

**Worked to the Bone**  
**Race, Class, Power, and Privilege**  
**in Kentucky**

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if I can show how people's attitudes about race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality may contribute to efforts to divide and rule us, getting us to fight each other in order to raise profits, then I will have fulfilled my agenda. This alternative to the dominant version of history and anthropology can be applied by people in other places to their own situations. And perhaps together we can circumvent a future of even bonier fingers in which we desperately fight each other for the right to basic human necessities while corporate profits soar.

## 1

## MAKING SWEAT TRICKLE UP: ORGANIZING THE FIRST STEPS TOWARD UNDERDEVELOPMENT IN THE U.S. SOUTH

The sun shines bright on the old Kentucky home,  
Tis summer, the darkies ["people," in recent versions] are gay,  
The corn top's ripe and the meadow's in the bloom  
While the birds make music all the day.  
The young folks roll on the little cabin floor,  
All merry, all happy and bright:  
By 'n' by Hard Times comes a knocking at the door,  
Then my old Kentucky Home, good night!  
[Chorus:]  
Weep no more, my lady,  
Oh! weep no more today!  
We will sing one song  
For the old Kentucky Home,  
For the old Kentucky Home, far away.

—Stephen Foster

**T**he power of dominant understandings of the past and of the dominant stereotypes of Kentucky—including the state song's description of slavery—lies in their inaccuracy. What is it that this remarkably unified dominant understanding of Kentucky is covering up in order to perform the usual function of such dominant views of the past—supporting the authority of those who hold power in the present? To answer this question, we first have to look at the meaning of *development*, the process that has brought Kentucky to its present position at the bottom of the barrel on most socioeconomic indicators while at the same time concentrating wealth in the hands of a small number of people.

## THE TRICKLE-UP THEORY OF DEVELOPMENT

Former President Reagan was known for his support of the trickle-down theory of economics—which George Bush Sr., running against Ronald Reagan in the primaries, referred to as “voodoo economics.” But this wasn’t voodoo: Reagan had just gotten things a little mixed up. What he should have said was the trickle-up theory, which is what development is all about.<sup>1</sup> To explain what I mean, let me go back to the plumbing business.

Plumbing deals with drainage systems, and organizes the flow of water in and out of a house. Development likewise deals with drainage, organizing the flow of value produced by work—the flow of sweat—out of the hands of workers and through the hands of successive layers of elites. In a plumbing system, pipes get bigger and bigger toward the bottom of a house as they carry more and more water, and continue getting bigger as larger pipes under the street collect water from more and more houses. Plumbing systems get reorganized from time to time as new technologies are developed. When the outhouse is replaced by a flush toilet and septic tank, the house develops a drainage system connecting it with a spot a short distance away, and much more liquid is handled than in the old system. As additional bathrooms are installed, new plumbing is needed and the amount of liquid increases. When the septic tank is replaced by a sewer system, drainage again has to be reorganized. The house is now connected to a much larger system that includes all the other houses in the neighborhood. Each house now contributes to a huge flow of sewage going toward a central point at a considerable distance. Likewise development involves reorganization of the flow of sweat, of the flow of value produced by work. Like the progressive changes in plumbing systems, historically development has meant a bigger and bigger flow out of the household and an increased concentration of that flow into fewer and fewer, but bigger, pipes. And development, like the reorganization of plumbing systems (as I can personally testify!), involves a lot of dirty work.

We ordinarily visualize social structure as a pyramid, however, with lots of ordinary people at the bottom, and fewer and fewer people higher on the pyramid, with a few extraordinarily wealthy and powerful people at the very top. So since we think of powerful people as being “up,” to make my plumbing analogy work, think of that flow of value as an uphill flow, going up in bigger and bigger concentrations into the hands of level after level of fewer and fewer but increasingly wealthy people. Sweat, in other words, is made to trickle up.

Development is a process by which sweat is made to trickle up. Each stage of development is a reorganization to produce a larger flow of sweat into the hands of an elite. This is not voodoo, and Reagan’s “trickle-down” economics did increase the flow of value up the socioeconomic scale into the hands of the already wealthy. During his administration the rich got significantly wealthier, the poor got significantly poorer, while those in the middle saw drops in their standard of living.<sup>2</sup> But Reagan didn’t invent this system, nor did it stop under a Democratic administration. The plantation of “My Old Kentucky Home” in reality merely represented a different organization of the drainage system. It was one of the stops along the pipe that eventually drained small white farming households as well as slave households. But before any of this could happen in Kentucky the Native American culture already there had to be dismantled, because it was not organized to provide drainage.

## THE NATIVE AMERICAN EGALITARIAN SYSTEM

The dominant history says Native Americans described Kentucky as a “dark and bloody ground,” used merely for fighting and occasional hunting forays. This is a variant of the common colonial claim that an area was unused, misused, or under used by its indigenous inhabitants. This claim makes colonization appear to be a more “efficient,” and therefore a “better,” use of the land, and taking it away would have little consequence for indigenous survival.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the Cherokee and Shawnee used Kentucky extensively. The Cherokee hunted here and had a few permanent settlements. For the Shawnee it was an integral part of the annual subsistence strategy; they left their permanent settlements and migrated into Kentucky during the winter in small family encampments.<sup>4</sup>

The Cherokee and Shawnee were not organized before colonization to produce a surplus that an elite could take away from the households that did the work. Neither Cherokee nor Shawnee had a real elite or ruling class. Cherokee households consisted of kin all related to each other through their mother’s side of the family; at marriage, men moved in with their wives’ families.<sup>5</sup> The older women in the household directed the work of the younger women, their daughters and granddaughters, nieces and younger cousins. The crops they grew together belonged to the entire household. The clan to which each household automatically belonged distributed land to its members. All women had the right to farm on the land used by their household. And since all women were automatically born as

part of a household, this meant they all had the right to farm somewhere. The men who lived with them, husbands and unmarried sons, brothers, and nephews, had a right to food from the crops because they were married to or related to the women who had direct use rights to clan land. This meant that all men had the right to eat somewhere, either in the household where they were born or in the household of their wives. Men cleared land for farming, helped with planting and harvesting, did a lot of hunting, providing meat for the household in which they lived, and conducted warfare. The senior men and women of each clan had positions of considerable authority in guiding decisions for the conduct of internal and external affairs of each village, including decisions relating to war.

The Shawnee system was similar, although there is far less anthropological and historical information about them than about the Cherokee. Shawnee households were nuclear rather than extended like those of the Cherokee, and apparently village rather than clan organization determined land use. But like the Cherokee, women controlled the crops they grew and held positions of political power in a system of chiefs that paralleled that of the men. These chiefs participated with male chiefs in policy decisions relating to both war and peace, and directed the conduct of those affairs, such as farming, that were exclusively female.

Neither chiefs nor anyone else among the Cherokee or Shawnee had the right to demand tribute or tax from other households. Chiefs did the same work and lived in the same way as everyone else. Nor was there any method for hiring someone to work to produce wealth for you. Households that didn't have enough male or female labor to support all their dependents—the very elderly and the young or incapacitated—could adopt or enslave war captives. Some of the chiefs—like monarchs in Europe—had to come from the right lineage, but were chosen from the available men or women of that lineage according to ability, not by being firstborn. Other chiefly positions, such as war chief, were awarded according to ability, not by lineage. Chiefly households were not materially better off than other households. Chiefs themselves received prestige and had some power, but could not act without the agreement of a council composed of clan elders.

Kentucky had not always been free of a drainage system or of an elite. Earlier in Native American history, things may have been somewhat different. Archaeological evidence indicates that people here—who preceded the Cherokee and Shawnee—were involved in chiefdoms that are now called Hopewell and Mississippian.<sup>6</sup> Hopewell chiefs may have received gifts and later Mississippian chiefdoms may have demanded a small

amount of tribute. The most powerful Mississippian paramount chiefs at Cahokia (near present-day St. Louis) may have stored tribute and weapons in warehouses on the huge central temple mound. Similar, but smaller, mounds are found throughout Kentucky. These were much more complex and less egalitarian chiefdoms than those of the Cherokee and Shawnee, and did involve some drainage. It was the work of the household that produced those gifts and tribute, and that work went to increase the prestige and power of the chief. Nevertheless, the drainage was slight, since only a very small proportion of the household's work went toward producing or procuring the gift or tribute. Everyone in Mississippian societies had direct access to land. However, this was not true of Native American states such as the Aztec or Inca where, as in the European kingdoms from which the early colonizers came, an aristocracy controlled the land and took much of the produce grown by people living on it. However, by the time the first Europeans and Africans arrived in Kentucky in the mid-1700s, Native Americans—like the Cherokee and Shawnee—had established a more egalitarian society in much of the former Mississippian area.

Most of what is now the United States was organized in ways comparable to those of the Cherokee and Shawnee, without a major drainage system like that of the Inca and Aztec empires. The Europeans here could not simply conquer a king or paramount chief, substitute themselves at the top of an already-established drainage system, and receive the tribute that was already organized to flow to the top, as they did when they conquered the Incas and Aztecs.<sup>7</sup> Nor could they control the labor of these Native Americans who—unlike those in the empires—had clear and direct rights to land, and were not organized to give labor or wealth to nobles. So in Kentucky, as in much of the rest of what is now the United States, a drainage system had to be established before anyone was going to get wealthy. And wealth was, indeed, the intention of the first European landowners in Kentucky, the speculators who took up vast tracts of the best land.

#### ORGANIZING THE INITIAL DRAINAGE SYSTEMS IN VIRGINIA

To make sense of what happened in Kentucky it is necessary first to take a good hard look at Virginia. What is now Kentucky was part of Virginia during the colonial period, and events in colonial Virginia shaped the future of drainage in the South. Drainage requires access to resources and to a controlled labor supply, to people who will, voluntarily or involuntarily

ily, allow their sweat to flow up to enrich others. With the invasion of what is now Virginia, Europeans simultaneously organized two methods of drainage. They tapped the coastal plains by growing tobacco using the forced labor of Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans on confiscated or ceded Powhatan land. They tapped the more distant hills and mountains through trade for deer and other skins with indebted Native Americans, particularly the Cherokee.

### Deerskin, debt, and indirect control of Native American labor

Europeans on the coast, bent on raising tobacco rather than food, were not at all reluctant to back up their negotiations for land and for food with force.<sup>8</sup> Tobacco was a medium of exchange within the colony, used regularly for purchases; growing tobacco was almost like growing dollar bills. And it was the source of profits for investors in the Virginia Company and later for independent planters. Devoting land and labor to tobacco, rather than to growing food, was a policy that forced European dependence on Native American cornfields and women's labor, and on Native American meat hunting and men's labor. Since tobacco depleted the soil rapidly, it also forced dependence on continuous new supplies of Native American land. Massacres of reluctant villages were not uncommon; neither was Native American retaliation and resistance.

Trading was often forced by violence, but Native Americans soon had their own reasons to trade. Not least among these reasons for people living back from the coast was the need for rifles to hold back the rising tide of Europeans. Furthermore, Europeans purposefully gave alcohol in trade in order to addict Native Americans; once addicted they became willing traders. Again purposely, European traders gave goods on credit in order to create debt. As trade increased, so did the need for European goods, particularly the metal axes and hoes needed to increase the production of corn and the rifles and knives that helped produce meat and skins. Deerskins for Europe's leather industry followed tobacco as the second most lucrative colonial product. In a series of vicious circles, as deer became scarcer, men devoted more time to hunting and less to clearing farmland. As women devoted more time to tanning hides, they became more dependent on manufactured goods and tools. At the same time, an enormous death rate contributed to the destruction of the former Native American social structure. Deaths skyrocketed as a result of exposure to European diseases, from wars with the Europeans, and from wars with other Native Americans over the land that was left. Gradually Appalachian Native

American communities, pushed by debt and growing dependence on European goods, became part of an export economy. Many people, however, continued to argue that they should push the Europeans back into the sea or cut off all contact with them.

### Tobacco and direct control of forced labor

Tobacco was the greatest source of wealth for the owners of the Virginia Company and later for independent European planters. In addition it was often the more powerful planters who monopolized the deerskin trade, concentrating the two greatest sources of wealth in the hands of a fairly small number of Europeans. However, tobacco was then, as it is now, an extraordinarily labor-intensive crop. For large tobacco planters to maximize their profits, they needed a huge labor supply. Their system, like the drainage system in England, was based on the denial of land rights.<sup>9</sup> Any system similar to the Native American egalitarian system in which land rights were treated as human rights would not produce drainable people. The planter elite met their labor and profit requirements with a flexible and constantly evolving system of unfree labor. While this system itself was never static, its fundamental principle was always "the assumption of the God-given right to mistreat others" in the name of profits.<sup>10</sup>

Initially unfree labor was organized for a vast array of people from three different continents in an equally vast array of unfree arrangements. Europeans defined unfree labor for people captured in a "just war" as legitimate. This definition was common around the world, permitting the buying and selling of captives under sentence of lifelong, but not hereditary, servitude. The result was a flow of exported captives around the world as neighboring enemies sold each other on the centuries-old international market. England had sold Irish captives to the Spanish army; Germans had sold Slavs; African kingdoms sold captives from other kingdoms and tribes . . . the list includes slaves and slave-traders from every continent.<sup>11</sup> In the North American colonies thousands of captive Native Americans were forced into lifelong unpaid servitude in a system close to slavery; others were forced into shorter unpaid contracts, closer to indenture. Some were captured by Europeans. Others were captured in inter-tribal wars and sold by the winners to Europeans. The Europeans quickly established a policy of fomenting inter-tribal war and of supplying arms to both sides. This policy provided an increased number of captives, depleted Native American fighting strength, and focused their anger on each other instead of on European invaders.<sup>12</sup>

However, Native Americans were not an ideal labor source from the planters' point of view.<sup>13</sup> Since many Native Americans still had access to land themselves, they had no need to work for others. Captured Native Americans could disappear, joining other Native Americans further from white settlement. Perhaps even more importantly, Native Americans had friends and family with some power nearby; Europeans frequently had cause to regret enslaving Native Americans when a captive's relatives staged retaliatory raids.

Since the attempt to directly control Native American labor on the continent was relatively unsuccessful, other sources of labor were needed if tobacco was to be lucrative.<sup>14</sup> Tenants, both African and European, were part of the answer. But tenants demanded a portion of the crop they raised or helped to raise, a big labor cost to landowners. As the elite consolidated more and more land in their own hands, they began to force tenants into accepting contracts that turned them into nearly unpaid laborers.<sup>15</sup> With this adjustment, landowners considered tenancy a practical arrangement for land they couldn't oversee themselves, particularly in areas vulnerable to Native American attack, or where land had to be cleared and the crop would be small. But in prime tobacco-producing areas, landowners wanted even cheaper and more abundant gang laborers. However, hiring gang labor was difficult since European workers tended to leave these jobs so long as land, and therefore a degree of independence, was still somewhat available to them.<sup>16</sup>

Forced and unpaid labor was the planters' preferred choice, and those most easily available for forcing came from Europe. The poor of England and the youth of rebellious Ireland were rounded up, frequently by force, and shipped to the colonies under conditions so awful that Bennett describes them as "the White Middle Passage."<sup>17</sup> They, as well as desperately poor people from other parts of Europe and some captives from Africa, became indentured servants. Laws were written or revised to increase the supply of people who could be shipped involuntarily. Vagrancy laws now could be applied to anyone who couldn't find a job, and people could be convicted and shipped for sale for seven years if they stole a loaf of bread.<sup>18</sup> For the first seventy years of colonization unfree Europeans performed most of the work of the colonies. Indeed, until 1660, Africans were probably not more than 5 percent of the population of Virginia.<sup>19</sup> And during those early years, neither slavery, indenture, nor race were clearly established; all three evolved together to meet changing elite needs for forced unpaid labor.

## EARLY EVOLUTION OF UNFREE LABOR

Initially the Virginia Company paid workers' passage and supplied them with food for a year.<sup>20</sup> After that year they were freed, given land, and could get more land by importing other workers under the headright system. However, contracts soon shifted the cost of the passage and supplies to the servant, creating debt and debt peonage. Indentures were rapidly lengthened far beyond covering the cost of the passage and food. Laws governing the relationship between owner and servant gave the owner more and more control over the life of the servant. During their indenture, servants could be sold to other masters; they could be whipped for disobedience; they had to have their masters' permission to marry. Women who bore children while indentured were forced into two and a half additional years of service to pay their masters back for the time they "lost" due to pregnancy and child care. Eventually children whose indentured mothers were unmarried were themselves indentured until they were in their twenties, so that to some extent indentured servitude took on the hereditary aspects of true slavery. As indenture laws became harsher, owners of women found it advantageous to permit or to make sure they became pregnant. Raping, coercing, or seducing their servants gave owners the labor of their own illegitimate children, to use themselves or to sell, until the children were adults.

Indenture during the 1600s thus gradually became a closer relative of slavery; indentured servants were often sold on the same auction block as slaves. During the early years, most indentured people were European. However, Africans were also sometimes indentured, and slavery for those Africans who arrived already enslaved from the West Indies was not as different from indenture as it later became. Children of slaves were often free, or became free at adulthood, as did the children of indentured servants. Slavery wasn't even necessarily lifelong, but was instead an indenture that was a lot longer than the usual version. Free Africans and Europeans frequently married; some free Africans owned land and indentured servants. The two groups were not clearly demarcated, either in terms of ancestry or in terms of their position in early colonial social structure. Oppression at this point wasn't racial.<sup>21</sup>

It is difficult to know how many were unfree at any one time, but it was certainly a large number. In 1627, for example, fifteen hundred captured children were shipped to Virginia and in 1636, of the five thousand non-Native inhabitants of Virginia, approximately three thousand had come as indentured servants. The legality of all this was established at the very first

session of the Virginia House of Burgesses, with democracy for a few and unfree labor for nearly everyone else.<sup>22</sup>

### REVISING THE SYSTEM: CONSTRUCTING SLAVERY

In shifting away from dependence on tenants to dependence on indenture, big landowners destroyed the middle class, those people with a stake in the system who would act as a buffer between the landowners, their forced laborers, and the free but desperately poor.<sup>23</sup> As the European population of the colonies increased, this became a more pressing problem. It became harder and harder to isolate European indentured servants from the free European population, so that even temporary enslavement became harder to enforce. European indentured servants could and did run away, blending in with the rest of the Europeans.<sup>24</sup>

From the masters' point of view, another problem with indentured servitude was of even greater concern. European and African indentured servants frequently identified with each other and exhibited what was to their masters an alarming tendency to join together in rebellion and resistance. The tendency of African and European indentured servants to join poor and disgruntled, but free, Europeans and Africans to make common cause against the elite was an even greater cause for alarm.<sup>25</sup> And the ranks of the poor and disgruntled were growing as more people finished their indentures. Since the financially advantaged got most of the remaining land, little remained for newly free people. Earlier, perhaps one-half of those gaining their freedom had been able to get land. By the 1670s, it was closer to one in twenty, and many small landowners were in debt to the larger ones.

Before 1670 all free men, African and European, had the vote. But the elite worried about the potential for rebellion among those Governor William Berkeley described as the six out of seven "people [who] were 'Poor Indebted Discontented and Armed,' " and in 1670 the legislature took away the voting rights of landless men.<sup>26</sup> Bacon's Rebellion followed in 1676 on the heels of this withdrawal of privilege and was the culmination of years of increasing discontent.<sup>27</sup> Nathaniel Bacon, a frontier landholder, organized a militia for an attack against Native Americans. Organizing armed and desperately poor freemen was counter to Governor Berkeley's policy, given elite worries about revolt. Bacon was charged with treason, and he retaliated by marching against Jamestown, joined by a multitude of African and European indentured servants. It

was a dramatic exhibition of the tendency of poor free people and indentured servants, all angry, to make common cause regardless of ancestry. While Bacon apparently intended to use this anger to propel himself from local elite status into the ruling core, his followers were intent on using the rebellion to force land redistribution and to regain the vote. Nearly the entire Virginia population was at least peripherally involved. Jamestown literally went up in smoke. On top of all this, tension between larger and smaller landowners was increasing, although that didn't develop into outright conflict until the early 1700s when elite and small farmers fought over tobacco sale regulation.<sup>28</sup>

People with power, in other words, were having trouble getting everyone else to believe their power was legitimate and natural. Poorer people of similar class position joined together, understanding that they had a common oppressor in the elite. A royal commission after the rebellion concluded that controlling the unrest, forcing local elites and the rebellious poor to accept the legitimacy of the governing elites, would require the permanent presence of an army.<sup>29</sup> From the point of view of the elite, a new system was needed.

Let us be clear here: the course the elite chose was not their only option.<sup>30</sup> They could have abandoned forced labor. They could have redistributed land and power so that all would have enough, in a system more like the Native American one they had destroyed. They could have stopped importing European and African labor so that the population would not grow so dramatically. Then it might have been possible to provide land for all without threatening Native American survival, thereby avoiding Native American reprisals. The elite chose not to go this way. To do so would have meant renouncing the drainage system that made them wealthy and powerful; they would no longer be an elite. This they were not willing to do. Instead, they chose to reorganize the drainage system and to create the racial divide from which nearly all Americans have suffered, to varying degrees and in varying ways, ever since. They created this divide in order to manufacture consent to poverty or powerlessness, or both, for most Europeans, and absolute powerlessness for most Africans. They created a drainage hierarchy to benefit themselves, to provide maximum profits with minimum rebellion. This hierarchy ranged from smaller landowners to tenant farmers, laborers, apprentices, servants, convict laborers, and slaves.

One strategy was simply to lengthen the term of indenture and tighten the laws surrounding it. This progressive removal of English rights for servants had begun before Bacon's Rebellion, as had the first steps toward

slavery.<sup>31</sup> It accelerated after the rebellion, and, as a stopgap measure, it was helpful. However, it produced even angrier servants and angrier freed men and women at the end of their indenture. But its biggest flaw was a demographic one. As more indentured servants began surviving long enough to become free, even with the extended indenture period, the free population wanting land was increasing rapidly.

Earlier, when half the new arrivals to the colonies survived for less than five years, masters had preferred the cheaper, short-term purchase of indentured servants, rather than spending more for a lifetime servant who might die within a few years. Later, however, turning to lifetime purchase made economic sense for landowners since new arrivals were likely to live longer.<sup>32</sup> But constructing permanent slavery for Europeans in the colonies would have been difficult. Like Native Americans, unfree Europeans had free friends and relatives with some degree of power; some of them wrote home to England. If Europeans became slaves, ferment in England might lead to laws cutting off the flow of laborers to the colonies. To some extent this problem was avoided by describing the assignment of unfree laborers as marriage. In the earliest colonial years, the Virginia Company simply imported women and sold them, at a profit, for marriage to men who could afford the very high price.<sup>33</sup>

As the next chapter will describe, the solution the planters eventually chose was two-pronged: permanent, inherited slavery for those identified by African descent, and varying forms of temporary unfree and semi-free labor for many of those identified by European descent. Altogether this system had disastrous consequences for both Europeans and Africans.<sup>34</sup>

## 2

### DERAILING REBELLION: INVENTING WHITE PRIVILEGE

**A**nger increased among landless Europeans as their numbers continued to increase after Bacon's Rebellion. By 1720 in Christ Church, Virginia, for instance, over 40 percent of households were landless.<sup>1</sup> Jobs other than low-paid labor or farm tenancy were scarce, and a new series of laws criminalized joblessness: "vagrants" were sold as unfree servants. In fact, many European tenants, day laborers, indentured servants, and apprentices were only partially free. Smedley points out that "convicts, vagabonds, orphans, illegitimate children of all 'races,' and debtors were frequently bought and sold and even referred to occasionally as 'slaves.'"<sup>2</sup> The misery resulting from landlessness was very real, and therefore so was the danger of rebellion, but using direct force struck the Virginia elites as problematic for controlling Europeans. Instead, they defused the danger of European rebellion in the century following Bacon's Rebellion through strategies focused on getting Europeans, regardless of their class position, to identify with the elite—to believe that what was good for the elite was good for them.

While there was still some fertile, if expensive, land left, this operation was relatively straightforward. The elite, through their own credit in England and Scotland, provided loans to small farmers. In return for credit, these farmers provided deference and political support to the elite. But the landless were not tied into this system, and by the 1760s even smaller landowners were becoming less submissive.<sup>3</sup> An alternative mechanism was needed to get the poor to accept elite leadership; the solution lay in creating the first of what would be many versions of an evolving white privilege. The drainage system after Bacon's Rebellion was gradually

revised into a two-pronged system of slavery for those of African descent and "freedom" for those of European descent. In reality, however, the least powerful among those of European descent were bound into varying degrees of unfree labor, and even those with somewhat more power continued to be drained by those above them.

Because of the rather mythical quality of their freedom, and because of a several generation history of cooperation between African and European laborers, it wasn't immediately obvious to many poorer Europeans that *whiteness* was their defining characteristic. They had to be persuaded to buy into the new dual system, persuaded that whiteness made them like the elite. If oppressed European and African laborers could be divided this way—if their solidarity could be broken—the elite would have an adequate, controllable, and cheap African labor supply and drainable class categories of Europeans.

### CONSTRUCTING RACE

Improbable as it now seems, since Americans live in a society where racial characterization and self-definition appear to be parts of nature, in the early days of colonization before slavery was solidified and clearly distinguished from other forms of forced labor, Europeans and Africans seem not to have seen their physical differences in that way.<sup>4</sup> It took until the end of the 1700s for ideas about race to develop until they resembled those we live with today. Before Bacon's Rebellion, African and European indentured servants made love with each other, married each other, ran away with each other, lived as neighbors, liked or disliked each other according to individual personality. Sometimes they died or were punished together for resisting or revolting. And masters had to free both Europeans and Africans if they survived to the end of their indentures. Likewise, Europeans initially did not place all Native Americans in a single racial category. They saw cultural, not biological, differences among Native Americans as distinguishing one tribe from another and from themselves.

Given the tendency of slaves, servants, and landless free Europeans and Africans to cooperate in rebellion, the elite had to "teach Whites the value of whiteness" in order to divide and rule their labor force.<sup>5</sup> After Bacon's Rebellion they utilized their domination of colonial legislatures that made laws and of courts that administered them, gradually building a racial strategy based on the earlier tightening and lengthening of African indenture. Part of this process was tighter control of voting. Free property-owning

blacks, mulattos, and Native Americans, all identified as *not* of European ancestry, were denied the vote in 1723.<sup>6</sup>

To keep the racial categories separate, a 1691 law increased the punishment of European women who married African or Indian men; toward the end of the 1600s a white woman could be whipped or enslaved for marrying a Black. Eventually enslavement for white women was abolished because it transgressed the definition of slavery as black. The problem of what to do with white women's "black" children was eventually partially solved by the control of white women's reproduction to prevent the existence of such children. The potentially "white" children of black women were defined out of existence; they were "black" and shifted from serving a thirty-year indenture to being slaves. To facilitate these reproductive distinctions and to discourage the intimacy that can lead to solidarity and revolts, laws were passed requiring separate quarters for black and white laborers. Kathleen Brown points out that the control of women's bodies thus became critical to the maintenance of whiteness and to the production of slaves.<sup>7</sup> At the same time black men were denied the rights of colonial masculinity as property ownership, guns, and access to white women were forbidden. Children were made to inherit their mother's status, freeing European fathers from any vestiges of responsibility for their offspring born to indentured or enslaved African mothers. This legal shift has had a profound effect on the distribution of wealth in the United States ever since; slaveholding fathers were some of the richest men in the country, and their wealth, distributed among *all* their children, would have created a significant wealthy black segment of the population.

At the same time a changing panoply of specific laws molded European behavior into patterns that made slave revolt and cross-race unity more and more difficult.<sup>8</sup> These laws limited, for instance, the European right to teach slaves to read. Europeans couldn't use slaves in skilled jobs, which were reserved for Europeans. Europeans had to administer prescribed punishment for slave "misbehavior" and were expected to participate in patrolling at night. They did not have the legal right to befriend Blacks. A white servant who ran away with a Black was subject to additional punishment beyond that for simply running away. European rights to free their slaves were also curtailed.

Built into all this, rarely mentioned but nevertheless basic to the elite's ability to create and maintain whiteness, slavery, and exploitation, was the use of force against both Blacks and Whites. Fear kept many Whites from challenging, or even questioning, the system. It is worth quoting Lerone Bennett's analysis of how the differentiation between black and white was accomplished:

The whole system of separation and subordination rested on official state terror. The exigencies of the situation required men to kill some white people to keep them white and to kill many blacks to keep them black. In the North and South, men and women were maimed, tortured, and murdered in a comprehensive campaign of mass conditioning. The severed heads of black and white rebels were impaled on poles along the road as warnings to black people and white people, and opponents of the status quo were starved to death in chains and roasted slowly over open fires. Some rebels were branded; others were castrated. This exemplary cruelty, which was carried out as a deliberate process of mass education, was an inherent part of the new system.<sup>9</sup>

### Creating white privilege

White privileges were established. The "daily exercise of white personal power over black individuals had become a cherished aspect of Southern culture," a critically important part of getting Whites to "settle for being white."<sup>10</sup> Privilege encouraged Whites to identify with the big slaveholding planters as members of the same "race." They were led to act on the belief that all Whites had an equal interest in the maintenance of whiteness and white privilege, and that it was the elite—those controlling the economic system, the political system, and the judicial system—who ultimately protected the benefits of being white.<sup>11</sup>

More pain could be inflicted on Blacks than on Whites.<sup>12</sup> Whites alone could bear arms; Whites alone had the right of self-defense. White servants could own livestock; Africans couldn't. It became illegal to whip naked Whites. Whites but not Africans had to be given their freedom dues at the end of their indenture. Whites were given the right to beat any Blacks, even those they didn't own, for failing to show proper respect. Only Whites could be hired to force black labor as overseers. White servants and laborers were given lighter tasks and a monopoly, for a time, on skilled jobs. White men were given the right to control "their" women without elite interference; Blacks as slaves were denied the right to family at all, since family would mean that slave husbands, not owners, controlled slave wives. In 1668, all free African women were defined as labor, for whom husbands or employers had to pay a tithe, while white women were defined as keepers of men's homes, not as labor; their husbands paid no tax on them. White women were indirectly given control of black slaves and the right to substitute slave labor for their own labor in the fields.

Despite these privileges, landless Whites, some of them living in "miserable huts," might have rejected white privilege if they saw that in fact it made little *positive* difference in their lives, and instead merely protected them from the worst *negative* effects of elite punishment and interference, such as were inflicted on those of African descent.<sup>13</sup> After all, the right to whip someone doesn't cure your own hunger or landlessness. By the end of the Revolutionary War unrest was in the air. Direct control by the elite was no longer politically or militarily feasible. Rebellions and attempted rebellions had been fairly frequent in the hundred years following Bacon's Rebellion.<sup>14</sup> They indicated the continuing depth of landless European discontent. Baptist ferment against the belief in the inherent superiority of the upper classes simply underscored the danger.<sup>15</sup>

So landless Europeans had to be given some *material* reason to reject those aspects of their lives that made them similar to landless Africans and Native Americans, and to focus instead on their similarity to the landed Europeans—to accept whiteness as their defining characteristic. Landless Europeans' only real similarity to the elite was their European ancestry itself, so that ancestry had to be given real significance: European ancestry was identified with upward mobility and the right to use the labor of the non-eligible in their upward climb. So, since land at that time was the source of upward mobility, land had to be made available, if only to a few.

Meanwhile, Thomas Jefferson advocated the establishment of a solid white Anglo-Saxon yeoman class of small farmers, who, as property owners, would acquire a vested interest in law and order and reject class conflict with the elite. These small farmers would, by upholding "law and order," support and sometimes administer the legal mechanisms—jails, workhouses and poorhouses, and vagrancy laws—that would control other Whites who would remain a landless labor force. They would support the legal and illegal mechanisms controlling Native Americans, Africans, and poor Whites, becoming a buffer class between the elite and those they most exploited, disguising the elite's continuing grip on power and wealth. This strategy—co-opting a few, giving them privileges and advancement in return for controlling the rest of an exploited group—has been used in many parts of the world when an elite wishes to avoid the use of military might to put down the rebellions their exploitation arouses.<sup>16</sup>

With land or the hope of land of their own, these white people would become a buffer between the elite and those they most severely exploited. And some, at least, would see white anger from those at the bottom as unjustified. Elite legitimacy would be reestablished. But providing the land to create this white buffer class remained difficult until after the Revolutionary War.

## KENTUCKY, LAND, AND A MATERIAL BASIS FOR HOPE

Kentucky, with its first permanent European settlement in 1774, became a relief valve for the East Coast European landless. It provided that missing material basis—land—for an apparently realistic hope of upward mobility and a corresponding identification with elites. The potency of that hope, and the desperation that prompted it, is hinted at in contemporary horrified descriptions of poor Whites flooding over the mountains.<sup>17</sup> These descriptions bring to mind stories of Okies heading to California, or television images of refugees fleeing starvation, carrying children and possessions, without money for land or food, enduring the trek in the hopes that conditions elsewhere will be better.

The first white explorers had crossed the mountains around 1750, when the lack of land east of the Appalachians was reaching crisis proportions. They returned with tales of incredible land in Kentucky. John Filson described Kentucky as an earthly paradise “where afflicted humanity raises her drooping head; where springs a harvest for the poor; where conscience ceases to be a slave, and laws are no more than the security of happiness.”<sup>18</sup> This was a land where poor but intrepid white men like Daniel Boone could become heroes, according to Filson, a land speculator, who published this widely distributed description in 1784 to attract buyers.<sup>19</sup> The myth of Kentucky as a wondrous Garden of Eden gripped public imagination, and the rumor circulated that land would be available to all Whites. Instead there were land grants to veterans, but only to those non-veterans who arrived before 1778. For a brief time, laws made land relatively easy to purchase south of the Green River. The rumor and the occasional reality of free or cheap land combined with the widely circulated descriptions of paradise to become the basis for the hope that led tens of thousands to Kentucky. What most poor Whites actually found upon arrival in Kentucky bore little resemblance either to the myths or to the bonanza that the wealthy had already claimed.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, by providing a material basis for hope the Kentucky myth helped consolidate whiteness and played a critical role in creating a buffer class.

## DISPOSSESSING NATIVE AMERICANS IN KENTUCKY

The deerskin drainage system had by this time reached across the mountains into what is now Kentucky. That system had depended on Cherokee and Shawnee control of hunting and farming grounds, and was protected

for a time by the British Proclamation Line that forbade white settlement across the Appalachians. When it became necessary to allow European access to land in Kentucky, this older drainage system, as well as the remains of the indigenous egalitarian system, had to be dismantled. First, Shawnee and Cherokee land rights had to be denied. Military force was critical in this process, since Native Americans mounted a fifty-year armed resistance.<sup>21</sup> Also critical was the onslaught of European disease, and the signing and abrogating of treaties. Dragging Canoe was right when he said the European invasion would *make* Kentucky “dark and bloody.”<sup>22</sup>

Second, despite military and biological assault there were still Native Americans left in Kentucky. And as long as they held land in common, no individual could sell it to white settlers, because no one actually owned it. To deal with this, Congress and Thomas Jefferson, both as president and as governor of Virginia, organized individual private property *ownership* to replace the land *use* rights vested in clan, village, and household. Men (not women) had to farm their own farms and become patriarchal heads of households. Women lost control of land, crops, and their official positions of authority, becoming dependent on men for their right to sustenance. Men would not be subject to what some Europeans, in disgust, called “petticoat government,” and would control decisions about their land.<sup>23</sup> And, as Jefferson explained to Congress, once individual Native Americans privately owned land, the sale of manufactured goods could be used to tempt or fool them into debt. Once indebted, Jefferson pointed out, they could be forced to sell those privately owned farms to Whites. Jefferson advocated the use of federally owned trading houses to accomplish this goal, since they would not need to make a profit, as would private businesses.<sup>24</sup>

Some Cherokee bought into this system. They accommodated themselves to private property ownership and white ideas about farming and established farms on land Whites didn't want at that time. Owners of large tracts needed more laborers than a family could provide in order to accumulate the wealth that their private ownership theoretically made possible. Since Cherokee culture didn't provide people “willing” to allow the owner to use their labor to become wealthy while the person doing the work did not, some large Cherokee landholders bought African slaves.<sup>25</sup> These Cherokee landowners now played a part similar to that of many Whites in the new drainage system. Once Whites wanted their land, however, U.S. troops forcibly removed them and sent them on “The Trail of Tears” to land Whites did not want in Oklahoma.

## REPOSSESSION BY WHITES

During the 1750s, wealthy land speculators began breaking treaty agreements with Native Americans and with the French. They obtained vast land holdings for future sale and as a resource to be used in the production of goods for sale. Much of what remained later went to veterans in lieu of wages. Officers' grants were often many thousands of acres, far more than the 100 to 300 acres enlisted men generally received.<sup>26</sup> Since higher rank in the military tended to go to the already better-off, this policy maintained the class structure of the East while at the same time providing hope of upward mobility for those at the bottom of the white hierarchy.<sup>27</sup>

The legal system provided further protection for the class structure. Since grants were initially made without surveying, Kentucky became a crazy patchwork of overlapping claims. While any grant gave the grantee the right to defend his claim against other claimants, then, as now, litigation was expensive and the already better-off stood a greater chance of establishing ownership. Poorer people often lost their title or were relegated to more marginal land, unsuited for plantation agriculture.<sup>28</sup> And Jefferson's system for dispossessing Native Americans through debt worked equally well for dispossessing poorer Whites.

Not only was class differentiation solidified through the land grant system; so was white privilege. Large grants went only to people of British or Irish ancestry; presumably the 5,000 Africans who had fought in the Revolution received none.<sup>29</sup> To make land more available to themselves, many Whites supported the continued elimination of African competition for land, and even non-slaveholders supported slavery in hopes of joining the slaveholding class themselves. And if Whites were to utilize their grants they had to define their interests as contrary to those of Native Americans. Further, treaty requirements and payments to Native Americans for the capture and return of African slaves undoubtedly encouraged Africans and Native Americans to define their own interests as conflicting, helping in the process of divide and rule.<sup>30</sup>

And finally, the land grant system contributed to male supremacy, since land was generally granted to men, leaving women dependent on men for the right to use land, unlike the female independence built into the Cherokee and Shawnee systems. Whites hid this difference with their portrayal of Native American women as "squaws" whose independent farming for female-organized households was described as drudgery inflicted by brutal savages upon "their women," whom they treated like slaves.<sup>31</sup>

This was quite a construction, considering that it was Whites who enslaved African women, and that European-American women in small farm families on the frontier probably worked longer hours than did Native American women. Even elite white women had less control over the affairs of their government than did Native American women!

Much of the best land in Kentucky was already taken up by wealthy speculators before 1795, when ordinary people began flooding into Kentucky. One of these speculators owned over 830,000 acres.<sup>32</sup> Family ties connected the owners of these huge estates and family networks enhanced their ability to act in a fairly cohesive manner, giving an extremely small number of people immense power. Their names are familiar ones in Kentucky history: Breckinridge, Shelby, Trigg, Brown, Preston . . .<sup>33</sup>

Land grants to veterans helped defuse discontent back east, permitting elites to maintain control.<sup>34</sup> Equally important, they attracted men and women who were desperate enough to act willingly as shock troops, making Kentucky safe for the westward expansion of plantation production. Veterans, especially officers, were given far more land than a family could farm because they had something the elites wanted more than money: military experience and the willingness to use it against Native Americans. In return for donating their experience, and often their lives or the lives of their wives and children, they received the right to build a fort, settle a group of tenants on their grant, and try to wrest it from Native Americans. In essence they became a military buffer between Native Americans and advancing white settlement. For people without access to capital or land in the heavily settled East, the chance for upward mobility—if they survived—made the risk worthwhile. They now had reason to treasure white privilege.

### Early white and black settlement in North and South County

The general outline of settlement policies is visible in the early history of North County.<sup>35</sup> North County originally included part of what is now South County and parts of several other counties—an area about the size of Connecticut. There were some extremely large grants in this area; one was about 150 square miles. Most, however, were much smaller. By 1780 three forts were established around what is now the county seat. Revolutionary War officers held these forts and organized the "defense" of the area, resisting Native American raids and implementing their own. Within twenty years the non-native population of North County had exploded to about 3,500; nearly 10 percent were of recognized African

ancestry. The fort system was clearly accomplishing its purpose of Native American destruction, removal, and control, making North County safe for white invaders and their slaves.

North County was organized in 1792, and one of its first official acts was to get a jail built, which became the county's first public building. Overseers of the poor were appointed almost immediately, and "vagrancy" was a de facto racially defined white crime. Only free people could be vagrant, since wandering slaves and bond-laborers were simply returned to their masters. Thus the only non-Whites who could possibly have been declared vagrant were North County's eleven free people of color. The presence of overseers of the poor and of vagrancy indicates that poverty became an issue for Whites almost immediately, reflecting the class structure built into the land grant system. Whites convicted of "vagrancy" were sold for a year to the highest bidder at the courthouse door. Orphans and illegitimate children were bound-out as "apprentices" in a system very close to slavery, so that there was a continuum of unfree, semi-free, and free people in North County.

By 1820, after North County and South County separated, slightly over a quarter of the Whites in North County owned slaves, and almost 14 percent of the population was enslaved. Slave ownership in South County was slightly more concentrated. There a slightly smaller percentage of white families owned slaves, and a slightly bigger proportion of the population was enslaved. The census doesn't clearly specify unfree white labor, those who had been sold for vagrancy or bound-out, but it is clear that during the early years of white settlement lack of freedom was a fairly common condition, including both enslaved Africans and some Whites. Unfree labor, whether of the temporary white variety or the lifelong inherited African variety, provided a significant proportion of each county's labor, part of the system of making sweat trickle up.

### QUELLING REBELLION BY REINFORCING WHITE PRIVILEGE: VOTING RIGHTS

So the provision of land as the material basis for white privilege turned out to be a partial mirage. Consequently class divisions and protest appeared almost immediately. By the 1780s, perhaps 75 percent of Kentucky residents were poor and landless, more in the Bluegrass than elsewhere, often working as tenants for the huge landowners.<sup>36</sup> Henderson's Transylvania Company attempted to reestablish a form of feudalism, with perpetual rents

for those who worked the land.<sup>37</sup> In Harrodsburg one group of protesters assembled to set aside Virginia law in order to divide land among themselves equally rather than according to their wealth and ability to buy land. They were dispersed by a militia officer aided by people opposing the protesters.<sup>38</sup> Resistance to service in militia units was intense; most men wanted to guard their own families, and raise their crops, rather than spend the summer risking their lives following elite orders to defend elite property.

Since most people had little access to cash without wage labor, and land prices rose as the frontier became safer, buying land became doubly difficult. Many landless Whites saw themselves in competition with slave labor, both in agriculture and in manufacturing, as well as in their frustrated ambitions of land ownership. They resented both the slaves and the elite who used those slaves to enrich themselves at the expense of poorer Whites. Not all poor Whites bought into this system, however; landless Whites who worked with Blacks and lived similarly to them occasionally crossed racial lines to defy the right of those higher on the drainage system to order white people lower on the drainage system around.<sup>39</sup>

In general, although whiteness ultimately helped maintain elite power, many Whites objected loudly to the "aristocrats" who had grabbed so much land and power. So the elites writing Kentucky's state constitution undid the property qualification that had helped spark Bacon's Rebellion and gave all white men the vote instead of accepting Jefferson's solution—giving them land.<sup>40</sup> The right to vote, to participate in deciding which of contending elites would represent them, became a critical piece of white privilege. Voting defused rebellion by giving angry people a stake in the government.<sup>41</sup> Equally important, it allowed white male tenants to define themselves as independent and free at a time when most white men of similar status on the East Coast still couldn't vote.

The whiteness that poorer people of European ancestry now accepted would continue to provide a smokescreen behind which the elite reorganized the drainage system as necessary to maintain their own control, to the detriment of black and most white households.