to blacks. Blacks retained only the power to negotiate at the point of production, using "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985, 1990). The most important of these was their refusal to be bound by debt, using planter competition for labor to move from plantation to plantation. Many also became skilled at manipulating the racial etiquettes for personal advantage. In this context of black political and legal invisibility, racist violence was a symbol of black powerlessness created through federal sanctioning of black disenfranchisement.

Not until a half-century after federal sanction of white supremacy, following World War II, would the federal government begin to alter the legal regime that installed white

supremacy. In the 1930s, Franklin Roosevelt struck a Faustian bargain with southern Democrats to get his New Deal legislation passed. Even social security, the crown jewel of New Deal legislation, was specifically denied to agricultural workers and household employees. The New Deal did not challenge the existing order, guaranteeing that the FSA projects in the Delta would racially segregate people who, in their previous immiseration, had lived side by side.

The reasons for the postwar shift lay outside the plantation South, but people within the Delta had themselves been affected by the war. The Holocaust and U.S. competition with the Soviet Union in Africa brought legal segregation into ideological and political crisis. The mechanization of agriculture allayed planters' interest in unmitigated white supremacy. Nonetheless, virtually all whites remained committed to social segregation. With that system threatened by federal actions and, increasingly, by local blacks, white elites worked to create white racial solidarities. Elites in Greenville were more moderate in their commitment to white supremacy than in many other regions, but their actions, nevertheless, promoted white solidarity. The relatively large business class, along with a cosmopolitan planter class, chose to expand manufacturing and to improve education for both whites and blacks. The resulting industry, reassured by "right to work" laws that guaranteed an absence of unions, came from the North and, although respecting the existing caste system for employment, had no ideological or utilitarian commitment to it. Neither, apparently, did the white workers in the factories. When racial discrimination was outlawed in the 1960s, the company Vernon Hammond worked for dismantled the separate toilets and began to hire blacks into all job categories without protest. Despite the history of competition between blacks and whites over land and agricultural work, and intense struggles elsewhere, we learned of no similar workplace competition in the Greenville area.

Whites hardened racial lines not in the economic arena but in the schools and government. When the federal government, through the courts, enforced school desegregation in 1969, it split racial solidarities, particularly white racial solidarities, along class lines. Despite efforts by some white elites to remain in the public schools, most affluent whites immediately left the public schools for hastily created academies. The private schools divided along religious lines as well as on their commitment to racial segregation. Two remained virtually all white, one Christian, one secular. The racially integrated Catholic school attracted middle-class blacks and whites, both Catholic and non-Catholic. The public schools, drained of much of their "cultural capital," declined sharply in quality.

Federal interventions brought other dramatic shifts. The voting rights act of 1957 overturned 60 years of legal black disenfranchisement. Rural areas lost power in the 1964 "one man-one vote" decision of the U.S. Supreme Court that forced state legislatures to adjust congressional districts.

Equally dramatic were the civil rights bills of 1964 on public accommodations and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Blacks in the Delta, with their large majorities, moved inexorably to take over governmental power. Throughout the country, politicians now sought to obtain the black vote. Although some cracks are beginning to appear within black solidarity, the centuries-long legacy of subjugation to white supremacy remains a powerful force for racial unity.

As the northern-owned factories have left because of global competition, large numbers of white workers have left the region. Those that remain have found work in the “big-box” stores like Wal-Mart and Lowes, in medical offices and services, at the casinos, and in the interstices of the economy: in child care, small-engine repair, and other informal-sector jobs that they create through their own initiative. Some local industries remain, serving local needs, and some people have been able to translate skills used in the towboat industry into skilled trades that are still needed in the area. Most of these local employers do not distinguish between black and white workers, although kin networks and political patronage remain important in people’s ability to find work. The towboat industry, with its month-on, month-off work schedule, allowed for the maintenance of kin ties, with workers contributing labor to their extended families during periods at home and finding work for their kin. As that industry has declined, some people have found comparable work and comparable routines in long-distance trucking, heavy-equipment operation, and in the oil fields.

With the declining economy and the crackdown on black gangs in Chicago and other northern cities, many gang members have fled back to their southern kin. Greenville has become increasingly dangerous. Crack houses have developed in long racially integrated neighborhoods, and gang activities have moved into the schools. The Delta is now a transfer point for gunrunning and for narcotics that are shipped North. Working-class white families who have never known legal segregation, seek safe neighborhoods and schools for their children. They are moving into rural Washington County, where Riverside School remains the only predominantly white public school in the Delta—the legacy of segregated New Deal land redistribution.

Washington County elites now must find ways to ally with the blacks who hold political power. Their enduring disdain for poor whites has resurfaced as they view the Confederate flags flying in “Jurassic Park” as emblematic of the segregated order they must now repudiate.

Under the radar, however, race is once again shifting. On Sundays, cars carrying white residents of the area around Confederate Lane drive north on Highway 1 while cars carrying black residents of Greenville drive south, meeting at the United Pentecostal Church on the south edge of Greenville. There, in a congregation that is half white and half black, they meet in friendship and worship. They share conservative views on contemporary flash-point social issues involving

gender, sexuality, and family. Whether these relationships, established through faith, will develop other dimensions remains to be seen.

In this unsettled climate, calls for white racial solidarities may yet arise. Poor whites, cast adrift by the white elites but not embraced by the new political order, form an undefined pool of resentment, fear, and instability. The political system may fail them yet again and create another legacy of distrust and disorder.

## Epilogue

When we returned to the Delta in 2005, we drove by our research site to visit some of the people we had worked with in the summer of 2003. We noticed that the Confederate Lane sign was down. We learned that the residents of the road had approached their county supervisor, Mike Gordon, about having the road taken over by the county so that it would be blacktopped and mail deliveries could be made to their homes. According to Mike, this was the type of routine request that was rarely turned down. But Mike is white, and it was clear that the black majority on the county board did not look favorably on fixing Confederate Lane.

They changed its name to Wild Willow Road.

## Notes

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Motivation for and some ethnographic knowledge relevant to this project derive in part from our personal biographies. We were both part of the Mississippi civil rights movement. Gorton is a white Greenville native who joined the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the leading Mississippi civil rights organization, in 1963 while a student at Ole Miss. Adams was a 1964 Freedom Summer Volunteer who stayed through 1965. She worked both in the Jackson movement office of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) helping coordinate federal program information for civil rights projects in the state and in a variety of field locations.

1. A double-wide is a manufactured house that is built in two pieces so that it can be hauled down highways and roads. A single-wide manufactured house is a self-contained unit. Although modeled on trailers, manufactured homes have evolved into low-cost housing that has all of the amenities such as air conditioning and heating, bathrooms, and kitchens installed at the factory. Our double-wide, for instance, featured a whirlpool bath. We also were able to obtain high-speed Internet access at our rural location.

2. Sharecroppers were farmers who “shared” a portion of their crop with the planter who owned the land. Sharecroppers owned no draft stock or equipment. All the materials needed to put in the crop were furnished by the planter in exchange for half the crop. Share tenants owned varying amounts of stock and equipment; the share of the crop taken in payment by the landowner varied in relation to the amount of capital the renter brought to the contract.

3. A plantation is an estate devoted to monoculture, operated with wage or other labor. Cotton is a fibrous material that grows on a bushy plant in the form of bolls that also contain the seeds of the plant. Cotton was harvested by hand, the bolls placed in long “tow sacks.” It was then ginned to remove the seeds from the lint, baled, and sent to market. In the United States, mechanical cotton pickers replaced handwork in the era after World War II. The machines were interdesigned with custom-bred cotton plants to facilitate efficiency by ensuring uniform height, among other characteristics.

4. The nine core Delta counties are Bolivar, Coahoma, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tunica, and Washington. An additional eight counties are divided between hills and Delta: Carroll, Grenada, Holmes, Panola, Quitman, Tallahatchie, Warren, and Yazoo. The sharpest increases in white population occurred in Sunflower, Washington, Bolivar, Coahoma, Leflore, and Warren counties. The sharp rise appears, for most of these counties, with the 1900 census, accelerating in the decade between 1910 and 1920. White population remained relatively steady in the counties that straddle the Delta and the hills: Carroll, Panola, and Holmes (white population in Grenada County trended gradually higher throughout the period). White populations remained very small in Tunica, Sharkey, and Issaquena counties.

5. Black Codes were passed by southern state and municipal governments immediately after the Civil War. The laws denied many rights of citizenship to free blacks and were designed to control black labor, mobility, and employment. The laws outraged Republicans, who instituted military government in the former Confederate States.

6. Poor whites were occasionally referred to in terms that had a racial dimension (Kester 1997), and as Theodore W. Allen (1994; see also Roediger 1991) has shown with respect to the Irish, the bare fact of skin color conferred little protection from racialized attributions.

7. John Hartigan Jr. (1999) studied a region of Detroit’s inner city populated by blacks and whites, most of whom came from Appalachia, and found that black–white relations were qualitatively different from those of other neighborhoods and those portrayed in popular culture. He, like Kirby Moss (2003), who studied poor whites of more recent European ancestry in another northern city, used *class* in terms of economic status, not relations of production.

8. The social analysis undertaken here does not deal centrally with the issues of accumulation of surplus value that Gibson–Graham and colleagues deal with in their more sustained works. Their use of Althusser’s concept of “overdetermination” is most germane to this piece.

9. The flyer is in the private collection of Benjamin Nelken, Greenville, Mississippi. Nelken related that he rescued it from the attic of the family store, the Fair, where his grandfather had placed documents in the 1930s. He found several copies of the handbill. He believes this document was written in the late 1930s.

10. John Dollard recounted that, when he first arrived in Indianola in 1935, he was rumored to be a labor organizer (Dollard 1957:10, Ferris 1975).

11. J. Douglas Smith (2002) observes that, in Virginia, race-baiting politicians were able to deliver desired schools and services to white workers while still keeping taxes low for the more affluent by not providing services to black neighborhoods or schools. Although fueled by white racial antipathy to blacks, such programs could be

supported by whites who were not particularly antiblack but who sought to protect their own economic interests.

12. Patterson was a founder of the (white) Citizens’ Council and a strong segregationist.

13. We have conducted a partial survey of FSA projects in Mississippi, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana, examining plat books and deed records in county and parish courthouses. We have completed a survey of Washington County FSA projects, visiting the site of every former project and determining, through interviews with current residents, the racial composition of the projects.

14. More than \$1.4 billion of federal funds in the core Delta counties came as loans or loan guarantees for homes or businesses. About \$1.4 billion came in the form of mortgage insurance.

15. We have not been able to establish the date that the Greenville Catholic schools were integrated.

16. The ruling was *Green v. New Kent County School Board*, 391 U.S. 430, 20 L. ed. 2d716. It abolished freedom of choice, the plan favored by many southern school districts (Keady 1988:104).

17. Data on racial balance in the schools were obtained from telephone queries to the offices of the Catholic Archdiocese of Mississippi, 2003, the principal’s office of Washington School, 2003, and the Greenville Christian School office, 2004, as well as from data provided by the state superintendent of schools available through <http://www.greatschools.net/modperl/bycity/ms>.

18. People in Patterson’s hometown, Indianola, were pioneers in the private school movement, founding Indianola Academy in 1965, when the passage of the public accommodations and voting rights acts by the U.S. Congress demonstrated that legal segregation would no longer be tolerated by the federal government.

19. Hartigan 1999 and Moss 2003 document similar abandonment of poor whites in Detroit and an unnamed northern city, respectively.

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