

Deconstructing the Myth

Understanding what Antebellum Life was really like through a close study of
Ames Plantation in Fayette County, Tennessee, 1820-1860

Katie Yewell

2010 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies

Introduction

In the field of historical archaeology, the American South is of great interest. The past century has seen countless studies examining the “peculiar institution” of slavery in the Antebellum South. Until recently, focus has been mainly on reconstructing the social and economic lives of slaves and on illuminating their unique struggles and experiences. It has been argued by some, however, that “the current focus of African American archaeology on the lives of enslaved African Americans negates or obscures the real relations of slavery by omitting from the picture the actions of those individuals who held power over slaves and controlled the social and economic conditions of slavery.”¹ As such, many scholars have shifted their interest to the lives of slaveholders. Social characteristics, as well as political and agricultural practices are the most common topics of discourse.² All together, these subjects fit together to form a more complete and realistic picture of America’s past.

It is also important in understanding the history of the American South to look at ideologies and myths. Stereotypes and misguided preconceptions have played a large role in how antebellum life is depicted. Hollywood’s representation of plantation life as

¹ As quoted by Susan C. Andrews and James P. Fenton, “Archaeology and the Invisible Man: The Role of Slavery in the Production of Wealth and Social Class in the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky, 1820 to 1870,” *World Archaeology*, (Vol. 33, No. 1, 2001), 116.

² Jane Turner Censer, “Planters and the Southern Community,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (Vol. 94, No. 4, Oct. 1986), 387-408.

seen in *Gone With the Wind* reveals how only a few Americans lived before the Civil War. These romanticized depictions of lanes lined by Live Oaks and brick mansions framed by massive columns do little to foster our understanding of antebellum life. In reality, most southern farmers did not live on large plantations and did not own more than a few slaves at most.

In addition to our modern misconceptions, antebellum settlers and planters may have had misconceptions of their own. One of the major motivating factors for moving to the frontier was the promise of economic prosperity and success. For those who felt crowded out of the Planter Class in more established states, the west was a chance to start fresh with more opportunities for mobility and economic growth. For others who had already experienced success, moving to the west was a chance to build an empire. With experience from established plantation states such as the Carolinas and Virginia, settlers may have expected to emulate the pattern of prosperity and displays of wealth that these societies demonstrated. As such, the planter ideal was a model that pursued wealth, stability, and comfort. The ideal required that the planter amassed assets, status, and respect, and provided comfort, security, and longevity for his family.

Modern generalizations regarding the “planter ideal” and assumptions of southern gentility and honor mar the reality that explains planters’ behaviors and concerns. Overviews such as Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s *Southern Honor* and James Oakes’ *The Ruling Race* discuss the behaviors of whites and slaveholders in the Antebellum South. But even academics such as these cannot agree completely on the nature of southerners. Wyatt-Brown argues that white Southerners “adhered to a moral code that may be

summarized as the rule of honor.”³ This honor encompassed ideas of hierarchy and entitlement, with close ties to family and community. In contrast, Oakes states that, “the slaveholders of legend were men bound by tradition... they lived lives of stability and comfort.” But this legend, he continues, “distorts [the past] by presenting an idealized image of the plantation divorced from the mundane and oppressive realities of everyday life.”⁴ Clearly, these scholars are in disagreement. While these overviews help to form a broad understanding of the nature of southerners, they also confuse the matter by contradicting each other and by making generalizations that do not apply to all people or regions.

Local studies are important for their specific details of southern life in particular regions. Whereas Wyatt-Brown and Oakes generalize in order to fit the entire south into their theories, local studies recognize the distinctions that make one area unique from another. By focusing on just one area, scholars are able to explain in much more detail and accuracy the phenomena of that area.

The area this study focuses on is West Tennessee, and more specifically Fayette County. By looking at historical records and personal artifacts, it will describe the transition from frontier South to plantation South in terms of the individual residents of the area. In the end it will be apparent that antebellum life in western Tennessee was characterized by the adjustments its inhabitants made and hardships they faced. Populated by an evolving demographic in constant pursuit of the American dream,

³ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

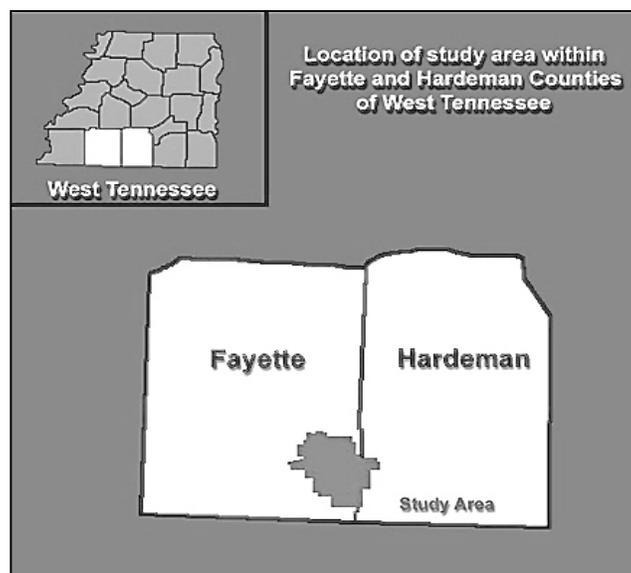
⁴ James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1998), 51.

Fayette County would see some succeed greatly while others were forced to move on. In the end, economic success was possible, but it did not signify that the planter ideal had been realized.

The Study Parameters

The study area, known as Ames Plantation, consists of approximately 19,000 acres located in Fayette and Hardeman Counties in southwest Tennessee (See Figure 1). To the northeast of LaGrange, Tennessee and the southeast of Somerville, Tennessee, the area was well placed between flourishing towns in the antebellum period. Its population of farmers and planters in the nineteenth century concentrated on growing short-staple cotton crops, as its fertile land was comparable to that of more southern regions. The property is now managed by the Trustees of the Hobart Ames Foundation and is presently used as a research and education center for the University of Tennessee.

FIGURE 1: Location of Study Area⁵



⁵ Map provided by Jamie P. Evans.

The Ames Plantation was chosen for several reasons. It has well-defined boundaries and its nineteenth century population was representative of that in other counties in West Tennessee. Furthermore, the area's primary sources and support structure for research is extensive. The timeline of the study will cover initial area settlement in the 1820s through 1860, just before the Civil War.

Primary sources for the study include Population Census, Slave Census, and Agricultural Census data, as well as some tax records. Land deeds and court records are also used, as well as personal letters and diaries. Family genealogies and histories were previously compiled and provided by Jamie Evans, the Cultural Resource Manager for the Ames Foundation.

Previous research on West Tennessee and specifically the area of the Ames Plantation is limited. Past studies have discussed master-slave relationships, land tenure, land value patterns, female landowners, public education, and the impact of the Civil War at Ames.⁶ This study will add to the understanding of the area by examining the social histories of the families who lived on the plantations.

Settling the Frontier

By the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783, North Carolina's boundaries had been extended west to the Mississippi River, to include the area that would one day be considered West Tennessee (See Figure 2). A year later the land was given over to the federal government, but not before legislative steps were taken to ensure that much of the

⁶ Ames Plantation, History and Genealogy, "Rhodes Institute Research Papers," <http://www.amesplantation.org/history/Rhodes%20Institute/default.asp>.

land was reserved for North Carolina citizens. In particular, land was reserved as payment for military service in the war in the form of military warrants.

In 1796 Congress established the state of Tennessee, but the state was not able to control its main asset, land, due to North Carolina’s previous actions. Furthermore, land in the area of West Tennessee still officially belonged to the Chickasaw Indians. After the War of 1812, a revived interest in westward expansion led the federal government to purchase the land from the Chickasaw. Andrew Jackson of Tennessee and Isaac Shelby of Kentucky were appointed commissioners to negotiate the treaty, which was finalized in 1818 with the United States paying \$300,000 to the Chickasaw for their land. With the Chickasaw Treaty of 1818, the frontier land was finally available for settlement.⁷

FIGURE 2: North Carolina’s Boundaries in 1783⁸



⁷ Jamie P. Evans, “Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee” (MS Thesis, University of Memphis, 2000), 23-36.

⁸ Map provided by Jamie P. Evans.

Fayette County Tennessee was established September 29, 1824. Its name was in honor of General Lafayette who, the following year, was the “nation’s guest.”⁹ The county seat was established in Somerville in 1824, and the town of LaGrange was founded just two years later.¹⁰

In it’s beginning, Fayette County would have been virtually untouched – the epitome of the “frontier.” Improvements had yet to be made, and roads were nonexistent. An 1888 interview of John R. Hendon describes his recollection that in 1826,

“The country had just been vacated by the Indians who kept it for hunting grounds and annually burned off the undergrowth... Game was abundant and deer, bears, wild turkeys were more common than partridges... There were no regular roads of any consequence, but merely paths blazed out through the forests and were called ‘knotched roads.’”¹¹

Another early settler, Helorih Garvin, recalls similarly, “the country was full of game. I have set in my door and seen many deer run by, have seen them in my fields, in the woods, and in fact they were plenty every-where. We had turkeys, wild cats, coons, and some bear.”¹²

In 1825, around the time of these descriptions, the population of Fayette County, Tennessee was scarcely 800. But in just five years it grew more than ten times, to

⁹ *Old Times in west Tennessee* (Memphis, TN: W. G. Cheeney, Printer and Publisher, 1873, Reprinted by the University of Michigan), 271.

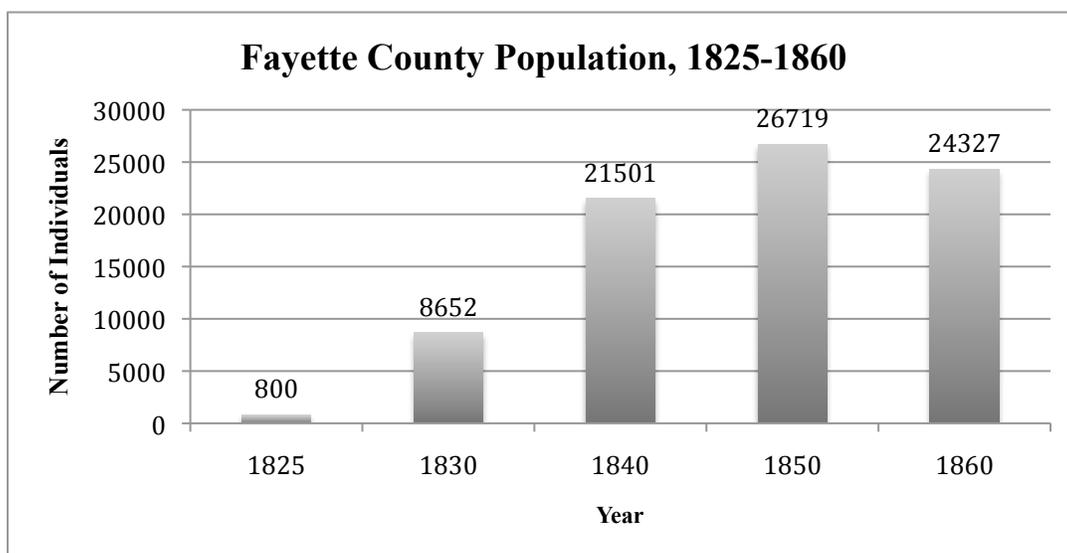
¹⁰ *The Goodspeed Histories of Fayette & Hardeman Counties of Tennessee* (Reprint of 1887 Original, Woodward & Stinson Printing Co., 1973), 797.

¹¹ Fayette County Historical Society, *The History of Fayette County, Tennessee* (Salem, WV: Walsworth Press, 1986), 252.

¹² *Ibid.*, 252.

8,652.¹³ Over the next ten years, the population would reach more than 21,000 (See Figure 3). The majority of settlers came from North Carolina and northern Alabama, with some also from Middle Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky.¹⁴ Considering North Carolina's involvement with land warrants early in the area's history, it is not surprising that those with claims to land moved into the region, thus ensuring the population was overwhelmingly from North Carolina.

FIGURE 3: Fayette County Population, 1825-1860¹⁵



People moving out to the wild frontier of West Tennessee from well-established states surely had to adjust their expectations. As a history of the region recalls, "Each of these [settlers] brought the peculiar characteristics of his particular neighborhood."¹⁶ These "particular neighborhoods" were those of traditionally plantation-bred states such

¹³ *The Goodspeed Histories of Fayette & Hardeman Counties of Tennessee*, 799.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 807.

¹⁵ Adapted from Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee" (MS Thesis, University of Memphis, 2000), 82.

¹⁶ *The Goodspeed Histories of Fayette & Hardeman Counties of Tennessee*, 807.

as North Carolina and Virginia, which had been settled nearly two centuries earlier. As such, Fayette County's early settlers had certain expectations and were accustomed to fairly high standards of living. When they reached the frontier, they were faced with new problems to overcome.

One of the most fundamental obstacles was the lack of any type of support structure. Modern society takes simple things such as transportation, medical care, and available commercial goods for granted, and the early settlers probably did to some extent as well. When settlers first arrived, there were no institutions such as these in place. The living standard, in the beginning, was far below what they experienced in established states. Only after years of hard work were they able to re-claim, to an extent, their previous level of comfort.

Some, anticipating the difficulties of moving to a new area, traveled in groups. As such, there is evidence that many settlers were friends or relatives of others before their arrival. These associations surely made the transition easier. In this way, they formed a support structure of their own.

Building a Community

When settlers arrived in Fayette County, there was no established government or judicial system. There were hardly any roads and most of the land was unimproved. It was the initiative of settlers that allowed the institutions of the community to develop.

On the first Monday of December in 1824, the new county "was formally organized at the house of Robert G. Thornton, on the North Fork of the Wolf River,

twelve miles southeast from Somerville, and seven miles northwest from LaGrange.”¹⁷

This meeting represents the first effort to organize the community of new settlers. At this “legislative” meeting, commissioners were appointed to lay off the new county and to locate a permanent seat of justice. The fact that the meeting took place at a private residence demonstrates the lack of public venues.

Later, in February of 1825, the commissioners returned to Mr. Thornton’s and reported to the county court, which was in session at his house, that they had located the county site on the land of two individuals, George Bowers and James Brown. These two men then donated a tract of about 25 acres each to the county. New commissioners were appointed to divide the county’s land into town lots to be sold at public auction. This town would become Somerville. In September 1825, the town lots were sold and the proceeds went to erecting a temporary log courthouse, jail, and “other necessary public buildings.” The temporary courthouse was completed in November 1825, and in 1833 a permanent brick courthouse was built.¹⁸ In a history of the county, the first courthouse is described as “an old log hut with no floor in it. Stobs were driven into the earth upon which rude benches were fastened.”¹⁹ Even this public structure, the symbol of law and order, was crudely fashioned in the beginning.

Clearly, the process of forming a town and local government took many years. The individual involvement in each step was tremendous and reveals the contributions

¹⁷ *The Goodspeed Histories of Fayette & Hardeman Counties of Tennessee*, 798.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 798.

¹⁹ Fayette County Historical Society, *The History of Fayette County, Tennessee* (Salem, WV: Walsworth Press, 1986), 246.

necessary in forming new institutions. This community participation would characterize Fayette County's population in other aspects as well.

In 1824, the first public road in Fayette County was cut out under the direction of four residents. "It began at the Hardeman County line near Thomas Head's ferry, through the county to the Shelby County line. The second began at the Hardeman line and passed through Somerville, the nearest and best route to the Shelby County line."²⁰ Seven residents surveyed this second road. Fayette County Court records demonstrate how the process of surveying and building roads worked. In 1840, an entry states: "Wm. BAW, Leander CULLON, Beverly S. HOLCOMB, Galatin BARRETT, David JERNIGAN, John N. PULLIAM, Wm. A GALIT appted jury to view, examine and mark road commencing near JERNIGAN Rd. and southwards toward LaGrange."²¹ These men were responsible for deciding how the road should be directed, then they had to report back to the court. Later, men would be appointed to construct the road and be responsible for its upkeep. An example is seen in later court records, which state: "Ordered by the court that all the hands on the plantation of Alexander McNEAL shall work on that part of the road leading from Boliver to Moscow to Memphis..."²² As this order demonstrates, the planter would not necessarily work on the road himself, but would be responsible for directing his slaves to do so. Going from blazed forest paths to a decent road system took organization from the court and the cooperation of the residents in Fayette County.

²⁰ *The Goodspeed Histories of Fayette & Hardeman Counties of Tennessee*, 809.

²¹ Fayette County Court Records (1840-1844), 6. Provided by Jamie P. Evans.

²² *Ibid.*, 18.

Transition to Plantation Tradition

As Jamie P. Evans discusses in his thesis concerning land tenure in Fayette County, the pattern of ownership changed following the Fayette County's first years. Factors influencing the transfer of property ownership included population fluctuation, success or failure of economic endeavors, death, and changes in agricultural practices.²³ All of these considerations could result in expansion or reduction of individual land holdings. The change in landholding sizes reflects a change in Fayette County's population.

Mr. Evans' thesis discovers a pattern in which the number of landowners on Ames is inversely proportional to the average parcel size.²⁴ This pattern makes sense because in an area with distinct boundaries, there is a limited and finite amount of land. With fewer landowners, there is more land available to each landowner. Conversely, with more landowners, there is less available land for each landowner.

By studying this pattern, it becomes evident that a shifting demographic emerges in Fayette County. In the 1830s, the average parcel size decreased, reflecting the influx of settlers. The 1840s show a leveling out of the parcel size, when the population was somewhat stable. Then from 1850 to 1860, there is a dramatic increase in the average parcel size, which demonstrates the phenomenon of land consolidation (See Figure 4).²⁵

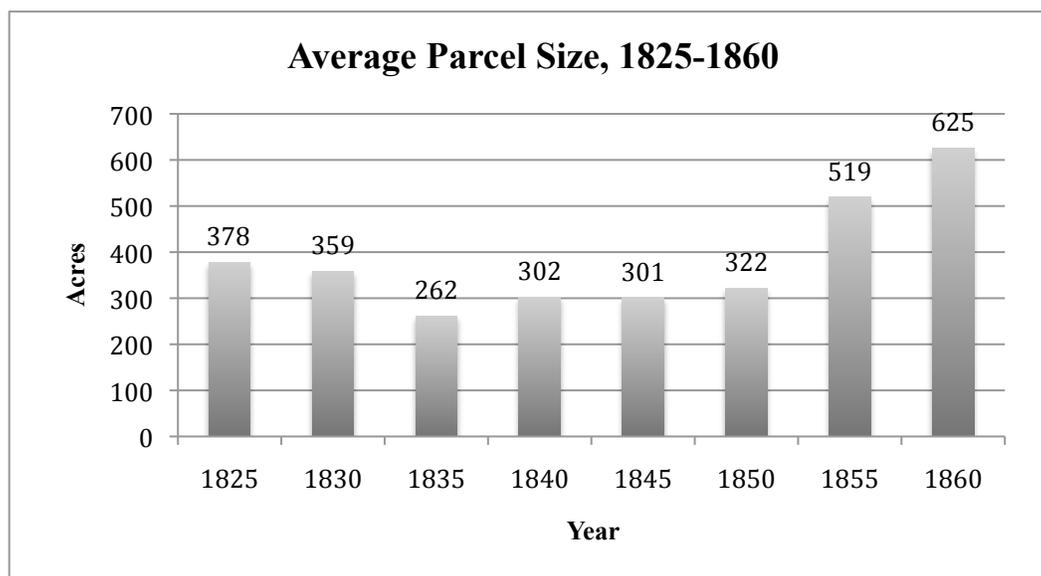
²³ Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee" (MS Thesis, University of Memphis, 2000), 45.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

This is significant because large landholdings demonstrate the economic power of individuals who had begun to form plantations.

FIGURE 4: Average Parcel Size in the Study Area, 1825-1860²⁶



The plantation tradition would shape society in Fayette County by giving it a few distinct members to which others looked up. In times of economic distress, it was often these few planters who came to the rescue of smaller farmers. The financial prosperity of planters in the region brought profit to others in different industries as well.

Economic Contexts

It is important, before examining individual families, to have a concept of the economic contexts of the area. At this point in America's history, a measure of success

²⁶ Adapted from Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee" (MS Thesis, University of Memphis, 2000), 64.

was the number of slaves one owned, the amount of land held, and the amount of cotton produced.²⁷ Compared to the rest of the Antebellum South, farmers and planters in West Tennessee, and in the study area specifically, were more prosperous.

According to a history of American slavery and slaveholders, “in 1860, only 2.7 percent of Southern slaveholders owned 50 or more slaves... Very large plantations were a rarity: a mere 0.1 percent of slave owners held estates of 200 or more slaves.”²⁸

According to this same source, the median holdings of slaves for Tennessee was 15.2 in 1850 and 15.1 in 1860.

The Planter Class is commonly defined as those who owned more than 20 slaves. In 1860, this constituted around 3.5 percent of the heads of households in the American South.²⁹ In the study area, 23.1 percent of the heads of households were a part of this class. Big planters are considered those with more than fifty slaves, and in 1860 these made up one percent of the heads of households.³⁰ In the study area, 6.15 percent of the heads of households held more than fifty slaves in 1860. These figures demonstrate the extent to which this specific area of West Tennessee was particularly prosperous in comparison to the rest of the South.

²⁷ Jamie P. Evans, “Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee” (MS Thesis, University of Memphis, 2000), 93.

²⁸ Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery* (NY: Hill and Wang, 2003), 101.

²⁹ Nathalie Dessens, *Myths of the Plantation Society: Slavery in the American South and the West Indies* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 39.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 39. The difference in these figures from those in the paragraph above represent a difference in defining slaveholders versus heads of households who owned slaves.

TABLE 1: Distribution of Slaveholdings in the Study Area³¹

| Number of Slaves | 1850 - % of households | 1860 - % of households |
|------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| 0 | 29.23 | 47.69 |
| 1-2 | 10.77 | 0.00 |
| 3-5 | 6.15 | 1.54 |
| 6-10 | 10.77 | 13.85 |
| 11-20 | 15.38 | 13.85 |
| 21-50 | 18.46 | 16.92 |
| 51 or more | 9.23 | 6.15 |

In addition to large slaveholdings, cotton production in the area lent itself to large landholdings. As seen below in Table 2, landholdings in the study area increased in size between 1850 and 1860. Again, this demonstrates the economic prosperity of certain landowners.

TABLE 2: Distribution of Landholdings in the Study Area³²

| Acres | 1850 - % of Households | 1860 - % of Households |
|---------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| 0 | 0.00 | 4.55 |
| 1-49 | 9.52 | 11.36 |
| 50-99 | 4.76 | 0.00 |
| 100-199 | 19.05 | 15.91 |
| 200-299 | 9.52 | 9.09 |
| 300-399 | 4.76 | 4.55 |
| 400-499 | 9.52 | 15.91 |
| 500-599 | 42.86 | 22.73 |
| 1,000-1,999 | 0.00 | 6.82 |
| 2,000 or more | 0.00 | 9.09 |

Pursuing the Dream

As discussed earlier, families moving into the study area may have had their own misconceptions about what life would be like. The frontier promised a chance at the

³¹ Data taken from a representative sample of the Study Area, Fayette County and Hardeman County Slave Census, 1850 and 1860.

³² Data taken from a representative sample of the Study Area, Fayette County and Hardeman County Agricultural Census, 1850 and 1860.

American Dream, but was it ever realized? The planter ideal for which residents strove was the epitome of the American Dream. It required not only economic success, however, but also demanded respect from others in the community. Along with these, security and comfort for the family were expected.

A distinction between the frontier lifestyle and previous lifestyle experienced by settlers from more established areas such as Virginia and the Carolinas was the standard of living attainable. This had an effect on the extent to which they could realize the conditions of the planter ideal. The sheer lack of available resources certainly suppressed their aptitude.

In the beginning, families literally had to build their own houses from the raw materials available. Log cabins constituted the majority of dwellings in the study area, until eventually the wealthier inhabitants were able to construct more elaborate manor houses. If someone wanted a house constructed of brick rather than wood, they first had to make bricks. Stores were not readily available for purchasing luxury goods unless someone took the initiative to open such a store. The lack of transportation inhibited such early ventures. Essentially, settlers were on their own until the area became more established.

Clearly, many residents in the study area were able to achieve economic prosperity over time. Through hard work, some overcame the obstacles of the frontier and built an empire for themselves. For others, the possibility of failure was always on the horizon.

Despite possible success economically, many families experienced hardships and heartbreak with the death of loved ones such as wives and children. Untimely death of

patriarchs was also an obstruction to economic success for others. This was often caused by lack of medical care and the poor medical knowledge of the time. Additionally, poor diets for most of the population entailed more health problems. As one scholar notes, “seasonal variations and the prevailing ignorance of elementary principles of nutrition produced a diet that by today’s standards lacked balance and was at times deficient in basic vitamins; the nutritional composition of food given to young children was especially inadequate and contributed to a high rate of infant mortality.”³³ The mortality rate, in the end, was one of the most significant obstacles in achieving the planter ideal.

Case Studies

Realizing the unique histories of individual families deepens our understanding of the region. In exploring stories of success and failure, triumph and loss, joy and heartache, it is possible to relate the experiences of the past closer to the reality in which they were felt. This association lends itself to authenticity and accuracy that is immune to popular myth.

While a lot of information is available for some families, for others very little is known. The extent to which data is obtainable relies, to some extent, on the length of time a family was present in the area. While the trend associated with western migration involves a quick influx of population, it also entails the logical consequence that not all who come, stay. Many families who entered the study area stayed for only a short time until they migrated further west. As such, little may be known about their tenure, especially if they show up very seldom in records and census data. These cases have

³³ Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery* (NY: Hill and Wang, 2003), 113.

been chosen to demonstrate the variety of Ames Plantations' inhabitants as well as the diversity of their experiences.

Robert W. Cotton

The Cotton family was one of the first in the study area, and became one of the most prominent in Fayette County in the nineteenth century. Their involvement in the area's early progress, as well as the local government and businesses, give insight into how early settlers were integral parts of their newly formed community.

Around 1823, Robert W. Cotton moved to Fayette County from North Carolina. Fayette County had not even been established when he arrived, and he was instrumental in its early developments. His second year in the area, he served Fayette County as a juror and also assisted in the formation of some of the earliest roads. The following year he was appointed commissioner of Fayette County and Somerville.³⁴ Clearly, Cotton's involvement played a large role in the area's initial development. His activity in local government did not stop there – Cotton was also one of the seven original property owners in LaGrange, founded in 1826. Further, in 1835 he was named a commissioner for the LaGrange and Memphis Railroad Company. This business was surely essential to the area's economic growth as it aided in the transportation of cotton crops.

The Cottons resided on Willow Glen Plantation, which they established after their first land purchase in 1826. The Cotton's built a manor house on this property sometime

³⁴ Ames Plantation, History and Genealogy, "Cotton Family History," <http://www.amesplantation.org/history/family-histories/cotton%20%family%20history.asp>.

during their tenure, and it remains intact presently. A 1974 self-published work entitled “Nineteenth Century Homes of Fayette County” describes the house. It is

“built of simple colonial plantation type lines—a large hall in the center both upstairs and down, with two rooms on each side of the hall measuring approximately eighteen feet square with twelve foot ceilings. Each room originally had four windows with extended mantel and fireplace. At one time a long, low brick house extended out at the rear and contained the cook’s house, kitchen, and smokehouse.”³⁵

This description gives insight into the type of manor house that a family in the planter class could build. It is important to remember, however, that the Cottons were one of the wealthier families in the area, so their economic abilities were not representative of the entire population in Fayette County.

By 1836, the Cottons had expanded their landholdings to 1,324 acres. Furthermore, they now owned 41 slaves, with a value of \$27,800.³⁶ This placed them as one of the most prosperous families not only in the study area, but also in the entire region. Unfortunately, their prosperity would not last. Robert Cotton died on November 12, 1836, leaving behind his wife, five sons, and two daughters.³⁷ It is estimated that Robert Cotton was only between 37 years and 47 years old. His will was made on September 13, just two months before his death, so he may have been experiencing poor

³⁵ Dorothy Rich Morton, “Nineteenth Century Homes of Fayette County,” (Fayette County Library, Somerville, TN, 1974), 58.

³⁶ Fayette County Tax List, 1836.

³⁷ Ames Plantation, History and Genealogy, “Cotton Family History,” <http://www.amesplantation.org/history/family-histories/cotton%20%family%20history.asp>.

health or illness. Robert's wife and son, Leonidas Cotton, were left to run the plantation after his death.

This turn of events demonstrates the uncertainty of life at the time. Robert was a prominent member of the community and active in the initial improvements of Fayette County. In his thirteen years there, he managed to build up a successful plantation and construct an impressive manor house. For all of these accomplishments, he could not escape an early death. Thus Robert Cotton could not guarantee security for his family. In the end, he was unable to reach the American Dream.

John W. Jones

John W. Jones would become one of the most successful planters in Fayette County. His long tenure in the county as well as his involvement in the community make him one of the most influential inhabitants, and one of the most interesting to study.

Jones' story begins with his father-in-law, Micajah Clark Moorman. In the early nineteenth century, Moorman moved his family from Virginia to Alabama. Around the same time, Jones' own father sold his plantation in Virginia and moved to Alabama as well.³⁸ Sometime before the move to West Tennessee, John W. Jones would marry Micajah Moorman's daughter, Martha. Moorman became unsatisfied with his location in northern Alabama, and decided to purchase land in Tennessee, which promised fertile soil and affordable land. In 1824 he purchased 1,971 acres in the recently opened Fayette

³⁸ Cailin E. Meyer, "Land Value Patterns in Ames Plantation, Fayette County, Tennessee: 1825-1860" (2009 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies), 21.

County.³⁹ He spent time on this land beginning to improve it and building a house for his family. But before Moorman could finish preparing for the move he passed away, leaving his son-in-law as the head of the household.

In 1826, Jones moved his wife, their infant son, Moorman's widow, and several of her minor children to the property in Fayette County. Additionally Elisha W. Harris, Jones' brother-in-law and the husband of Moorman's eldest daughter, made the trip. Jones and Harris claimed a majority of the land, and the rest of the estate was distributed to Moorman's heirs in 1831.⁴⁰ In the end, however, Jones managed to obtain all of Moorman's original tract, with the exception of Harris' 511 acres, bringing his total landholdings to 1,480 acres.⁴¹

In the years to come, Jones would continue to increase his land holdings while also acquiring a large number of slaves. By 1860 the Census lists Jones as the owner of 2000 improved acres and 1500 unimproved acres in Fayette County, valued at \$52,000. On that land, his 182 slaves produced 800 ginned cotton bales of 400 pounds each.⁴² These outstanding figures placed Jones not only at the top of the economic ladder in Fayette County, but also in the entire Antebellum South.

Even with all his wealth, Jones was not immune to the harsh realities of life. The Jones family cemetery is an enduring witness to the tragedies his family faced (See

³⁹ Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 97-98.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴² "U.S. Census Manuscripts, Slave Population 1860," Eighth Census, Fayette and Hardeman Co. TN.

Figure 5). Jones buried his first wife and ten of his children in this cemetery while he was alive. Of the thirteen children he had, only three lived past the age of ten.⁴³

Jones was the epitome of economic success. His tenure as a planter was filled with everything the planter ideal demanded of him – wealth, status, respect – with the exception of security, health, and longevity. The realities of life in West Tennessee prevented Jones from emulating the perfect plantation life for his family.

FIGURE 5: The Jones Family Cemetery⁴⁴



⁴³ Ames Plantation, History and Genealogy, “John Walker Jones Family Cemetery, Gravestones and Inscriptions,” <http://www.amesplantation.org/history/cemeteries/john%20w%20jones%20family%20cemetery/john%20w%20jones.asp>.

⁴⁴ Located on present-day Ames Plantation. Photograph by author.

Elisha W. Harris

Elisha W. Harris was the brother-in-law of John W. Jones. He also profited from the inheritance of his wife after Micajah Moorman's death, and moved to the study area around the same time. Given the same opportunities as Jones, he would not be able to reach Jones' level of success. As such, his story serves as a mirrored counterpart to that of Jones'.

Born in North Carolina around the turn of the century, Elisha W. Harris married Micajah Moorman's eldest daughter, Ann Eliza. The couple had their first child, Whitson, in 1824 while still in North Carolina.⁴⁵ As stated earlier, Micajah Moorman was living in Alabama at this time and acquired land in the study area where he planned to move. With Moorman's death in 1826, these plans were cut short. Elisha W. Harris was one of the family members to move to Moorman's land in West Tennessee. Harris claimed 511 acres of the inheritance, while Jones acquired the rest.

Elisha and Ann Eliza worked to establish themselves on their new land. In the first few years after moving, they had their second child, Camelia. In March of 1828, Elisha Harris' luck ran out. His wife died, leaving him to care for their two young children.⁴⁶ This event would be difficult for Harris to overcome, and it affected his future prospects. In 1831 Harris remarried. He and his new wife lost three children and had three more survive in that decade. In 1844, however, Harris again was affected by the

⁴⁵ Genealogical information provided by Jamie P. Evans.

⁴⁶ Genealogical information provided by Jamie P. Evans.

untimely death of a wife. Two years later he would remarry again, but the couple had no additional children.⁴⁷

Elisha's poor luck distinguished him from his brother-in-law Jones. When they both first settled in the area, they had the same prospects for success. Both came from planter backgrounds in the well-established east and both profited from their wives' inheritances. Both received large tracts of fertile land which already had some improvements made by Micajah. These two men entered the study area with far more than most. But the effect of losing two young wives on Elisha was that he would not be able to succeed as Jones did. For him, life on the frontier would never compare to the planter ideal.

Beverly Holcombe

While many families were able to prosper at Ames, there are also those who failed. As mentioned earlier, some settlers in the area were compelled to leave the area in search of a fresh start. The story of the Holcombes demonstrates how poor business decisions and a high threshold of risk could leave a family with nothing but a hope for success elsewhere.

Beverly Holcombe was originally from Amelia County, Virginia. He was born in 1806 and arrived to Fayette County in 1829, when he then purchased 900 acres of land. Holcombe came from a wealthy background, and was able to develop his plantation, known as Woodstock, into one of the area's finest.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Genealogical information provided by Jamie P. Evans.

⁴⁸ Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 102-103.

Beverly Holcombe married Eugenia Hunt, the daughter of John Hunt, in 1829. John Hunt was a prominent and wealth figure in LaGrange, and the economic equal of John W. Jones. This marriage was certainly beneficial for Beverly, as his father-in-law even built the couple a manor home in LaGrange, which they called Westover.

The diary of Eugenia Dorothea Hunt Holcombe has been published by her descendants. The diary entries demonstrate Eugenia's concern for the health of her children, as many become ill. Her grief is recorded at the loss of a child in 1839.⁴⁹ Later, she talks about losing several of her servants to cholera.⁵⁰ Clearly the issue of health on the frontier had an effect on her existence.

In 1842, Eugenia writes, "Since writing the last page great have been my worldly afflictions, riches have taken to themselves wings and flown away... My home is changed and all is gone."⁵¹ This was the year when her husband Beverly Holcombe unfortunately made a poor business decision. He used his plantation as collateral while cosigning a large note for a friend. When the loan failed, Holcombe was held responsible for the amount and eventually had to sell his land to John W. Jones.⁵²

Beverly then, over the course of several years, eventually moved his family to Texas where they made a fresh beginning. Despite their initial prosperity and background of wealth, the Holcombes could not hold on to their plantation in Fayette County. The story of the Holcombe family is an example of economic failure, as in

⁴⁹ Jack Thorndyke Green, *Leaves from a Family Album* (Waco, TX: Library Binding Company, 1975), 16.

⁵⁰ *Leaves from a Family Album*, 25.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

⁵² Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 103.

Fayette County they were unable to follow the pattern of success laid out for them by their forbearers.

Jesse Humphrey

Previous stories demonstrate the head starts many settlers had before they entered the study area. With family connections and economic security, starting a new life on the frontier was not as difficult for them as for those who came with more meager means.

Jesse Humphrey moved from North Carolina to Fayette County in the early 1830s. His family included his wife Jeannette King, son Elsey, and five younger daughters.⁵³ The family struggled in their first few years, as they lacked the initial economic support that families such as the Jones' took for granted. In 1844 Elsey married and began a family of his own. At that time, he owned only ten acres while his father owned around 160. By the end of 1846, however, their total combined land holdings reached 498 acres.⁵⁴ And in 1860, the Census shows that the Humphrey family owned 946 acres, which produced 100 bales of cotton.⁵⁵

Jesse and Elsey Humphrey are a prime example of the kind of father-son partnerships that occurred in the area. By combining resources, each increased his chance of success. Furthermore, the Humphreys represent a class who arrived in Fayette County with meager socioeconomic backing, but who was also able to increase their status and advance to the middle class. For them, the American Dream was about economic mobility, and they were able to capture this as a reality.

⁵³ Jamie P. Evans, "Patterns and Processes of Antebellum Land Tenure Change on Selected Portions of Fayette and Hardeman Counties of Tennessee," 91.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

David Ellis Putney, William C. Harris, and William P. Ingram

The Putney, Harris, and Ingram families are an example of families that were friends or relatives before their arrival from North Carolina. It was not uncommon for groups to move to the frontier together, as it promised to be an easier transition. When they arrived in Fayette County, their interactions were so interwoven that it makes best sense to tell their story all together.

David Ellis Putney, along with the group of relatives and friends, came to Fayette County from North Hampton County, North Carolina in the mid 1820s. David's sister Caroline was married to William P. Ingram. In 1831, David married Elizabeth R. Harris, the sister of William C. Harris.⁵⁶ Each of the heads of households purchased land in their first few years that was close to the others. The land they purchased had never been occupied, and so they had to clear the land and prepare it for crops. This work was very demanding, even with the help of a few slaves.

In 1837, William P. Ingram died, leaving his wife Caroline Putney Ingram and three children. Shortly after, Caroline remarried but then died as well. Her brother David Putney became guardian of the Ingram's children in 1842. In 1845 William C. Harris died. His widow, Charlotte remained on the farm with their four children. It is likely that her brother-in-law David Putney aided this family as well. On August 20, 1847, David Putney also died, leaving his pregnant wife and six other children.⁵⁷ David's will was written less than two months before his death, suggesting that he was in poor health and

⁵⁶ Genealogical information provided by Jamie P. Evans.

⁵⁷ Genealogical information provided by Jamie P. Evans.

expected his fate. By 1850, three years after her husband's death, Elizabeth Harris Putney had also died.⁵⁸

The thirteen-year period between 1837 and 1850 was not kind to the Putney, Harris, and Ingram families. In that span, five of the six parental figures died, leaving the eldest children to care for their younger siblings. The remaining widow, Charlotte Harris, continued to run the Harris farm in her husband's absence. Her endeavors appear successful, as the 1850 Agriculture Census shows that her farm produced fifty-three bales of cotton and that she was the owner of eighteen slaves.⁵⁹

These three related families demonstrate, again, the hardships that life on the frontier offered. When they first arrived in Fayette County from North Carolina, they dreamt of building successful plantations and accumulating wealth that the new land promised. They expected this opportunity would allow them to emulate the success of established plantations back in North Carolina. But instead, they would never witness the fruit of their hard work, and they all died before their hopes would be realized.

Conclusion

This study has shown, through historical and personal description, the social and economic background of the area in Fayette and Hardeman Counties during the antebellum years. In doing so, it has shown how our modern misconceptions of life in the Antebellum South do not depict reality. Simply put, life in the early years of

⁵⁸ Genealogical information provided by Jamie P. Evans.

⁵⁹ "U.S. Census Manuscripts, Slave Population 1850," Seventh Census, Fayette and Hardeman Co. TN and "U.S. Census Manuscripts, Agriculture 1850," Seventh Census, Fayette and Hardeman Co. TN.

settlement was not easy by any means. It took years of hard work and initiative from individuals to make improvements and build up the community.

In addition, life in West Tennessee did not live up to the contemporaneous expectations of settlers either. Families who wanted to find opportunities for social and economic mobility certainly could succeed, but the possibility of failure was always on the horizon. For others who wanted to emulate life in the east, they would fail to do so. The model of a planter ideal had requirements that the western planter could not achieve. Many families experienced unimaginable hardships, especially with the untimely deaths of family members. In the end, the mortality rate was one of the most significant obstacles to achieving the ideal, and to emulating their previous lifestyle.

In conclusion, antebellum life in western Tennessee was characterized by the adjustments its inhabitants made and hardships they faced. In pursuit of the American dream of prosperity, Fayette County's inhabitants would work hard to improve their lives. In the end, economic success was possible, but the planter ideal could not be realized due to the harsh realities of life in the west.