Bondage on the Border: Slaves and Slaveholders in Tazewell County, Virginia

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Bondage on the Border:
Slaves and Slaveholders in Tazewell County, Virginia

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Tazewell County is located in the Appalachian Mountains of Southwest Virginia. Although slavery is almost absent from the county's accepted historical record, slavery was present and influential in antebellum Tazewell County. The white citizens in Tazewell County participated in the slave trade with the larger South. Slaves labored at many different types of work, both skilled and unskilled in Tazewell County, but they were only part of the labor force, not the majority. Slavery was never the central productive force in the county's economy. However, even though slavery was not central to the economy of Tazewell County, it had a large impact of the county's development. The majority of county government leaders were slaveholders, as were their state representatives. Slaveholders held the county's political and social power. The white citizens, even those who did not own slaves, accepted slavery as a positive good. They continually elected slaveholders as their leaders, and they sided with the Confederacy during the Civil War. This distribution of power and this attitude that viewed slavery as a positive good, without the economic centrality of slavery, demonstrates the weaknesses in the binary historians have created between slave societies and societies with slaves. Historians who use this binary insist that all slave societies must have slave labor at the base of the region's economic productive process. However, the case of Tazewell County shows that a region can still have all the other characteristics of a slave society without the centrality of slavery to its economy.
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Historic Crab Orchard Museum in Tazewell County, Virginia, lies nestled among the Appalachian Mountains of Southwestern Virginia. Claiming to be the region’s most comprehensive cultural history museum, it displays many curious treasures such as furnished nineteenth-century cabins, period farming tools, horse-drawn buggies, a ring carved out of a Confederate soldier’s knee cap, and even a Confederate flag that once, in another life, was a silk wedding dress. The county’s white majority is well represented in the museum’s discourse on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century life. White settlers are praised for their independence, bravery, and love of liberty. The Amerindians are also recognized and admired for their self-reliance and freedom. However, white and red were not the only colors in the mountains, and freedom was not residents’ only condition. The museum notes in passing that the first settlers brought enslaved Africans with them; however, the slaves’ stories end there. Their history in this part of Appalachia is almost forgotten. Only a few pieces of their material life remain: a chair, a quilt, a home-made pen. Even those bits of history go un-noticed in the museum, lost amid all the white history presented. A homemade pen in particular captures the plight of the historical slave narrative in Southwest Virginia; the pen survived but not the records it might have created.1 The history of slavery in Tazewell County, Virginia, has been almost

1 Roy Rector, in discussion with author, 2009. Roy Rector found this pen in the 1930s, as a teenager. He was nosing around in a small old house in Southwest Virginia that had once been the home of slaves. Noticing a loose brick in the chimney, he worked it out to discover an old cloth pouch behind
forgotten. Most slave men and women were illiterate. Those who were literate were not at liberty to record and save their stories. Their stories must be pieced together through official records, white accounts, the little bits of the material culture they left behind, and the oral traditions of freed slaves and their descendents. Just like the pen, these slaves’ voices have lain dormant and hidden for many years. It is time to let their experiences and struggles be told. It is time to put the slave pen to paper.

When we finally do put the slave pen to paper, it reveals a significant and growing slave population in Tazewell County, Virginia, throughout the nineteenth century. Slavery in the county was typical of Appalachian slavery in some ways, and not in others. Not only does the case of Tazewell County complicate commonly held assumptions about Appalachian slavery, but it also complicates the binary division of the U.S. into slave societies and societies with slaves. Tazewell County was not only on the border of the North and the South, it sat in between what historians categorize as slave societies and societies with slaves.

In the 1990s, Ira Berlin divided American societies that included slavery into slave societies and societies with slaves. Only in slave societies, he argued, was the

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2 Ira Berlin applied the concept of slave societies and societies with slaves to America. In 1996, Berlin wrote “From Creol to African: Atlantic Creols and the Origins of African American Society in Mainland North America,” for the William and Mary Quarterly (3rd series, vol. liii, no. 2, April 1996). In that article, he proposed that slave societies were “societies in which the order of the plantation shaped every relationship.” In 1998, he published Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). In this book, he more clearly presents his case for the division between slave societies and societies with slaves. There, he states
economy based primarily on slavery. In such an economy and society, he says, slaveholders composed the majority of the ruling class, and slaveholding was represented as the pinnacle of the social ladder. Only in slave societies was the master-slave relationship “presumed to be the social exemplar.” As slaves came to be viewed more as commodities than as people in slave societies, it became harder for them to gain their freedom. In societies with slaves, in contrast, slavery was just one form of labor among many. In those regions, the line between slave and free was fluid, and slaveholders were merely one portion of the elite, not the ruling class as in slave societies. In Tazewell County, those border lines were blurred.

Tazewell County, Virginia, rests on the mountain spine that separates West Virginia from Virginia. The natural beauty of the Appalachian Mountains dominates the landscape. Several small towns and many farms dot the mountains and hills. Current citizens of Tazewell County are proud of their pioneer and Confederate heritage. Their long memories include wilderness, Amerindians, log cabins, heroes in grey, and the black gold of coal. The history of the Civil War is foremost in the county’s public memory. Outside of the county courthouse, a tall statue of a Confederate soldier stands, defiantly facing north, reminding everyone who walks down Main Street that the “cause” might be lost, but it is not dead. However, most Tazewell County residents do not remember why the war was fought. Local memory

that slave societies are distinguished from societies with slaves by the economic centeredness of the institution of slavery. Berlin was influenced by the works Ancient History scholars, Keith Hopkins and Moses I. Finley who used the binary of slave societies and societies with slaves with Rome and the ancient World. For more on this, see Keith Hopkins, Conquerors and Slaves: Sociological Studies in Roman History, 2 vols. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978) and Moses I. Finley, Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology (New York: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1998).

3 Berlin, Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America, 8.
says that states’ rights were the reason that Tazewell County sided with the Confederacy in this border community, and that slavery was not an issue for Tazewell County residents. The common understanding is that slave ownership was almost nonexistent in the county. Yet there were slaves in Tazewell County, and more than just a few. Just as the mountains dominate the landscape of Tazewell County, slaveholders dominated the society and politics in Tazewell County. Also, almost every county official was a slaveholder. Slaves were present, and that presence influenced the economy, politics, and society. Still, most people have forgotten that slavery ever tainted the purity of these hills. Only a few descendents of slaves remembered and recorded their families’ stories to try to keep their memory alive.

Two related families – the Warrens and the Holleys—who had similar, yet distinctly different, histories made an effort to record their families’ experiences. Hoyt George Warren recorded his family’s history in 1910. He wrote down his parents’ stories and what he could remember from his own childhood. He was born the child of a slave father and free black mother. Minnie C. Holley also recorded her family’s history. In 1977, she published a collection of the stories her father told her of the slave days. Her father, Leander Holley, was born a slave in Tazewell County in 1859. These two accounts are the only personal narratives of slave life in Tazewell County.4

4 The account of the Warren family history, written by Hoyt George Warren, was found by William Warren Harris, his grand nephew, at the family homestead at 217 West Main St., Tazewell, Virginia. The document was written around 1910, and transcribed and printed by William Warren Harris for interested family members. A copy of the transcribed document is in Crab Orchard Museum’s library. Minnie C. Holley wrote down her family’s history and oral traditions, and published them in a book entitled Glimpses of Tazewell Through the Holley Heritage, (Radford, VA: Commonwealth Press, Inc., 1977).
Historical scholarship on Appalachia has significantly increased and changed in the past forty years. Scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s tended to promote the image of the stereotypical white, uneducated, poverty-stricken, ruggedly individualistic, mountaineer that Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty brought to the nation’s attention in the 1960s. These historians depicted Appalachians as a people trapped in the past, unable to progress because of their extreme independence. The historiography focused more on the contemporary problems in Appalachia than on the history of the area. For example, in 1962, Harry M. Caudill argued in his book, *Night Comes to Appalachia: A Biography of a Depressed Area*, that Appalachians did not possess an inherent culture of poverty regardless of the influences of outside forces. For him, the region’s history of exploitation was the reason for Appalachia’s problems. However, Jack Weller’s 1969 book *Yesterday’s People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* blamed the region’s problems of poverty and illiteracy on the inhabitants’ character flaws.

A new brand of Appalachian historians arose out of social history, Neo-Marxist labor studies, and what Kenneth Noe calls, “a commitment to interdisciplinary approaches, and often an underlying anger and pride of place that grew out of mountain roots and sixties activism.” ⁵ Called the Appalachian Revisionists, these scholars included Ronald Eller’s pivotal *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, published in 1982, and Henry Shapiro’s *Appalachia on Our Mind* published in 1986. Unlike the earlier generation of scholars who tended to see Appalachian people as

inherently backward, the Revisionists suggested that before the exploitation caused by industrialization, Appalachian society existed in full Jeffersonian glory as a region of yeoman farmers who were independent, egalitarian, and isolated. The modern problems of poverty and exploitation were brought to the region by outsiders. For these scholars, the nineteenth century was presented only to contrast the pollution of industrialization. However, thanks to their work, Appalachian History emerged as a viable area of historiography. Appalachian study centers were created on college campuses, and, in 1973, the *Appalachian Journal: A Regional Studies Review* was started.

In the late 1980s, a new generation of scholars recognized the Revisionists' shortcomings. Challenging the concept of Appalachian isolation and exceptionalism, they tended to focus more on pre-industrial Appalachia. Mary Beth Pudup challenged the egalitarian and Jeffersonian tradition of Appalachians, while Durwood Dunn stressed the important of capitalistic enterprise in antebellum Appalachia. Altina Waller's book *Feud: Hatfields, McCoys, and Social Change in Appalachia, 1860-1990* also challenged the notion that Appalachia was isolated and exceptional. Waller stresses the persistence of traditional values in the face of industrialization, and Dunn looks instead at the presence and influence of trade in Appalachia from its first settlement. Mary Beth Pudup, Dwight B. Billings, and Altina L. Waller together edited *Appalachia in the Making: The Mountain South in the Nineteenth Century*,

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which represents scholarship that refuses to treat Appalachia as a homogenous unit and argues that Appalachia was not unchanging and isolated.

While some historians were challenging previous historiography, others were opening up an entirely new field, African American Appalachian History. Appalachia had been painted white by the early historians, partly because of the enduring tradition of egalitarian yeomen that pervades Appalachian culture and lore. This led to what historians William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell termed "black invisibility." Together, they edited a landmark work challenging the bleaching of Appalachian history. Published in 1985, the essays in *Blacks in Appalachia* demonstrate that blacks not only were part of Appalachia but together formed a cohesive Appalachian black community. Before this book, only a few articles had been written on the subject, notably Richard B. Drake's "Slavery and Antislavery in Appalachia," published in 1986 in *Appalachian Heritage* and James B. Murphy's "Slavery and Freedom in Appalachia," published in the *Register of Kentucky Historical Society* in 1982.

Only a year after *Blacks in Appalachia*'s publication, John C. Inscoe challenged yet another point of Appalachian exceptionalism, its position in the Civil War. In 1989, he published *Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina*, arguing that the issues that divided the North and South did indeed affect Appalachia and that the only real differences between Appalachia and the rest of the South were the small slaveholdings and the mountains themselves.

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In answer to John Inscoe and others who challenged the exceptionalism of Appalachia, Richard B. Drake wrote *A History of Appalachia* in 2001, which became the first monograph to bring together the diverse history of Appalachia. Although he believes in Appalachian exceptionalism, he departs from the Revisionists by devoting over half of his book to preindustrial Appalachia. He describes the development of, what he calls, the “Cohee” society, that possessed a different mentality than the rest of the South. Drake’s “Cohee” society is essentially a pre-capitalist society, where farming is viewed as a “self-sustaining activity.” Mountaineers called themselves “cohees” in the antebellum period, and Drake adopted that term to describe Appalachian society throughout its early history. Drake blames the building of the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad in the 1850s for slavery’s influence in Appalachian Tennessee and Virginia.

Slavery in Appalachia has stirred its own debate. In 2001, John C. Inscoe edited *Appalachians and Race: The Mountain South from Slavery to Segregation*, a collection of essays summarizing the scholarship of African American Appalachian history after the publication of *Blacks in Appalachia*. The essays explore race relations in nineteenth-century Appalachia, African American population shifts during and after slavery, modernization, and Reconstruction. They argue that biracial issues and conflicts were a major formative force in Appalachia. Slavery is the central issue of most of the essays in the book. Richard Drake makes a case for the pervasiveness of slavery in Appalachia and gives a history of the antislavery movements that existed in eastern Tennessee, Kentucky, and Appalachian Virginia in “Slavery and Antislavery

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in Appalachia.” David Williams’ essay, “Georgia’s Forgotten Miners: African Americans and the Georgia Gold Rush of 1829,” narrates the story of the gold rush in Georgia’s Blue Ridge mountains in the late 1820s and early 1830s and the impact it had on slaves in the region. John Stealey’s essay, “Slavery in the Kanawha Salt Industry,” puts the spotlight on Appalachian industrial slavery, proving how Appalachians adapted slavery to serve their purposes. Charles B. Dew’s essay “Sam Williams, Forgeman: The Life of an Industrial Slave at Buffalo Forge, Virginia,” looks at the master-slave relationship outside of the common agricultural context and shows that the power play between master and slave is less one sided than might be supposed. Slaves did have a degree of agency.

Wilma Dunaway summarized the history of slavery in Southern Appalachia in her 2003 *Slavery in the American Mountain South*. Dunaway argues that slavery was not more benign in Appalachia than it was in the larger South. In fact, she argues that it was worse. Because enslaved people in Appalachia lived in closer contact with their masters, they were denied the opportunity to develop their own families and culture as could happen on larger plantations where the slave quarters were separate and removed from the master. Also, she argues that slaveholders could be more brutal when their economic well-being was not dependent on slave labor. Slaves could sometimes be seen as more disposable in that type of environment. Dunaway also demonstrated that slavery influenced the economy of Southern Appalachia more than historians have traditionally acknowledged. This was specifically through the export
of slaves from the region. She also emphasizes how the smallholders of Appalachia wanted to be like Southern planters and so allied politically with the planters.

Richard Drake explained that the northwestern Virginia counties sided with the North in “Slavery and Antislavery in Appalachia,” due to their antislavery attitudes. According to Drake, these attitudes were products of topography that did not yield itself to slave labor and of animosity that existed between northwestern Virginia and Richmond. However, the peculiar history of Southwest Virginia makes it impossible to treat all of Appalachian Virginia the same as Drake tends to do. Although Southwestern Virginia is undoubtedly part of Appalachia, it did not break off with the rest of the Appalachian Virginia counties to form West Virginia. Kenneth Noe argues in his 1994 book, *Southwest Virginia’s Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis*, that Southwest Virginia did not break away with the rest of Appalachian Virginia because of the influence of the Virginia and Tennessee railroad. Built in the 1850s, the V&T connected Bristol, Tennessee, with Lynchburg, Virginia. In doing so, it incorporated Southwest Virginia into Virginia and the larger South as a whole. According to Noe, slavery increased in Southwest Virginia because of the railroad's construction. His argument is that the railroad increased the export potential for the regions’ farms and that, in turn, increased the need for slave labor. He also argues that the railroads connected Southwest Virginia more strongly to the slave markets in the South. This influenced the counties of Southwest Virginia to remain in Virginia and support secession from the Union. Richard B. Drake, in his *A History of Appalachia,*
also makes this point regarding Southwest Virginia and its alliance to the Confederacy during the Civil War.

The case of Tazewell County demonstrates that slavery's influence in Southwestern Virginia long predated the building of the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad. The railroad was not completed until 1856, which would have given the counties of Southwest Virginia only five years to develop a strong attachment to both slavery and the rest of the South. That is hardly long enough to create the sentiments of Southern solidarity found in the letters and diaries of Tazewell County residents. Not only that, but as Kenneth Noe noted, one of the South's "most notorious advocates of slavery in Civil War Era America," George W. L. Bickley, came from Southwest Virginia. He resided, for a time, in Tazewell. Bickley later founded the infamous secret society, the Knights of the Golden Circle, dedicated to spreading slavery across the North American continent. A prominent citizen in Tazewell County, Bickley was invited to write a history of the county by the local historical society. While Tazewell County was never home to large plantations with numerous slaves, slaveholders were the leaders of the county long before the 1850s, and they continued to lead the county into war alongside the Southern planters.

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The Birth of Tazewell County

Virginia's state assembly created Tazewell County from pieces of Russell and Wythe Counties in 1799. Figure 1 shows the original size and location of Tazewell County. The petition for the new county convincingly argued for the necessity of forming a new county because of the mountains that at the time separated those areas of Russell and Wythe from their county seats. However, its formation caused consternation at home and in Richmond. Members of the local county courts worried that they would lose their influential and profitable positions as justices appointed by
the governor. In Richmond, certain men were against the formation of another county due to the presence of another western Virginia representative in the Legislature. That would disrupt the balance. The opponents of the county enlisted the support of Henry Tazewell, a legislator from Norfolk County. When the bill was proposed in the legislature, Tazewell vehemently opposed it, but, the next day, Russell County representative, Simon Cotterel, again proposed the bill, only this time he named the new county Tazewell. After that, the bill passed uninhibited, and even received its vehement opponent's vote.\textsuperscript{10}

The County Court was the center of the county's society, government, and politics. The court made decisions for the county as a whole and for the individuals who appeared before it, whether they were criminals, veterans seeking pensions, or slaves suing for their freedom. The court was composed of Justices of the Peace who originally were appointed by the governor. However, by 1851, Virginia's amended constitution granted county voters the right to elect their justices. The first meeting of the Tazewell County Court occurred in the house of a slaveholder, Henry Harman, on the second Tuesday in June, 1800. Its first act was to qualify a sheriff and appoint a county clerk. James Maxwell, a slaveholder, was appointed the first sheriff of the county, and John Ward, a slaveholder, was appointed the first clerk. Also a slaveholder, Hezekiah Harman was appointed the county surveyor. Later, these would become elected positions. With that in place, the court had only to choose a county seat.

\textsuperscript{10}George W. L. Bickley, \textit{History of the Settlement and Indian Wars of Tazewell County, Virginia} (Parsons, West Virginia: McClain Printing Company, 1974), 59-60.
Choosing a county seat was not a simple task. Two sites—less than two miles apart—were strong contenders, but the court could not agree on either location. At the end of the day, it took a dual to settle the debate. As the county’s Confederate veteran historian, William C. Pendleton recorded,

The justices being unable, or loth [sic], to determine the most suitable location, it is said that the advocate of the two competing locations agreed for each to choose a champion, and have an old-fashioned rough-and-tumble fight to settle the dispute. Tradition affirms that the champion who battled for the present site was proved the better man.\textsuperscript{11}

The very next day the court set off twenty-eight acres of land for erecting the county’s public buildings. They named the new town Jeffersonville after the then Vice President Thomas Jefferson. They also commissioned men to partition off town lots, and commissioned the building of the county jail. Tradition has it that the first courthouse in Tazewell County was constructed in a single day and only cost the court ten dollars. In essence, the citizens of the county had a “courthouse raising.” Citizens from every part of the county came together, bringing their tools, and raised the first courthouse out of freshly hewn logs. The popular memory of the event was captured by Pendleton. “Perhaps the building was rough in appearance and not very capacious, but it was a temple of justice for our worthy ancestors and served their purposes well until a permanent building was erected.”\textsuperscript{12}

That was the beginning of Tazewell County and the beginning of the collective memory of its citizens, a collective memory strangely void of African Americans. The

\textsuperscript{11} William C. Pendleton, \textit{History of Tazewell County and Southwest Virginia 1748-1920} (Cincinnati, OH: Morgan and Co, 1852), 472.
\textsuperscript{12} Pendleton, 473-474.
images of a mountain society coming together to erect a log cabin for its first
courthouse are powerful. The pioneer culture of the county is the one remembered and
cherished. Those memories are valid and useful. However, if they are the only ones
remembered, the history of the county is skewed.

Slavery in Early Tazewell County

The first census of Tazewell County was held that same year. The total
population of the county in 1800 was 2,127. Of this number, 219, or 10.3 percent of
the population, were black slaves. Throughout Appalachia at that time, the average
slave percentage was 17 percent, half the overall Southern average. For Appalachian
Virginia counties, the average was less than 10 percent. Tazewell County had a larger
population of black people than neighboring Appalachian Virginian counties, such as
Monroe County, where the slave population was only 5 percent, and Russell County,
where it was 7 percent.\(^\text{13}\) Yet, the telling of Tazewell County’s birth does not include
any black faces. Since four of the five men who gave up land for the county seat were
slaveholders, slaves were present in Tazewell at the time the courthouse went up. It is
therefore reasonable to assume that if the Tazewell County courthouse was truly built
in a day, slave laborer helped with that process, or at the very least witnessed it. Yet
they are absent from the record of the event.

That first census shows that slaveholders only made up 3 percent of the white
population of the county, but this small group wielded great influence. The first court

\(^\text{13}\) Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center,
of Tazewell County had seven Justices of the Peace appointed by the governor. Three were formerly on the Russell County Court, and four were on the Wythe County Court, proving that those early opponents of Tazewell County’s formation need not have feared losing their positions of authority. Of these seven justices, six were slaveholders. In a population where only 3 percent were slaveholders, that is astonishing. Although their overall presence was small, slaveholders’ influence over the government and politics of Tazewell County was tremendous even at the county’s inception. This influence did not lessen over time, or with the advent of more elected positions. This is typical of slave societies; slaveholders were not just part of the propertied elite, but the ruling class.

Most of the citizens of early Tazewell County were farmers, and the majority of slaves in the county were owned by people involved in agricultural pursuits. Most of these small slaveholders were “self-working farmers” who owned between one and ten slaves and therefore still had to work with their own hands.14 Because of the mountainous landscape, most farmers raised livestock instead of growing cash crops. Horses, pigs, and cattle were the main exports from the county.15 It is safe to assume that most of the slave laborers in the county were put to work clearing land, building fences, and tending livestock. Slaves in other parts of Appalachia were put to work at similar tasks.16

15 Pendleton, 479.
16 Wilma Dunaway, Slavery in the American Mountain South (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 66-69. Dunaway describes how livestock production was much more profitable than cash crops.
Tazewell County never made the jump from a society with slaves to a slave society primarily because of its mountainous landscape. The landscape hindered the establishment of large plantations bearing cash crops such as tobacco, cotton, or rice. Without those cash crops, slavery did not become the cornerstone of Tazewell’s economy. However, slave laborers were present and valuable in various agricultural and non-agricultural productions.

Tax lists show that several Tazewell County men in non-agricultural pursuits owned slaves. Although no records exist of the daily life of these slaves, they either took care of the family’s home and belongings or they helped in the family business. In 1801, Thomas Peery applied for and received a license to run a tavern out of his home in the new county seat, Jeffersonville. At that time Thomas Peery owned two taxable slaves. He was not the only tavern keeper to use slave laborers to run his business. Thomas Harrison also ran a local tavern with the help of his slaves. The 1801 tax list shows William George and Evans, who ran a profitable county store and tavern, owning at least six taxable slaves. In fact, the only tavern in 1801 that did not employ slave labor, William Williams’ Tavern, did not exist the next year.17

In 1801, there were three stores in Tazewell County. William George and Evans Store and Tavern, as we already mentioned, paid taxes for six slaves in 1801. Their competitors were John Crockett and John J. Trigg and Company. In 1801, neither of these two store owners were slaveholders. But by 1803, John Crockett had for most Appalachian farms. Ten percent of the adult male slaves in Appalachian narratives identified themselves as working with livestock. Slaves labored in tending and training livestock, in transporting them, and in meat processing across Appalachia.

invested in one slave. Men in other commercial professions also owned slaves. John
Peery, Jr., the son of a silversmith, was a blacksmith in Tazewell County. In 1801, he
was taxed for two adult slaves. 18

By 1810, the slave population had increased to 11 percent of the county’s
population, while the percentage of slaveholders actually remained at 3 percent of the
free population. The supposedly egalitarian society of Appalachian Tazewell County
actually was a society ruled by a slaveholding elite. Slavery expanded further in the
next decade. By 1820, slaves formed twelve percent of the population of the county,
while slaveholders remained at 3 percent. The average slaveholding was four slaves.
John Crockett, in 1820, surfaced as the leading slaveholder, owning twenty slaves in
1820. He expanded his slaveholdings in the next decade to thirty-two, but was
surpassed by Samuel Sayers in 1830 who, with forty-five slaves, was by far the largest
slaveholder in Tazewell County.

Crockett’s investment in a slave in 1803 must have brought an economic
return. By 1820, his slaveholdings had greatly increased, and he was expanding his
business. He made another investment, buying a carding machine for $1000, and set
up a carding business. A carding machine combed or “carded” out sheep’s wool to
prepare it for spinning. He employed one man to attend the machine and paid him
$180 annually. Throughout the year, his machine carded over 4,000 pounds of wool,
making $10 per hundred pounds. Crockett did not raise sheep himself, but only carded
what was brought to him by others. Between his store and his carding business, it is

18Ibid; U. S. Census Bureau. Census of Tazewell County, Virginia, 1820.; “1803 Personal Property Tax
List for Tazewell County, Virginia,” in Archives of the Pioneers of Tazewell County, 1973.
reasonable to assume that at least some of his twenty slaves were engaged in non-agricultural labor.\textsuperscript{19}

There were two other carding machines in operation in 1820 in Tazewell County. Reese Bowen and John Leslie operated similar establishments. They both employed one man to operate the machine and paid him $15 dollars a month. They each claimed to card up to 4,000 pounds of wool a year at $10 per hundred. Both were also slave holders. Reese Bowen owned six slaves, and John Leslie two. Apparently in the carding business, slaves were not trusted to run the machines unsupervised, as all three men hired a white man to run the machine. This does not, however, eliminate the possibility that slaves were involved in the wool processing procedures.\textsuperscript{20}

Jacob Helms, who worked and lived in Jeffersonville, was the only saddler in the county, and he was also a slaveholder. In a single year, he went through $200 worth of wood, iron, and leather. Jacob Helms procured leather from his kinsman, William Helms, the only tanner in the county. Because his business was increasing, Jacob Helms commented to the Tax Commissioner that there was a greater demand that year for saddles than he had experienced before. The records say that he employed two men and one boy in his shop, but neglect to say what their wages were, as accounts of other manufacturers did. Jacob Helms owned two slaves in 1820, and one cannot help but wonder if they worked in his shop.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{19} Netti Schreiner-Yantis, Transcriber and editor, “Manufactures in Tazewell County in 1820,” in Archives of the Pioneers of Tazewell County, Virginia. (1973), 174; U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Tazewell County, Virginia, 1820.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
Using slaves in non-agricultural purposes was common in Appalachia in the nineteenth century. Wilma Dunaway, in her book on slavery in the region, has shown how slaves throughout Appalachia were involved in manufacturing, even in factories. Appalachian slaves labored in industries such as textiles, manufacturing farm equipment, timbering, mining, and others. Slaves in Wythe County, Tazewell’s neighbor to the south, mined and shipped iron, and in other areas slaves extracted coal, salt, and copper from the resource-rich mountains of Appalachia.22

The largest increase in slavery in Tazewell County history occurred between 1820 and 1830. During this same time, the total population of the county also increased through both natural increase and new settlers. By the 1830 census, the total population of the county was 5,749. Slaves formed 14 percent of that population, the largest the percentage would be in the county’s history. The number of slaves in the county increased by more than 350 between 1820 and 1830. This was the largest increase in a single decade. John Crockett procured twelve more slaves in those years. The number of slaves in Tazewell County only increased by 142 between the years of 1850 and 1860 the decade that the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad was built. Slavery was alive and thriving long before the railroad penetrated the mountains.23

Slaveholders – Ruling Class

Between 1799 and 1832, 3 percent of the free population were slaveholders, but 52 percent of the Justices were slaveholders. In spite of the dramatic increases in

22 Dunaway, 107,113, 117-119, 125, 129, 132.
the numbers of slaves, the slaveholding class had not grown, yet they maintained the disproportionate control over the county’s courts that they had enjoyed since the county’s founding. Their domination was not contained to the court as Justices, but extended to the county’s militia, schools, sheriff’s office, and even the offices of Revenuer and Coroner.24

The free residents of Tazewell County respected and supported these slaveholders. Although the Justices were appointed by the governor until the 1850s, elected positions were also filled by slaveholders. The white residents voted them into positions of authority and made them their representatives. The men with the power were also the men with the wealth. It is significant that the richest men in the county chose to express their wealth in slaves. They supported and indulged in the South’s peculiar institution, and their supporters, by voting in such men, condoned the practice of slavery and reinforced Tazewell County’s commitment to the values of the larger South. Slaveholders were not merely one portion of the propertied elite in Tazewell County, they were the ruling class – a characteristic of slave societies.

The non-slaveholders placed the reigns of their county’s government in the hands of the slaveholders. In fact, they entrusted not just their county, but also their state to them. Between 1801 and 1841, Tazewell County sent twenty-one men as their representatives to the General Assembly of Virginia. Sixteen of them, or 76 percent,

were slaveholders. Clearly, the egalitarian stereotype of Appalachian society did not apply to Tazewell County where the slaveholding few held almost all of the county’s governing power.

There was an elite slaveholding class in Tazewell County throughout all of the nineteenth century, and there was not an official office they did not influence. John Crocket, one of the county’s largest slaveholders, was the elected county clerk of Tazewell County in the 1820s and served two six-year terms. County Clerk was one of the most important elected offices at the time. He had risen from the ranks of non-slaveholders to slaveholders through his mercantile business ventures. This rise also brought him political power.

### Slavery and Race in Tazewell County

Tazewell County not only stood at the border of North and South, of slave societies and societies with slaves, but also on racial borders. Slavery in Tazewell County was racial slavery as in the rest of the South. But there were some unusual cases in Tazewell County that defy the stereotype of the African-American slave. The first slaves in Tazewell County mingled freely with a small tribe of racially mixed Amerindians. This tribe originated in North Carolina when a Chocktaw married a Cherokee, and both were expelled from their native tribe. This new family group

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eventually became known as the “Hawleyon Chocktaws” or the “Holley Indians.” Members of this tribe intermarried with African Americans in the region. The first of the Holleys to move to Tazewell County, Virginia, did so to avoid miscegenation laws. A Holley wanted to marry a white woman, and in order to do so, they both had to move to a place where they were not known. Once in Tazewell, several of the Holley men had children by the slave women on the Crockett Farm and the George Farm. Slave Codes dictated that the children of these unions take the status of their slave mothers. Thus the colors of slavery in Tazewell County were not just black and white, but shades of black, red, and white.²⁶

One Tazewell County slave, in particular, breaks the mold of the southern slave. His name was William Johnston Warren. Warren’s great grandmother, Susan Johnston, was a Pamunkey Amerindian from New Kent County, Virginia. When Susan was only four years old, she was kidnapped by a white family who made her their slave. She grew up with them and had children by her master. One of these children was a girl who was sold to a Mr. Tinsley. Mr. Tinsley sexually abused Susan’s daughter, and she bore two children by him, named Billie and Pollie. They were sold to Robert Warren of New Kent Courthouse. Robert Warren “induced” Pollie to sleep with him. The result of this union was William Johnston Warren. Being only one-eighth Pamunkey and seven-eighths white, William Johnston Warren was born a slave in New Kent County between 1808 and 1810.²⁷

William’s mother later married a free African American man named Hadny Moss, introducing the first African blood into the family. William soon had two half sisters from this union. This family unit was not long lived, however. Shortly after William’s sisters were born, Robert Warren sold William, his mother, and his two half sisters to Mr. Euwin of Richmond, Virginia. In Richmond, William worked at the tannery that Euwin owned. Mr. Euwin suffered from alcohol and gambling addictions. His habits created serious business problems for him, and even more serious problems for William Johnston Warren and his family. Mr. Euwin could only pay off his debts by selling William and the rest of his family at auction. All this occurred around the year 1828, making William about twenty years old. After a time in Richmond’s infamous Lumpkin slave prison, William was sold to Tazewell County’s representative, Thomas J. George, who served in the Virginia General Assembly from 1828 to 1830. George took William back to live the rest of his life in Tazewell County, Virginia.28

The slave auction was at the center of a slave society. Walter Johnson in his book, *Soul By Soul*, describes slavery as being “a person with a price.”29 This was nowhere more clearly portrayed than in the antebellum slave market. White men marked their successful climb up the social ladder by buying slaves. The slave market allowed slaveholders to feel powerful and dominate, as if other people existed solely to satisfy their desires, whether those desires were power, wealth, or sex. By participating in the slave market, whites created freedom for themselves out of the

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slavery of others, yet in doing so they made their identities and society dependent on
slaves. Johnson also makes the point that, even in the slave market, where a slave’s
humanity was stripped more than in any other setting, the slave was not without a
measure of agency, however small that might be. Slaves like William Johnston
Warren seized the small power that was theirs and used it as best they could. Slaves
were able to show that they were not just commodities by taking advantage of the
opportunities afforded by a sale. Slaves manipulated and negotiated the situation in
order to gain a result that was more in their favor, whether that was the purchase of a
family member, or being purchased by a particular master. Slaves were not present in
the market as mere unthinking, unfeeling commodities. They were there as human
souls, strategizing for their own benefit as best they could. 30

William Johnston Warren saw opportunity in the form of Tazewell County’s
representative, Thomas J. George. Thomas J. George represented Tazewell County in
the Virginia General Assembly from 1282 to 1830. His father, Henry P. George, had
also been a representative to the General Assembly and was the Tazewell County’s
school commissioner. 31 The George’s were part of Tazewell County’s propertied
elite. In 1820, Henry George held seventeen slaves, a large number for Tazewell
County. 32 His son followed in his father’s footsteps, seeking power in politics and
slaveholding. Warren family legend has it that William asked Thomas J. George to
buy him, perhaps because he knew Thomas J. George was not from the Deep South,
and so would not take him down to work in the cotton or tobacco fields. Perhaps, he

30 Johnson, 164.
32 U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Tazewell County, Virginia, 1820.
was just desperate to get out of the slave pens. Slaves whose skin was very light, as William's undoubtedly would have been, sometimes spent months in a slave pen because buyers were hesitant to buy a slave whose light skin might assist him in running away. Light-skinned men in the slave market never commanded a premium price. It is very possible that William was the last member of his family still in the slave pens. Perhaps he had been forced to watch his mother and sisters all sold before him, and he just wanted to be out of Lumpkin. Whatever the reasons may have been, William convinced Thomas George to purchase him, and take him back to Tazewell County with him.

The leaders of society in Tazewell County did not hesitate to participate in slave society's ultimate experience, the purchasing of a slave in a major southern city's slave market, a practice Walter Johnson characterized as producing "whiteness" and "blackness." The whitest thing a person could do was buy a slave at market, and the blackest thing a person could do was to be sold in the market. Nowhere were the trappings of slave society more clearly displayed. Men from Tazewell County, who desired to be members of the ruling class, participated in the slave market, a typical sign of slave societies. Thomas George took the opportunity of being in Richmond to go to the slave market and buy a slave, most likely at a discounted price. William Johnston Warren was the seventh slave that Thomas J. George had purchased.

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33 Johnson, 151.
34 Johnson, 159.
35 Berlin, 8.
36 U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Tazewell County, Virginia, 1830.
Once Representative George brought him back to his Tazewell County farm, William discovered that George was a violent man. George whipped William at least twice. After the second whipping, William began to look for a way out. He found it in the form of a young lawyer who was new in Jeffersonville, Mr. Joseph Stras.37

Joseph Stras was a young lawyer from Richmond who had moved to the western end of the state to make a name for himself. In addition to working for Thomas George, William Warren was hired out to Stras. It is unclear whether the money Warren received for waiting upon Stras went to George or was kept by William. Stras and William developed a friendship, perhaps because both of them came from the Richmond area before moving to rural Jeffersonville.38 Once Stras had established himself in Jeffersonville, William once again asked to be purchased. In spite of their cordial relationship, Stras hesitated to buy William. His friends warned him that William Warren was too white to be trusted as a slave. It would be too easy for him to run away and blend into free white society. Stras only agreed to buy him after William swore not to run away. Stras bought William Warren from George for $1,012 dollars.39

Stras allowed William Warren to continue to hire himself out on the side. It is unclear what he did, or who hired him but the family’s history says he waited on wealthy men around the town. Hiring out was common in Tazewell County. A hiring contract found in Tazewell County states that anyone who hires a “Negro” must “furnish one suit of winter clothing to said Negro such as hired Negros generally

37 Warren, 4.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
Another written agreement for a slave hire in Tazewell County shows that the price for hiring an adult male for a year was $250. Warren was fortunate that his master did not merely pocket the money he earned. Instead, Stras saved up the money William Warren made and opened a bank account for William.

William Warren had a good reason to remain in Jeffersonville, a reason that helps explain his vow not to run away. He had fallen in love with a young girl of the Holley clan – Miss Cynthia Holley. She was descended from the first Holleys to move to Tazewell County, Virginia, from North Carolina. Her mother, Betsy Holley, had lived a sad life. As a child, both her parents died, leaving her and her siblings orphans. As was the custom with free colored orphans, they were all bonded out to different families in the county. Betsy was bonded out to a man who took advantage of her. She had a son by him named James Milton Holley. After she served her indenture, Betsy drifted from man to man until she met

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40 “Slave Hiring Agreement”, Historic Crab Orchard Museum Archives, 86.14.15, Tazewell, Virginia.
41 “Agreement for Hiring a Negro boy,” Historic Crab Orchard Museum Archives, 86.14.16, Tazewell, Virginia.
Hughey Tifney. She spent the rest of her life with him, and he was the father of
Cynthia Holley. Cynthia Holley was also bonded out when she was a very young girl.
She was more fortunate than her mother. Her indenture was bought by Henry
Harman, who treated her well. While she was still living in the Harman household,
she met William Warren.42

When Cynthia was just sixteen years old, she married William Warren and
moved into the Stras household to live with him, although she was free by law.
William and Cynthia Warren had five children born in the Stras household: John,
Lettie, Beverly, Felix, and Hoyt George. Cynthia took care of all her children and the
children of Joseph Stras and his wife. According to their youngest son, Hoyt, who
recorded the family history for later generations, Cynthia was not happy living as a
slave when she was, in actuality, a free woman. Also, she did not want to raise her
children as slaves, when, according to the Virginia slave codes, they were free. By this
time, Joseph Stras owned more that 20 slaves, at least some of whom were resentful of
Cynthia and her children. Cynthia insisted on leaving the Stras farm before the
situation became unsafe for her and her children.43

This left William Warren with a dilemma. He had sworn to never leave Stras.
Yet, his wife had left the Stras farm, and he was unable to follow her unless he was a
free man. William Warren approached Stras and asked him if he could buy his
freedom using the money in the account that he had accumulated. By 1859, the
account held over $2,000 dollars. Joseph Stras agreed, but only accepted $470 as the

42 Holley, 9.; Warren, 6-7.
43 Warren, 7-8.
price for William Warren's freedom. Stras said that William Warren was too white to be a slave and deserved his freedom. Stras urged William to go north and start a new life living as a free white man. However, Cynthia did not want to leave Tazewell County where all her family lived. The Warrens remained in Tazewell County, and William went to work as a waiter in the only hotel in Jeffersonville. He was listed as a free man in the census of 1860, with a personal estate of $275 dollars and a new baby daughter, little Josephine.44

William Warren navigated along the edges of society. He steered along between three races. He lived as both a slave and free man, and he lived in a society between North and South, between slave societies and societies with slaves. He and his wife provided a better future for their children by successfully negotiating along the borders of southern society.

One of the characteristics of a society with slaves is that the line between slave and free was fluid. However, in a slave society manumission rates were low and slaves often were their own emancipators through self-purchase and flight.45 The story of William Warren demonstrates that the line between slave and free was not completely rigid in Tazewell County. He did have to purchase his own freedom, although at a low cost. However, his experience was not the norm. Very few slaves were set free by their masters or successfully bought their freedom in Tazewell County. The line was easier for William Warren to cross because of his light skin.

45 Berlin, 52, 124, 331.
Manumission in Tazewell County

Manumission was not common in Tazewell County, even though slavery was not central to the economy. The stigma of being labeled an abolitionist undoubtedly helped prevent some masters from freeing their slaves. Even Joseph Stras, who was by no means an abolitionist, had threats on his life after he freed William Warren. If any white Tazewell County residents were antislavery, they left no indication of their sentiments.

William Warren sired two sons by a slave woman before he married Cynthia. After he bought his own freedom, he saved up enough to buy his sons. In 1862, he gave the money to Stras and asked him to purchase his sons for him with the money. William knew that his sons’ master would never sell them to him. Unfortunately, the boys’ master suspected that Stras was merely acting as Warren’s agent, and refused to sell the boys, knowing that they would be freed. This would be allowing an intolerable act of emancipation. Tazewell County’s white citizens were staunch supporters of the Confederacy, especially during the first half of the war. They would not tolerate the threat created by having abolitionists in their midst. The citizens formed a lynching plot against Stras. Stras was only able to diffuse the situation by promising not to free any more slaves. Most likely, William Warren’s sons were only freed by the end of the Civil War.46

Freeing slaves was not a wise idea during the Civil War or the years immediately preceding it. Before that time it was not as dangerous. Before 1860, there

46 Warren, 16 and 17.
were several instances where a slaveholder freed his slaves. Several masters did so while they were still alive, but most emancipated their slaves in their wills. Two slaves in Tazewell County sued for their freedom; one won.

In October of 1821, a slave man, Watt, unsuccessfully sued for his freedom.47 His former master, Dudley Young, died on July 24th that year. One month before his death, Dudley made a will dividing all his property among his relatives, except for his “negro man named Watt.”48 His will stated that Watt could choose a master from any of Young’s four male relatives. Apparently, Watt chose none of them. He sued for his freedom in the Tazewell County Court, and the court assigned him legal counsel.49 Unfortunately, that is the last record of Watt that the Court Law Order book contains. It can only be assumed that he did not win his suit. Another slave was more fortunate.

In June of 1828, Abram was given permission to sue in the court for his freedom. The court law order book records that in the August term the court granted Abram his freedom, and the sheriff was directed to release him from custody.50 Abram’s master’s name is not in the records, and neither are the other details of the case. However, this does show that it was not impossible for a slave to prove that he should, by rights, be a free man. The cases of Watt and Abram show that the lines between free and slave were neither fluid nor entirely rigid.

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47 Harman, “County Court Orders from January 1821 to June 1825,” Annals of Tazewell County, Virginia, Vol. 1, 204.
48 Dudley Young, will made June 28, 1821, will proved July 24, 1821. Tazewell County Will Book No. 1, 147.
49 Harman, “County Court Orders from January 1821 to June 1825,” Annals of Tazewell County, Virginia, Vol. 1, 204.
50 Harman “County Court Orders from January 1821 to June 1825,” Annals of Tazewell County, Virginia, 216.
Between 1820 and 1860, the Court Law Order Book contains only three cases of a slave being emancipated by his master during his lifetime without money changing hands, as it did in William Johnston Warren’s case. In July of 1820, William Neal emancipated his only slave, Dimon. In May of 1824, George Harman freed Thomas Bell, his only slave. Harman’s relatives, both slaveholders, witnessed and signed Bell’s deed of manumission. In a fit of good will, Jacob Waggoner freed all five his slaves in 1828. All three men, William Neal, George Harman, and Jacob Waggoner never bought another slave.

At least five men and one woman between 1800 and 1860 freed slaves in their wills. Jessiah Wynne made a will in 1812 declaring that, at his demise, his young female slave Lisa should be freed but was to remain with his daughter Jinny, not as a slave, “but under her care.” In 1857, Benjamin Layne’s will required the manumission of one of his ten slaves, a girl named Rose. In 1847, Elijah King died and, in his will, freed one of his slaves, Mathew. The county court granted Mathew permission to reside in the county because he “was a person of good character, peaceable, orderly, and industrious and not addicted to drunkenness, gaming or any other vice.” The court even noted that “the population of the county might be greatly reduced if only those who can prove such a character as Mathew’s, were permitted to

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54 Jessiah Wynne, will made November 11, 1812, proven February, 1813. Tazewell County Will book No. 1, 70.
55 Benjamin F. Layne, will proved September 27, 1857. Tazewell County Will Book No. 3, 277.
In September of 1849, Susannah King’s will freed seven of her slaves: Henry, Amy, Cosby, Ann, Elizabeth, Ellan, and Louisa; and they were granted permission to remain in the county. In September of 1849, Susannah King’s will freed seven of her slaves: Henry, Amy, Cosby, Ann, Elizabeth, Ellan, and Louisa; and they were granted permission to remain in the county.57

One of the post-mortem emancipators went a step further than freeing one, or even all, of his slaves. In 1820, Daniel Harman died. His will divided his property and slaves between his children and his wife. Slave families were separated as a result.58 Thirty-three years later, one of Daniel’s sons, Buse Harman, died and left a will drastically different from his fathers’. His will stated that all his property would go to his wife. However, upon her death, all his nineteen slaves were to be emancipated and given a five-mile swath of Harman’s own land, an area called Mud Fork. Upon Mrs. Harman’s death, the details of Buse Harman’s will were carried out just as he proscribed.59 Another of Daniel’s sons, Adam, left a will freeing one of his slaves, Casper, a few years before Buse died. He was granted leave to stay in the county by the county court.60

These freed slaves moved onto the land deeded to them by Buse’s will and formed the free black community of Mud Fork. This incident is reminiscent of Richard Randolph’s 1790s will which freed his slaves and granted them four hundred acres of his own land, an event recorded in Melvin Patrick Ely’s history of the

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57 Ibid, 257.
58 Daniel Harman, Sr., will made November, 1816, proven January, 1820., Tazewell County Will Book No. 1, 116.
59 Buse Harman, will proven March, 1853. Tazewell County Will Book No. 3, 92.
60 Adam Harman, will proven September 1847, Tazewell County Will Book No. 9, 174.; Harman, “County Court Law Orders from January 1842 to December 1852”, 257.
resulting community, Israel Hill. Most of the families who formed the community of Mud Fork took their masters' surnames as their own. Names such as Harman, Higginbothan, Dickerson, Thompson, and Witten were common. Later on, this community became a gathering place for free black families. At the community’s height after the Civil War, there were about fifty black families living in Mud Fork, none of them from very far away. These ex-slaves mainly supported themselves by farming, but they also built a brickyard that shipped bricks via the railroad all over the state. As Ely noted in the case of Israel Hill, such a productive role in the wider economy was an indicator of a meaningful independence. In Israel Hill, "independence did not imply withdrawal. . . ." Ely writes. "[F]ree blacks has to assert their rights within the white-run institutions under which they lived – and they had to take part in the local economy."
The same was true of Mud Fork. Many of these African Americans worked in the coal mines after the discovery of coal in Tazewell County in the 1880’s. Mud Fork was a unique community of free African Americans in Appalachia that arose before the Civil War, and which produced many of leaders in black education and religion. Buse Harman’s will sparked the largest single act of emancipation in Tazewell County.

Manumission in Tazewell County was not very common. This is interesting and unusual, because unlike other slave societies, slavery was not the cornerstone of

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63 Ely, 106.
Tazewell County’s economy. However, the economy was, as a whole, strongly tied to the rest of the South, areas that were undeniably slave societies. This larger economy played a role in the shortage of manumissions in Tazewell County. Although slaves were not at the center of the productive processes in the county, they still were a valuable form of chattel just as they were elsewhere. Economic pressures from the rest of the slaveholding South were felt in Appalachian areas such as Tazewell County.

**A Lucrative Business**

Appalachia was not immune from the economic pressures of the rest of the slaveholding South. The demand for cotton increased dramatically in the nineteenth century which simultaneously increased the demand for slaves. Wilma Dunaway called the resulting movement in slaves, “the largest internal forced migration of slaves that has ever occurred in world history.”65 This migration from east to west, or from north to south, took many slaves straight through Appalachia. Some Appalachians took advantage of this lucrative trade by buying slaves in order to sell them down in New Orleans.66 Also, slaveholders would sometimes put a slave in his “pocket” – sell him, turn him into cash. Appalachian slaves constantly feared roving slave traders. Some Appalachians made their entire living as slave speculators. Poor whites also were involved in the slave trade, even though they might not own any slaves directly. A few were “slave catchers” or “bounty hunters,” trained to catch

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66 Dunaway, “Put in the Master’s Pocket”, 119.
runaways. Still others kidnapped slaves and free blacks to sell to the slave traders. Because of these activities, the relationship between poor whites and African Americans in southern Appalachia was not friendly.\textsuperscript{67} The blacks in Tazewell County had much to fear from the slave trade in their mountains. In June 1818, two Tazewell County men were brought to trial for kidnapping and attempting to sell a “free mulatto person.”\textsuperscript{68}

Thomas Harvey Wilson was a free person of color living in Tazewell County. On May 20, 1818, he was violently kidnapped by at least one man who intended to sell him to traders heading for New Orleans. Fortunately for Thomas, these men were caught trying to hustle him out of the county. They were arrested and brought to trial. Not much is known about Wilson, besides his name. However, sometimes names tell stories of their own. Wilson was a common surname in the western part of Tazewell County in the nineteenth century. It belonged to a wealthy white family of land owners and slaveholders. In 1795, a Thomas Wilson owned 57,000 acres of land.\textsuperscript{69} In 1796, he signed a petition to form Tazewell County out of sections of Wythe County and Russell County.\textsuperscript{70} It is possible that Thomas Harvey Wilson was named after this powerful man. Perhaps he was related to him. He was listed in the court documents as a “mulatto person.” His mixed race and his name would seem to indicate a relationship. Thomas Harvey Wilson certainly did have someone powerful on his side,

\textsuperscript{67} Dunaway, \textit{Slavery in the American Mountain South}, 150-151.
\textsuperscript{68} “Memorandum That Upon This 21st Day of June, in the Year 1818, in the 42nd year of the Commonwealth. . .” Tazewell County Court, Loose manuscript, Virginia Library Archives.
\textsuperscript{69} Wythe County Survey Book 1, (January 20, 1795), 154.
\textsuperscript{70} Virginia Legislative Petitions, Wythe County, Oversize Box 13, #3602, November 30, 1796, Virginia Library Archives.
because not only was his sale prevented, but the perpetrators of the crime against him were brought to justice.

There were two suspects in this kidnapping – John Griffitts and Jonathan McMeans. John Griffitts was not a slaveholder himself, but he recognized the benefits of slaveholding, and, apparently, desired to enter into the slaveholding class. He owned a small tract of land in the western portion of the county, close to the wealthy Wilsons. John McMeans, the other suspect, is not present in the 1810 or 1820 census of Tazewell County. He is only found in the records of the county in the year 1818. However, his relative Elihu McMeans can be found in the records from 1818 to 1850. The McMeans and the Griffitts were close families. Elihu McMeans married a Nancy Griffitts in 1821. Both Jonathan McMeans and John Griffitts were arrested in the June of 1818 for the kidnapping of Thomas Harvey Wilson “with the intent to sell and dispose of said boy contrary to law.”

The trial dragged on until August of that year. No record of particular testimonies remains. Three witnesses were brought forward – Elihu McMeans, Polly Halsey and David Alison. The victim, Thomas Harvey Wilson, was not allowed to testify in court because of his skin color. Eventually the court found only one of the men guilty of the crime. The jury declared that John Griffitts did “with force and arms, feloniously steal, take, and carry away Thomas Harvey Wilson, a free mulatto person, then there being for the purpose of making him a slave.” The jury sentenced him to

71 Tazewell County Deed Book 1, 1808, page 408.
72 U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Tazewell County, Virginia, 1820, 1830, 1840, 1850.
one year in the public jail. 75 The sentence seems light for a kidnapping, but at least it shows that the court was not going to let the offender off completely free. The kidnapping of the Thomas Harvey Wilson was recognized as a crime and the perpetrator had to pay the penalty. Although crime didn’t always pay, slavery was a lucrative business in Appalachia, one that attracted speculators and thieves. The slave trade was active in Appalachia just as it was in other areas of the South. Tazewell County residents participated in the trade. Even those of the lower classes desired to use slaves, or even free African Americans, for social mobility. Slaveholding was a social status symbol that most whites strove to achieve, even illegally.

In Tazewell County, as in any slave society, slaveholders occasionally found it necessary or convenient to liquidate their human property. Throughout Tazewell County, slaves feared being “put in the master’s pocket,” being turned into cash. 76 In September of 1825, William Haven sold five of his slaves for $500 dollars. 77 This price was very low. In 1833, John Deskins sold William Perry a mother and her daughter, Vina and Winnie, for $450. The bill of sale specifically dictated that any future increase by Vina or Winnie would belong to William Perry. 78 Tazewell County slaveholders recognized female slaves’ reproductive capabilities could turn a profit. However, a healthy young male slave was also valuable. William Perry paid $300 four

76 Dunaway, “Put in the Master’s Pocket.”
77 Haven Family Papers, Bill of Sale, September 29, 1825, 84.100.6, Crab Orchard Museum Archives.
78 Perry Family papers, Bill of Sale, October 5, 1833, Number not yet assigned, Crab Orchard Museum archives.
years earlier for a thirteen-year-old boy named Pleasant. These sales were not merely business transactions. They were traumatic events in a slave’s life (and that of the slave’s family). The Holleys passed down through their family a story of an attempted slave sale of Patsi Holley.

Patsi Holley was owned by Hervey George, who had bought her from an eastern Virginia tobacco farm where her old master had treated his slaves cruelly, whipping them at the slightest provocation. He allegedly had spit tobacco juice into her eyes, causing her to go partially blind. Because of her fear of once again belonging to a cruel master, Patsi swore never to be sold again. But one spring day, while Patsi and the other slaves were building a fence to keep the cows out of the forest, they saw strangers ride up the lane to the master’s house. Curious, the field slaves waited in their cabins that night to discover who the strangers were and what their business was. At last, the house servants brought the news back to the slave quarters that the visitors were slave traders. The master was in debt and had to sell some of his slaves. The strangers were slave traders who were collecting slaves in the area to march them to Ohio and then ship them down the Mississippi River to be sold to the cotton plantations. The master called all the slaves together to be inspected by the traders. After the excruciating inspections, the slaves were told to go to bed. The master would announce who he had sold in the morning.

The next morning the slaves went back to work on the fence. At noon, Patsi’s son ran up to her with the news that master and the slave traders were coming for her—she had been the one sold. As Patsi’s mind raced to find a way out, her master rode

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79 Perry Family Papers, Bill of Sale, October 27, 1829, 86.83.35, Crab Orchard Museum Archives.
over to the fence, dismounted, and announced that Patsi had been sold, and she should prepare to leave. Patis grabbed a fence rail and began to swing it around her head. Her master tried to calm her down by sympathizing with her, saying the sale and resulting separation would hurt him as much as it did her. Patsi was not consoled by his paternalistic expressions. She responded by swinging the fence rail again, this time hitting her master on the head, knocking him out cold. Surprisingly, when her master regained consciousness, he sent the slave traders away. Patsi was never sold, and lived on that plantation “until God called her home.”

We will probably never know if this story is entirely true, but its perpetuation in the Holley family’s oral tradition is important. It demonstrates that the threat of sale

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80 Story taken from oral interview of Leander C. Holley, recorded by his daughter, Minne C. Holley in Glimpses of Tazewell Through the Holly Heritage, 42-44. Leander was born a slave in Tazewell County in 1859. Patsi was his grandmother. Patsi’s “Marse George” was the Hervey George.
was as great in Tazewell County as it was elsewhere. The passage of slave traders through the county was possible and probable, and Tazewell County was connected to trade routes that led all the way to New Orleans, the largest slave market in the South. The closest major slave market was in Bristol, Tennessee, only a short distance from Tazewell County.81 This story also suggests that the paternalism associated with larger plantations in the Deep South was present in the mountain south. In the master’s claim that the sale would hurt him as much as it did Patsi, we see the paternalistic master forced to sell a slave through no fault or desire of his own, as Walter Johnson described in *Soul by Soul.*82 The slave traders appear as the villains, disrupting the peaceful plantation ruled by a kind master. The former slaves told this story in such a way to show that they were not fooled by paternalism. In this story, slaves turn paternalism on its head, with the master being mastered by his slave, and the slave inflicting corporal punishment upon her unruly master.

The threat of being sold was one of the main impetuses for a slave to obtain his freedom. Some slaves, such as William Johnston Warren, managed to buy their freedom. Others were freed by their masters, such as Thomas Bell’s being freed by George Harman. Most who were freed were willed their freedom by their master’s death, as in the case of Buse Harman’s slaves. However, there was another path to freedom open to the slaves of Tazewell County, a path that was shorter because of their close proximity to the antislavery regions of Virginia that later became West Virginia.

81 Noe, 81.
82 Johnson, 29.
Freedom Over the Hill

In the 1850 slave schedule of Tazewell County, two slaves are listed as fugitives. One of these fugitives was an eleven-year old boy owned by John Barnes, who owned twenty-five slaves in 1850. There is no record that this boy was ever caught. The other fugitive was a seventeen-year-old boy whose master was the same as Patsi Holley's – Harvey George. Again, it is not known whether this boy was ever recovered. We do not even know his name. However, both of these fugitives fit into the most common category of successful escapees, young unattached males. The close proximity of the "free states" made escape all the more appealing to discontented Tazewell County slaves, and, rumor had it, there were friends waiting across the mountains to help the escaping slaves on their way.83

In 1954, Samuel Harris was the last ex-slave to die in Tazewell County. He was born around 1848, as a slave in Abb's Valley, close to the freed slave community of Mud Fork. Area newspapers interviewed him several times in his last years. In one such article, written in the Clinch Valley News in 1953, he confided to his interviewer one

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83 U.S. Bureau of the Census, "1850s Slave Schedule of Tazewell County, Virginia."
of the ways Tazewell County slaves managed to escape north. Samuel Harris told the paper that the one of the few things he remembered about the Civil War was that “both sides took the master’s hosses.” At that time, Samuel was a slave in the household of John W. Taylor. He also remembered knowing that if the “men in blue won,” he would no longer be a slave. However, even if they did not win, Samuel and his brothers had another plan to gain their freedom.

Samuel said that there was a man who lived across the mountain, in what is now McDowell County, West Virginia, who would lead any escaped slave to the Tug Fork River. The Tug Fork River joins with the Big Sandy River and runs into the Ohio River right at the border of West Virginia and Ohio. It was a path to freedom. Rivers were a symbol of freedom throughout African American culture.\textsuperscript{84} Appalachia was no different. Samuel Harris said the man’s name was Henry Milam, and he was known to

\textsuperscript{84} Ely, 173.
Samuel and his brothers as the first stop on the Underground Railroad. Proximity was apparently not the only impetus to run for freedom. Help was close at hand as well.85

The Civil War increased the opportunities for a slave to run. No battles were fought in Tazewell County, but both Union and Confederate forces frequently passed through the region, many of them on their way to the salt mines in Saltville, Virginia. Whenever either side passed through the region, the soldiers helped themselves to the county’s ever-dwindling supplies of food, horses, livestock, and, occasionally, slaves. Whenever Union troops passed through a region, at any point during the war, it was a given that slaves would leave with them, because of the close proximity of West Virginia. This was also the case in Tazewell County.

In May of 1864, Captain Achilles Tynes, a Tazewell County native in the Confederate army, was shocked to run into familiar black faces while traveling with his company through West Virginia. On the night of May 16th, the captain’s troops came back with some prisoners from the Union army, including a few blacks. Achilles was shocked when he recognized all the blacks as escaped slaves from Tazewell County. Several of them belonged to John Higginbotham, a Tazewell County farmer, and several to Joseph Mays, a tanner in Jeffersonville. These escaped slaves had been driving wagons for the Union army, since they left their masters. Captain Achilles Tynes recorded all of this in a letter to his wife, and instructed her to tell the escaped slaves’ masters where they could be found.86 They were being held just across the

85 “Mud Fork Man has Formula for Old Age,” The Clinch Valley News (Richlands, VA: June 2, 1953); L.L. Dickenson, “Death of a Former Slaves Ends Emancipation Era” The Clinch Valley News (Richlands, VA: May 19, 1957).
border in West Virginia by an outpost of Confederates. These runaway slaves were the unfortunate ones. Many more succeeded in escaping either with the Union army or independently taking advantage of the disruptions of war.

Slaveholders knew the threat of running was increasingly real as the war progressed. Indeed, when the Confederate government called upon Tazewell County to send its quota of slaves to help build defenses around Richmond in February of 1865, the court of Tazewell County refused. They wrote telling the governor of Virginia that Tazewell County must be exempted:

The proximity of this county to the enemy and the frequent raids made through it have already caused the loss of one-third of its most valuable slaves and those who still remain with their owners do so from choice and not necessity. In fact any able-bodied adult slave, can at any time escape and in a few hours be out of reach. This Court is satisfied that if any attempt be made to send slaves from this County to Richmond, a very large number, if not all, will abscond, and many have already openly declared their intention to do so. Now surely it will not be contended that for the labor of nine slaves (the quota of Tazewell) the owners should be subjected to the loss of all their slaves, and the more especially since the people here [are] almost entirely dependent upon the few slaves left for all the agricultural [activities] of the county.  

Slaveholders interpreted a slave’s continued presence as loyalty. Tazewell County slaveholders boasted loudly about their slave’s loyalty, even in 1852 before the Civil War. Bickley’s history of Tazewell County included a short chapter on slavery in the county, which is two-thirds a defense of the institution of slavery and one-third a description of its practice in Tazewell County. He records that the total property value of slaves held in Tazewell County in the year 1850 equaled $530,000. Slaves, he wrote, were “well clothed, have often as good houses as their masters, work

no harder, and have the same fare. They are generally trusty, and jealous for their honor. . . . They are generous and kind, and much devoted to their masters. Such are the slaves of Tazewell County." Another local historian, William C. Pendleton, also insisted on Tazewell slaves' loyalty. An ex-Confederate colonel, Pendleton waxed eloquent about slaves' "faithful service" in his book, *The History of Tazewell County and Southwest Virginia, 1748-1920*, published in 1922. In recording the remembered hardships of the Civil War, he wrote:

The faithful negro slaves also toiled on uncomplainingly, and did their part nobly in caring for the wives and children of their masters and the families of the soldiers who had no slaves. Nothing more worthy of commendation transpired during the Civil War than the faithful service performed by the slaves in Tazewell County. In proportion to their condition and opportunity they did as excellent service as the gallant men who fought for the Confederacy.

There is no doubt that the slaves of Tazewell County had loyalty and honor. However, the subject of that loyalty was most likely not their slaveholders; it was probably their own families. The slaves of Tazewell County who remained with their masters did so either because they did not want to leave their families behind, or because they were waiting to see how the war ended. As Samuel Harris from Mud Fork pointed out, most slaves knew that if the "men in blue" won, they would gain their freedom without having to risk the danger of flight. It was a game of chances, and some opted to wait and see what the outcome of the war would bring. The spring of 1865 finally brought rumors of freedom, though not always freedom in fact.

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88 Bickley, 34.
89 Pendleton, 611.
Lettie Holley was a slave woman on the plantation of Colonel William Peery. She was the plantation cook, and also had the job of looking out for the plantation's young slaves. She lived in a two-room cabin in the slave quarters with her sons. Her sons remember her for having a strong faith in God, to whom she constantly prayed that her children might be free so that they could go to church, and get an education. In spring of 1865, the slave quarters were buzzing with rumors that the North had defeated the South. The slaves waited for the Peerys to tell them they were free, but the Peerys never did. As Lettie was sitting in front of her cabin one evening, waiting for the men to come in from the fields, she prayed her usual prayer for freedom. In the middle of it, she was interrupted by a noisy cricket. It sounded to her that the cricket was singing, "Free-Let-Tee, Free-Let-Tee!" Lettie jumped up, praised God, and ran to the plantation house shouting, "I am free! I am free!" Her mistress met her at the door and told her that it was true. She was free. The Peerys were planning on telling all the slaves as soon as the crops got planted, and they made some plans for the newly freed slaves. However, the slaves were not so loyal as to stay as slaves any longer than they had to.

The paternalistic whites in slave societies loved to interpret their slaves' actions as motivated by loyalty and devotion to their masters. Tazewell County whites did not deplore the relationship of master and slave, but commended it. As Berlin writes, "the master-slave relationship provided the model for all social relations." "From the most intimate connections between men and women to the most public ones
between ruler and ruled, all relationships mimicked those of slavery." Slaveholders in Tazewell County portrayed some of these attitudes toward the master-slave relationship and their slaves.

Slaveholding – An Attitude

Mary Kelly was the daughter of John A. Kelly, a lawyer and banker in Jeffersonville. He was a successful lawyer with a sizable estate. Although not a farmer, Kelly owned five slaves. Mary came of age during the Civil War and kept a diary of the first three war years. Typical of a sixteen-year-old girl, she writes in her diary more about handsome young officers, fashion, and community gossip than about war news. Occasionally, her parents’ slaves were the subject of her writings. On May 26, 1863, Mary wrote of the death of a family slave:

So much to write! [D]ear kind aunt Silla is dead & buried. She was taken sick on Sunday, at least took her bed on that day, tho' she had been complaining on the week before of sore throat. Dr. Cecil waited on her but did not understand, told ma up to Saturday night that there was cause for uneasiness. She getting scared about herself at one o.c. the night before wanted to see the Dr. so pa sent for him. [H]e staid till four o.c. & left, still not thinking her much worse. [C]ame back in the morning & said she had some “dangerous symptoms.” in two hours after she was dead. – She was the best servant I ever knew. Grandma gave her to ma when she was married she was just two years younger than ma. Pa says he never knew a kitchen so broken up by one death. I’m sure nothing has ever hurt me more. Ma says nothing but the death of one of her own white family could have hurt her more – I must stop now.91

90 Berlin, 8.
Aunt Silla was a slave woman, but she was also considered part of the family, the black part. In slave societies, paternalism reigned. Slaves were an extension of the white family, all ruled over by the white master. Master-slave relationships were meant to mimic those of a father and child, but in the twisted world of slave societies, every relationship mimicked that of master and slave. The white family could be affectionate and caring toward its black family, but never considered it equal. The death of a slave would never be mourned like the death of a “white family” member. Mary’s mother, although expressing mourning admits that the death of a white family member would hurt her more.

Even non-slaveholding whites viewed slavery as a positive good. The most extreme example of this is George W. L. Bickley. He was born in Southwest Virginia in 1819, and in the 1850’s worked as a physician and amateur local historian in Jeffersonville, Tazewell’s county seat. He helped found the Tazewell County Historical Society, and, in 1852, published *The History of the Settlement and Indian Wars of Tazewell, Virginia*. Shortly afterward, he moved north to Ohio and continued his writing. Soon, however, he became obsessed with his most famous scheme – the founding and leading of the Knights of the Golden Circle. This expansionist group joined Manifest Destiny with proslavery sentiment. The Knights of the Golden Circle had a complicated agenda. First, they desired to colonize Mexico as an extension of the Southern slave states. This, supposedly, would allow the Southern agricultural states to secede from the Union without serious economic repercussions, accomplishing the second goal. The final goal was to spread the golden circle of
slavery across the entire continent. The objectives of the Knights of the Golden Circle were a slave expansionist’s dream.\textsuperscript{92}

**Tazewell County: On the Border**

George Bickley was a product of Southwest Virginia and Tazewell County. His views were developed while he was growing up in the Appalachian Mountains, and while he served as a physician in Tazewell County. There he learned to view slavery as a positive good, the master-slave relationship as ideal, and the expansion of slavery as something to be greatly desired. Bickley should not be considered an exception to the general population’s feelings about slavery, but as an example of the generally held view, albeit taken to an extreme. After all, many Tazewell County men gave up their lives for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Although reasons to support the Confederacy could be complex and varied, they are impossible to separate completely from the issue of slavery.

Tazewell County was not a slave society by economic standards. Ira Berlin characterized slave societies in America as always having slavery as the central productive process. Tazewell County’s population of slaves never went over 15 percent of the total population. The landscape of the region did not allow for the large commercial plantations of the Deep South that created the perfect economic environment to perpetuate a slave-based system. Slavery was just one form of labor out of many in Tazewell County. George Bickley, himself, noted in his history of the

region that slaves have not “been so valuable here, as in the cotton lands of the south.”

Raising livestock such as cattle, hogs, and sheep, gathering ginseng, and harvesting the bluegrass were the main commercial enterprises in Tazewell County. None of these demanded the same amount of labor that cotton and tobacco did. Slaves were not a necessity to the economic system, but a luxury. If economic centrality is the only qualifier of a slave society, then Tazewell County would merely have been a society with slaves.

However, Ira Berlin also states that in slave societies, slaveholders were the ruling class, whereas in a society with slaves, they only formed one part of the ruling class, not the majority. Tazewell County was clearly a slave society in this instance. Seventy-six percent of Tazewell County’s elected officials were slaveholders. More than 80 percent of the local government officials, from judges to sheriffs’ deputies, were slaveholders. When slaveholders only comprised 3 percent of the total population, that amount of power is astounding. It is clear that power was squarely in the hands of slaveholders in Tazewell County, making them the ruling class. When it comes to power distribution, Tazewell County was a slave society.

Manumission in Tazewell County does not align perfectly with either slave societies or societies with slaves. The line between slave and free was not remarkably fluid, as Berlin describes it in societies with slaves. Manumission rates were never high, and, as the Civil War drew closer, manumission greatly decreased because of the general distrust of abolitionists. However, it was possible for slaves to gain their

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93 Bickley, 376.
freedom and create meaningful independence in the larger society. The community of Mud Fork is evidence of this. Freedom was elusive, but not impossible.

In addition, only in slave societies did white society consider the master-slave relationship to be exemplar, a model for all other human relationships. In Tazewell County, there was no indication that slavery was ever regarded as illegitimate by white residents. Slaves were occasionally granted their freedom, but those instances remained rare. Bickley, who founded the Tazewell County historical society, became one of the South's most ardent slavery expansionists. Also, slaveholders displayed the same attitudes of condescending paternalism that were evident in slave societies. Tazewell County was a slave society by attitude.

Tazewell County was not completely a slave society, and yet it was more than merely a society with slaves. Its citizens' attitudes were that of a slave society and its economy that of a society with slaves. In Appalachia, stereotypes rarely fit. The exceptionalism originally prescribed to Appalachia is not accurate. Historians have tried to fit Southwest Appalachian Virginia into different categories, but it always defies categorization. It is in the South, but just barely. It is in the mountains, but it emulated the society of the lower South.

Ira Berlin created a binary that breaks down in Tazewell County. Sitting on top the Appalachian Mountains, Tazewell County was a border county in more than one sense. It not only sat on the border of North and South but also on the border of slave societies and societies with slaves. It could be labeled, perhaps, a society with slaves inside a larger slave society. However, it was not completely inside a larger slave
society because its neighboring counties to the north had very few slaves. Slave populations dramatically decrease north of Tazewell County. It is not an isolated society with slaves inside a slave society, but something else entirely.

The case of Tazewell County pushes beyond the binary of slave society and society with slaves. Tazewell County had a society where slaveholders were economically, politically, and judicially powerful. Yet, slavery was not central to the economic processes of the county, nor was it the primary means of labor. For a society such as this, neither of the categories used by Ira Berlin and others work. This type of society forces us to think differently. Slaveholding there was not just an economic position. It was an attitude. Tazewell County white citizens held this attitude even though slavery was not central to their economic life. Societies such as that in antebellum Tazewell County are defined more by the power distribution and the attitude of its white citizens than by economics.

Berlin writes that societies with slaves transformed to slave societies after the discovery of some marketable commodity such as gold or tobacco. However, he makes it clear that the transformation was not complete until slaveholders had seized power.94 In Tazewell County, this transformation took a different road. A large marketable commodity was not discovered in antebellum Tazewell County, but slaveholders took control nonetheless. Tazewell County was a slave society, but not in all the ways Berlin and others seem to think necessary. Tazewell County was a slave society by attitude and power, not by economics. Perhaps the problem is not with the binary between slave societies and societies with slaves but in the qualifiers for those...

94 Berlin, 10.
labels. Tazewell County had the politics, power, and attitude of a slave society but with the economy of a society with slaves. However, when it came time to choose a side in the Civil War, the power, politics, and attitude won out over the economics. Tazewell County was a slave society without the centrality of slavery to its economic system.

Afterword

The history of slavery in Tazewell County touches upon many different areas of history. Not only does it affect slave studies, but also Appalachian studies. It adds texture and color to the history of Appalachia by putting one county under a microscope. More individual county studies like this would give us a better picture of what slavery in Appalachia really was like. This could, perhaps, broaden our understandings of societies with slaves and slave societies in America. Another area that this study touches upon is the study of border lands. Tazewell County was a border county. An extension of this study to include the other counties along the West Virginia and Virginia border would give historians more insight into the effect slavery had upon Virginia’s split. Tazewell County would also be an interesting place for a study of collective memory. For a place so dedicated to its heritage, it is strangely able to forget slavery while remembering so much else. Slavery’s pervasiveness in Tazewell County changes the perceived history of the independent white pioneers. They did not tame the wilderness alone, nor were they totally dedicated to freedom
and independence. They were slaveholders, and African Americans worked alongside the whites at building the society of Tazewell County.
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