CREGHAN, JAMES PATRICK. The Impact of Confederate Laws on Class Dissent in the North Carolina Piedmont (Under the direction of Susanna Lee).

On the eve of the Civil War, North Carolina debated following the other Southern states in secession. Many North Carolinians supported remaining in the Union up until the state seceded. Upon seceding, slaveholders appealed to non-slaveholders on several grounds to unite white southerners. Confederate ideology focused on Northern aggression, the protection of home, preservation of the South’s racial hierarchy, and the defense of republican government. War placed enormous stress on the Confederate home front, and Confederate ideology fell short as a unifying force. The Confederate government relied upon conscription, impressment, tax-in-kind, and relief programs to sustain the war effort. These policies affected the home front in ways that the Confederate government proved ill equipped to address. This exploration of one community in the Confederate interior shows how Confederate policies contradicted Confederate ideology and compromised the actual war effort.
The Impact of Confederate Laws on Class Dissent in the North Carolina Piedmont

by
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BIOGRAPHY

Patrick grew up in Pennsylvania where his interest in the Civil War started after visiting the Gettysburg National Military Park. He obtained his undergraduate degree from Elon University (Elon, NC) in History Education. Upon completion of his undergraduate studies, Patrick enrolled in the History-M.A. program at North Carolina State University. There, he focused on 19th century United States history with a specific concentration in the Civil War.
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I. Introduction

In January 1863, North Carolina Governor Zebulon Vance faced challenging circumstances. Many North Carolina soldiers appeared absent from their roll calls. In a proclamation on January 26, Vance confessed, “a large number of soldiers from our armies are absent from their colors without proper leave in this hour of greatest need.” Vance needed to find a solution to the desertion problem, but he also had his attention drawn to the home front. A few days earlier, he had warned James A. Seddon and the Confederate War Department that “the officers … are pressing corn and forage at prices less by one half than the current rates in that country. As that country was almost ruined by drouth last season, there will be the greatest difficulty in feeding the wives and children of the absent soldiers.” Seddon never responded. Conditions within North Carolina worsened, and the Governor wrote Seddon back a month later, insisting that he had made “every possible disposition to aid in the support of the army,” but “when the question of starvation is narrowed down to women and children on the one side and some worthless [cavalry] horses on the other, I can have no difficulty in making a choice.” He concluded his letter by threatening to use the state militia to drive Federal units from the state.¹

This exchange between Vance and Seddon in the early months of 1863 revealed distinct and interconnected problems within North Carolina. The Confederate government took men from their families through conscription laws and took needed

¹ Zebulon B. Vance to James A. Seddon, February 25, 1863, Zebulon B. Vance Governor Papers (hereafter cited as VGP), North Carolina State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, NC (hereafter cited as NCSA).
supplies through tax-in-kind and impressment laws, but struggled to step in for absent patriarchs through sufficient relief programs.

The North Carolina Piedmont presents a valuable opportunity to explore the effects of Confederate policies—like conscription, taxation, and relief—on the Confederate homefront. Judkin Browning’s study of loyalty in coastal North Carolina and John Inscoe and Gordon McKinney’s study of Appalachia address significant points about North Carolina’s homefront, but the coastal region shifted between Union and Confederate control throughout the war, and some parts of the Appalachians never submitted to Confederate authority. In contrast, the Piedmont remained under Confederate control through most of the war. Dissent in the Confederate interior, therefore, may reveal much more about the effect of Confederate policies on civilians’ ability and desire to sustain the war effort.²

The above map represents the geographic focus for this thesis. The section of the Piedmont that I focus on is outlined with the red square. This region represents the northern and eastern sections of the area identified as the North Carolina Piedmont. My thesis intervenes in a historiographical debate on the causes of Confederate defeat. Some historians ground their explanations in the battlefield. Gary Gallagher, a leading proponent of this interpretation, criticizes historians who have become too enamored with the home front and forgotten the important role that actual fighting played in the demise of the Confederacy. Gallagher contends that the Confederacy almost won the war on the battlefield on numerous occasions and that the Confederacy lasted as long as it did only because people believed in and fought for Confederate nationalism. The North Carolina Piedmont calls into question Gallagher’s conclusion about a united popular will and nationalist fervor throughout the Confederacy.³

My thesis builds on a significant body of historical scholarship that explores the failure of Confederate nationalism. Drew Gilpin Faust in *Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* argues that Confederate nationalism failed because of the social and economic gaps that existed within the South. Paul Escott in *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* argues that slaveholding elite was unsuccessful in solidifying the support of the non-slaveholding small farmers, who made up the majority of the white population. The Southern non-slaveholding majority feared a strong centralized government, a fear which slaveholders had used to argue for secession. When the government passed laws such as conscription, non-slaveholders protested and withdrew their support from the Confederacy. George Rable in *The Confederate Republic: A Revolution Against Politics* argues that class discontent influenced political structures, which prevented the Confederate government from building and maintaining a collective identity. Paul Quigley in *Shifting Grounds: Nationalism and the American South, 1848-1865* argues that “southern nationalists knew that by itself slavery was a weak basis of securing unity within the South.” Regardless of how much slavery was downplayed, “sooner or later, though, everything came back to the sine qua non of Confederate national identity: racial slavery.” My work seeks to contribute to the scholarship on nationalism and the home front by focusing on how governmental attempts to mobilize resources for the

war effort affected white North Carolinians’ ability and desire to maintain the Confederate war effort. My thesis draws on work that recognizes nationalism as a social construct. This concept reflects the efforts by Confederates to form unifying bonds. From its creation at the outset of the war, Confederate nationalism struggled to grow and change with the people of the Confederacy throughout the war. This greatly hindered the war effort and the ability for a unified people to survive the rigors of war. Confederates needed to believe that throughout the war their imagined nation matched the reality. However, this proved more often not to be the case. Confederate nationalism was constructed by the Southern people to unite in their war for secession, but never represented more than a construction.

The North Carolina Piedmont experienced extensive disaffection and discontent throughout the Civil War. Poor whites and yeomen in the Piedmont only reluctantly sided with the Confederacy once North Carolina was forced to take sides after the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter and President Lincoln’s called for 75,000 troops to put down secession. Confederate leaders, fearing that non-slaveholders would not unite in defense of slavery, attempted to broaden the Confederate cause with ideological arguments: defending republican government from King Lincoln and southern homes from Yankee invaders. Confederate government policies, however,

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7 Faust, Creation of Confederate Nationalism, 26, 34, 71.
contradicted these tenets of Confederate ideology. In this thesis, I analyze the impact of conscription laws, relief policies, and tax-in-kind and impressment on Piedmont whites. I start with conscription that sapped white families of a vital male labor force. Then I move onto poor relief policies that fell woefully short in filling the void left by the absent men. I finish with an analysis of tax-in-kind and impressment policies that pushed many poor families to the brink of starvation.

Many yeomen and poor whites supported remaining in the Union up until the state seceded, but agreed with secessionists who appealed to non-slaveholders to unite against Northern aggression, including the tyranny of Lincoln, to protect their homes and families, to defend ideas of republican government, and to preserve the racial hierarchy, and they believed secessionists’ promises of a brief victorious war. These arguments fell short during the war. The Confederate government’s own polices and laws harshly impacted the lives of yeomen and poor whites, causing many to question the Confederate cause. The Confederate government’s mode of waging war through conscription, impressment, and tax-in-kind contradicted in some ways Confederate ideology. The lack of poor relief left poor whites and yeomen struggling. Class dissent in the Piedmont shows how the Confederate war effort and Confederate ideology were internally contradictory and consequently compromised.
II. Origins of Class Conflict: The North Carolina Piedmont Before the Civil War

In the months leading up to the Civil War, many white North Carolinians felt uncertain about where they should place their loyalties. North Carolina Senator Thomas Bragg recorded in his diary the difficult decision that stood before the people of North Carolina. On January 3, 1861, he noted “what it is all to end in, God only knows – whether the Union will in the end be saved, which I believe hardly probable, or we shall have two more Confederacies – whether separation, if made, is to be peaceful or attended with Civil War? Time only can determine.” Bragg suspected that disunion was imminent, but did not fully understand its consequences. Bragg supported secession like many other politicians from Eastern North Carolina. Throughout his diary entries in the months leading up to the Civil War, Bragg cited the divisions within North Carolina over secession. North Carolina’s poor whites and yeomen, the state’s population majority, largely opposed secession. Bragg’s entries show a North Carolina divide along class lines. As the crisis continued, secessionists called for a convention. Bragg wrote on February 24, 1861, regarding the possibility of a convention, “my impression is she will not require [a convention]. From the papers rec’d this morning I apprehend the 'Unionists’ so called will carry the election for convention.” He acknowledged that the “Unionists,” or individuals who wanted to remain in the Union, held the advantage within North Carolina in late February 1861. These strong Unionist feelings in the early months of 1861 resulted in many poor whites and yeomen opposing the war. When
North Carolina seceded in May 1861, many of these poor white and yeomen reluctantly sided with the Confederacy.\(^8\)

Poor whites and yeomen in North Carolina in the beginning months of 1861 largely agreed that remaining in the Union was the best option despite the secessionist fervor that engulfed many other Southern states. The Unionist sentiment reflected the deep class divisions that existed within North Carolina society. When the state seceded from the Union, slaveholders, who sat in positions of government power, needed to convince the largely yeomen and poor white population that defending their home and rights against federal tyranny outweighed the benefits of remaining in the Union.

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North Carolina’s antebellum society featured a hierarchical class structure in which an elite minority ruled over the majority yeomen and poor white classes. Compared to Eastern North Carolina, the Piedmont contained a relatively small planter class. The majority of the white population in North Carolina lived on small isolated farms. The state’s lack of a large planter class and presence of a large yeomen class proved significant for the development of Unionist sentiment during the secession crisis.\(^9\)

North Carolina’s economy strengthened its ties to the North and weakened its ties to the Deep South. North Carolina participated in the cotton boom to a lesser extent

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\(^8\) Thomas Bragg diary, January 3, 1861, Thomas Bragg Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Wilson Library, Chapel, NC (hereafter cited as SHC); Thomas Bragg diary, February 24, 1861, Thomas Bragg Papers, SHC.

than states in the Deep South. In the cotton South, plantations multiplied and the black population skyrocketed. In North Carolina, the black population only comprised roughly 36% of the population. Since North Carolina remained on the sidelines of the cotton boom, its economy developed separately than the Deep South. The state’s merchants and farmers became tied to the Northern economy and consumers. Since Northern states consumed a large portion of North Carolina goods, many North Carolinians’ economic livelihood became tied to these Northern markets. Secession would disrupt their economic stability and would contribute to a reluctance to leave the Union.¹⁰

The elite class in North Carolina was economically diverse. The individuals within this class included planters owning 20 or more slaves, prosperous merchants, wealthy men of commerce, and educated professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, and professors. The planter class in the Piedmont was fairly small. Families in the Piedmont were ten- to twenty-percent slaveholding while families in the East, where slavery was more predominant, were an average of twenty-five percent slaveholding and as much as nearly fifty percent. Planters, individuals with twenty or more slaves, comprised only five percent of all slaveholders in the Piedmont compared with ten percent in the East. There existed few genuine, aristocratic slaveholding families, and many of these

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¹⁰ Escott, Many Excellent People, 3, 33; Browning, Shifting Loyalties, 13.
families had moved further into the Deep South with the rise of cotton. As a result, many members of the upper class had risen into elite status.\textsuperscript{11}

Below this elite class was the “middle” class, comprising approximately twenty percent of the population. They lacked the wealth or political success associated with the upper class, but they generally still aspired to upper-class status. As a result, they often identified with the elites, even as the elites looked down upon them. This class was made up of slave-owners with twenty or fewer slaves, commercial farmers, merchants, manufacturers, artisans, and professionals. The majority of this class was self employed and specialized in a particular trade. Many of these individuals developed a wide circle of connections, and some of these connections extended North.\textsuperscript{12}

Yeomen and poor whites constituted the majority of the population. The average North Carolinian was a small farmer or connected to a small farm, usually as a farm laborer. In 1860, seventy-two percent of the families in North Carolina owned no slaves at all, sixty-nine percent of the population in North Carolina owned fewer than 100 acres, and 42\% owned fewer than fifty acres. Only one-percent of farms in the Piedmont were larger than 500 acres. Compared to Eastern counties that averaged over five percent with a higher number that exceeded 1,000 acres, the Piedmont contained

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Escott, “Independent and Rebellious Yeomen,” 370; Victoria Bynum, \textit{Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 27; Escott, \textit{Many Excellent People}, 17. In Orange County, only 29.1 percent of families owned slaves, and of those families only 7.1 percent possessed more than twenty slaves. In Randolph County, 89 percent of the families in the county’s population owned no slaves. In addition, only .3 percent of the families owned more than twenty slaves. In Alamance County, approximately 74.6 percent of the families within the county owned no slaves compared to the numbers of slave-owners that possessed 20 or more slaves of 1.2 percent.
\item Myers, \textit{Rebels Against the Confederacy}, 23; Escott, \textit{Many Excellent People}, 7.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
relatively few farms large enough for plantations. North Carolina developed one of the strongest yeomen classes in the South as a result of the widespread success of small farmers. Most of these yeomen lived in economic independence on their family farms. While the yeomen made up a large population of the lower class, landless whites comprised another significant portion of the lower class. In 1860, roughly 30%, or more than 36,000, of North Carolina’s white male population comprised the landless whites. Many of these landless whites performed farm labor, but some lived lifestyles of hunting and herding. The lower class constituted the majority, but held significantly less political power and wealth.\(^{13}\)

Up until 1857, white men who owned fewer than fifty acres of land could not vote for state senator or governor. This comprised a large portion of the population since, many yeomen owned small farms, and a sizeable minority owned no land at all. In 1857, when North Carolina relaxed its voting restrictions to allow free suffrage for white males, the eastern slaveholding counties objected by a vote of 50,007 to 19,397. It is clear that all slaveholders, not just plantation owners who controlled those counties, did not want to lose their political power. By giving all white males the ability to vote

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\(^{13}\) Escott, Many Excellent People, 7, 13-14; Bynum, Unruly Women, 31. Within the Piedmont, agricultural concentration figures support the extensive presence of small farms and yeomen. Randolph County contained approximately 72.5 percent of farms between 3-99 acres of land that exceeded the state average of 69.1 percent. In addition, 77.9 percent of Orange County’s farms fit within that acreage range. These figures show that the majority of the farms within these counties were indeed small and not representative of large plantations. However, Alamance County does contradict some of that narrative. Only 46.9 percent of the farms within that county were listed within that acreage range. Escott, Many Excellent People, 9-10.
the voice of the majority could start to be heard. The talks over secession showcase the
first instance of the voice of the popular majority being heard politically.\textsuperscript{14}

While North Carolina allowed for more white men to vote after 1857, government remained in the hands of the elite. In 1860, slaveholders held 85 percent of the seats in the North Carolina General Assembly, which was the highest percentage in the South. Altogether, 36\% of North Carolina politicians owned twenty or more slaves, which constituted one of the highest percentages in the South. Besides controlling the state government seats, elites controlled local offices as well. The poor could not elect their own local officials, besides sheriff and clerk of court. Even though they could elect these local officials, the wealth of county court members shows the lack of non-elites in these positions. In 1860, Alamance County's court members held $25,717 in personal wealth. The majority of the county leaders came from wealthy families that most likely supported secession. This class constituted the minority of the population, but controlled the most wealth, land, and political power.\textsuperscript{15}

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On the eve of the Civil War, many North Carolinians favored remaining a part of the Union. Throughout the state, large contingents of citizens believed that dissolving the Union was unwise. Jonathon Worth, a prominent resident of the Piedmont, stated on


\textsuperscript{15} Escott, \textit{Many Excellent People,} 15; Escott, “Independent and Rebellious Yeomen,” 370; Escott, \textit{Many Excellent People,} 5.
May 17, 1861, “the dissolution of the Union is the greatest misfortune which could befall the whole nation--the whole human race.” Many North Carolinians opposed secession until the very end. As many other Southern states called for conventions and seceded, North Carolina remained loyal to the Union. The Unionists believed that the secessionist states overreacted to the election of Lincoln in 1860. By the beginning of 1861, three different factions existed within North Carolina: Unionists, conditional Unionists, and secessionists. Unionists and conditional Unionists favored remaining within the Union and maintaining peace, but secessionists argued for joining the other Southern states. The combined factions of Unionists and conditional Unionists kept North Carolina from seceding through the early months of 1861. Secessionists grew increasingly irritated that they lacked the support to leave the Union. The debate within North Carolina continued through the early months of the war and would not finally be settled until May.\(^\text{16}\)

Many yeomen and non-slaveholders lacked political power and wealth and resented the wealthy planters. Of the known Unionists within North Carolina prior to the start of the Civil War, over 75% of them were farmers or occupied a farm-related position. This number speaks to the desire of many yeomen and poor whites to remain within the Union and their hesitance for fighting the Civil War. These yeomen generally resented planters not out of antislavery commitment, but instead out of hostility

\(\text{16 Jonathon Worth to Dr. C.W. Woolen, May 17, 1861, Jonathon Worth Papers, North Carolina State Archives, North Carolina Divisions of Archives and History, Raleigh, NC (hereafter cited as NCSA); Michael C. Hardy, North Carolina In the Civil War (Charleston: The History Press, 2011), 12.}\)
toward their power and privileges. Many members of this lower class wished to find a way for North Carolina to stay out of a war and keep the Union whole.\textsuperscript{17}

Secessionists unsuccessfully attempted to take the state out of the Union from January 1861 to April 1861. Governor John Ellis made his stance clear after the election of Lincoln. In his November 1860 message to the General Assembly, Ellis contended that Lincoln and his vice president were elected “exclusively by the people of one section of the country upon a principle hostile to the constitution and domestic policy of the other.” Ellis wished to resist fighting a war, but viewed the election of 1860 as a direct challenge to the democratic action of the Southern people because it threatened slavery and the political power of elites. For this reason, Ellis and the General Assembly favored secession, but after the General Assembly passed a bill on January 24, 1861, calling for a vote on whether to call a convention, they were denied the opportunity. In a close vote, North Carolina voted against the convention by 47,302 to 46,672.

Additionally, many prominent newspapers, such as the \textit{North Carolina Standard}, \textit{Raleigh Register}, and \textit{Fayetteville Observer} all opposed secession based on arguments made by Unionists to remain in the Union. The attack on Fort Sumter changed these desires to remain within the Union.\textsuperscript{18}

The fall of Fort Sumter on April 14, 1861, and President Abraham Lincoln’s subsequent call for troops, propelled North Carolina to secede. As John Flintoff, a


\textsuperscript{18} Escott, \textit{Many Excellent People}, 15; John Ellis Message to the North Carolina General Assembly, November 20, 1860, John W. Ellis Governor Papers, NCSA; Hardy, \textit{North Carolina In the Civil War}, 13-14.
wealthy plantation owner from Orange County, decreed, “we are lamentably in war.” Likewise, the Fayetteville Observer wrote days after the fall of Fort Sumter, “This is dreadful news. War is a terrible evil. Civil war the worst of all earthly evils. Nothing but dire necessity can justify it… The stake is too great to rush into disunion and civil war upon the strength of telegraphic dispatches. In the mean time it will do no harm to be cool, calmly looking the great crisis in the face.” This call for calm and rational approaches to these events fell by the way side. For the secessionist faction, the fall of Fort Sumter and Lincoln’s call for 1,600 troops from North Carolina, gave them support to leave the Union. Governor Ellis moved forward and seized all of North Carolina’s forts. The Greensboro Patriot captured the state of excitement as Union gave way to secession. The writer reported, “streets were filled with an excited crowd” listening to addresses by prominent members of society. “The speeches of these gentlemen all breathed the true spirit of resistance to tyrants, and that the time had come in North Carolina to make a common cause with the brethren of the South.” This call to unite as brothers against northern tyrants was one of many calls that would accelerate in number and volume as Confederate leaders sought to rally support from slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike.19

On May 1st, 1861, the North Carolina House unanimously passed a bill for the election of 120 delegates. Interestingly, in most counties the elections featured secessionist candidates running unopposed. The convention then met on May 20th

19 John F. Flintoff Diary, April 12 and June 10, 1861, NCSA. Fayetteville Observer, April 16, 1861, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, NC (hereafter cited as NCC); Greensboro Patriot, April 23, 1861, NCC. Escott, Many Excellent People, 30.
following the election of delegates. By the morning of May 21st, 1861, the convention had signed a secession ordinance, and North Carolina had left the Union. Even with the speed of secession, elites knew they needed to maintain yeoman and non-slaveholder support for their venture to be successful. North Carolinians, in a short time, went from ardent Unionists to fully contributing Confederates. The state gave the second most per capita of its male population to the Confederate armies during the war, and the fourth most raw enlistment numbers.\footnote{Escott, \textit{Many Excellent People}, 30; Barton A. Myers, \textit{Rebels Against the Confederacy}, 9.}

Leading Confederates moved to rally people to the Confederate cause and unite the South. They knew that in order for their endeavors to be successful they needed the support of non-slaveholders. Slaveholders had long stressed non-slaveholders’ interest in the institution of slavery. They argued that non-slaveholders benefitted from slavery even if they did not own slaves. Non-slaveholders possessed a better quality of life and less competition for jobs than their free labor counterparts in the North. Slaveholders also depicted non-slaveholders as equals based on race and not dependents. If the South outlawed slavery, then the non-slaveholders would lose their position on the social hierarchy. Slaveholders played on racial ideology to focus attention on how non-slaveholders remained above the bottom of the hierarchy, which slaves occupied. Slaveholders also argued that non-slaveholders could move up in the social hierarchy and own slaves one day. \footnote{James D.B. DeBow, \textit{The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder} (Charleston: Evans & Cogswell, 1860).}
Confederate propagandists also sought to present the Confederate cause in the broadest terms possible as not just a war fought in defense of slaveholders’ interests, but instead a war in defense of republican government. Many Confederates described Lincoln’s actions as aggressive compared to the South’s attempt to peacefully leave the Union. Newly elected President Davis addressed the Confederate Congress on April 19, 1861, and explained that the Southern states had no other choice than to leave the Union and defend their rights. He attacked Lincoln’s actions and explained that the executive usurpations eliminated basic freedoms. Politicians went even further in their criticisms of the North by attacking materialism. To support the Confederate cause was to support liberty and freedom. Confederate propagandists also presented the war as a means to protect the South from the materialism that plagued the North. They presented the South as a harmonious society in which yeomen and poor whites could claim equality with planters. This image of a harmonious society was then later used in the construction of Confederate nationalism. They depicted the North, in contrast, as a region characterized by competition and profit. This criticism of Northern materialism helped Southern politicians frame secession in a conservative way to appeal to yeomen and poor whites. Finally, Confederate propagandists also called upon their neighbors to take up arms and defend their homes from invasion. Lincoln’s call for 75,000 troops did more than influence North Carolina to leave the Union. The threat of Northern troops marching into the South and imposing Northern will caused many Southerners to unite to protect their homes. Poor whites and yeomen felt drawn to this call to protect their
families and communities. Regardless of class differences, poor whites and yeomen wanted to preserve their communities and way of life. Their initial desire to protect their families propelled many of them to take up arms. They believed in Southern concepts of manhood and patriarchy that defined their duties as husband, father, and brother. This belief system aided slaveholders in rallying non-slaveholders to the Confederate cause.  

Leading Confederates promised that the war would be brief and the Confederacy would be victorious. Many Confederates predicted that the North would grow tired of the war quickly. James DeBow, a prominent South Carolina scholar, argued in 1860, “the social fabric at the North is in far greater danger of dissolution than it is here.” Confederates, in contrast, fighting for the future of republican government, their harmonious social order, and the security of their homes, would remain united. A brief war suggested that the sacrifices that Southerners would need to make to win the war would be minimal. Few imagined the war that followed.  

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The North Carolina Piedmont was a divided society during the secession crisis. The rationales used by Confederate leaders to sway yeomen and non-slaveholders into secession prove important for the disaffection and dissent that occurred later in the war. They articulated a Confederate cause that attempted to unite the varied interests within the new Confederacy. The following chapters show how efforts by the

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22 Escott, After Secession; Faust, Failure of Confederate Nationalism.
23 Escott, After Secession; Faust, Failure of Confederate Nationalism; DeBow, The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder, 80.
Confederate government to win the war ultimately undermined the basis for Confederate unity. Policies—such as conscription, impressment, and tax-in-kind—more closely resembled a tyrannical government to yeomen and poor whites living within the Piedmont than Lincoln ever did. The faltering defenses for secession contributed to waning support for the Confederate government and the Confederate war effort.²⁴

²⁴ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 9,20,22.
III. Confederate Conscription Acts in Piedmont North Carolina

In July 1862, the Confederate government conscripted A.K. Pearce, a North Carolina yeoman farmer. He would become one of other yeomen and poor white men drafted into Confederate military service. Pearce said, he felt “forsed in to this war vary much against my will.” He later deserted the army after only serving four of the twenty-one months of his conscription term. Pearce defended his actions: “I did not believ that the rebellion was right and my friends told me to leave the first chance I got.” By describing himself as “forsed into this war” Pearce referenced two key contentions of poor whites. Many of these men originally opposed secession and only reluctantly supported secession. Also, conscription forced many men into the army’s ranks against their wishes. Pearce’s sentiments connect with many white men in North Carolina who faced similar decisions. Conscription left many yeomen and poor white men without alternatives, either they enter military service or dodge conscript officers, but both options forced them to leave their families.\(^\text{25}\)

Once the Civil War began, these marginalized groups found ways to undermine those in power. As the war progressed, poor whites and yeomen opposed the continuance of fighting and found indirect and direct ways of challenging policies. Poor white men used desertion to combat unequal conscription laws. Roughly one-fifth of the total number of Confederate troops recruited out of North Carolina deserted during the war. Many of these deserters started as conscripts. Keeping men in the fight and

combatting flagging will proved difficult for the Confederacy. As a result, conscription caused deep divisions within North Carolina’s social structure.²⁶

While done out of necessity, Confederate conscription acts marked the first draft within the United States, and they allowed wealthy individuals to hire substitutes. By hiring substitutes, the wealthy remained out of harm’s way, while many poor white men left to fight. These poor whites left their farms and homes in the care of their wives and children. Confederate conscription acts emphasized class differences as poor whites and yeomen farmers, many of whom lived in North Carolina, faced little choice other than to fight for the Confederacy.

Conscription acts created an inequality in which the poorer North Carolinians left families, who relied on their labor, and sacrificed themselves for the Confederate cause as rich men and their sons remained safe at home. Conscription, substitution, and exemption hindered the Confederate war effort and caused dissensions amongst the lower class because they contradicted some of the basic tenets of Confederate ideology that were used to unite the slaveholders and non-slaveholders at the outset of the war. Pressure placed on the local and state government through written letters to officials, as well as efforts to subvert conscription by deserting and draft dodging, showed these class conflicts.

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²⁶ Katherine A. Giuffre, "First in Flight: Desertion as Politics in the North Carolina Confederate Army," *Social Science History* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1997), 249 & 250; Myers, *Rebels Against the Confederacy*, 12.
Over the course of the war, North Carolina gave up over eighty percent of its military-aged population (between the ages of 15 and 49) to military service. More than forty thousand North Carolinian sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers died during the Civil War, which gave North Carolina one of the highest casualty rates of any Confederate state. The majority of North Carolinians who served in the Confederate armies were yeomen, who comprised a vast percentage of the population within North Carolina. While small farmers coexisted with planters, an underlying degree of dissension existed between the classes. As previously discussed, the poor whites were marginalized within North Carolina’s hierarchical political structure that gave the wealthy the power and left little to none for the poor.27

The beginning of the Civil War saw a rush to arms by men from the North and the South. Armies from both sides began to wage war in 1861. According to the Census of 1860, the North outnumbered the South four to one in military aged men (men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five), but the initial mobilization of men sustained the South through the first year. In the early months of the war, the formation of military units within North Carolina proved easy. For instance, the Alamance Regulators organized their regiment directly following the firing on Fort Sumter, but when the Alamance Regulators formed all four of their officers originated from the wealthiest and most influential families in the county. The Regulators were not the only military regiment facing similar types of unequal distribution of social class amongst officers. From the beginning of the war, the majority of officers came from elite

27 Giuffre, “First in Flight,” 246 & 247; Escott, Many Excellent People, 53.
backgrounds, while the majority of the common soldier’s ranks comprised of poor whites and yeomen farmers. The army served to further reflect the class disparities and power within North Carolina society, and exemplified its hierarchical structure. As early as the summer of 1861, some North Carolinians began petitioning for their men to be exempt from serving in the army. Elizabeth Flowers, a woman of more means, of Fayetteville feared for the safety and well being of her fifteen year old son. Although not of military age yet, she feared that any form of conscription could take him into the army. She pleaded with Governor Ellis: “He is hardly able to shoulder a muskit...Sir if you was to see him I think that you would discharge him.” Flowers wanted to keep her son safe and used the excuse of his unfitness for duty as a means of excluding him. While preemptive, her pleas for her son’s safety reflect a desire to protect her son from harm. In her description of him she surely feared that if conscripted he would not make it back. Flowers represents an early example of one of many North Carolinians who hoped their loved ones could avoid military service.\(^\text{28}\)

Soldiers protested their service even before the Confederacy implemented a draft. On February 27, 1862, O. Goddin stated in a letter to Vance, “the majority of our soldiers are poor men with families who say they are tired of the rich man’s war and poor man’s fight, they wish to get to their families and fully believe some settlement could be made.” The poorer soldiers suffered from the harsh effects of army life, as well as knowing their families struggled at home. Goddin raised an important distinction in

\(^{28}\) William L Shaw, “The Confederate Conscription and Exemption Acts,” *The American Journal of Legal History* 6, no. 4 (October 1962), 368; Escott, *Many Excellent People* 37; Giuffre, “First in Flight,” 259; Elizabeth Flowers to Governor Ellis, June 20, 1861, John Ellis Governor Papers, NCSA.
his letter by identifying the war as “a rich man’s war and poor man’s fight.” This description reflects the belief that poor whites and yeomen were fighting for a war started by elites and benefiting elites. Goddin’s language and explicit statement differentiating between classes reflect growing class divides amongst North Carolinians over the war. After nearly a year of fighting, Goddin called for “some settlement” to end the war.²⁹

North Carolina’s communities depended upon male family members to support their yeomen independence. These fathers, sons, and brothers provided an essential labor force for the community. Without the men at home, harvesting crops and maintaining the farms proved difficult. Goddin wrote to Vance, “[I] left a wife with four children [...] made sacrifices thinking that the Govt would protect his family and keep them from starvation.” The lack of assistance by the government angered soldiers, who already were upset over fighting. They believed the government needed to step in and fill the role of patriarch. His language and tone suggest an individual that believed his sacrifice in fighting the war needed reciprocation by the government. If the government wanted the poor whites and yeomen to fight, then the Confederacy needed to protect the families they left behind. Inflaming the situation was the extortion and speculation as merchants and other distributors raised prices to line their pockets.³⁰

²⁹ O. Goddin to Vance, February 27, 1862, VGP, NCSA; Escott, Many Excellent People, 44; Joe A. Mobley, War Governor of the South: North Carolina’s Zeb Vance in the Confederacy (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2005), 53.
³⁰ O. Goddin to Vance, February 27, 1862, VGP, NCSA; Escott, Many Excellent People, 44; Mobley, War Governor of the South, 53.
The need to maintain the Confederate armies, both through supplies and manpower, began to take a toll on the people of North Carolina. In addition, the initial fervor that caused men to volunteer for service into the armed forces subsided. Many unsettling facts became apparent. The war would not be over quickly and the prospects of victory were not assured contrary to the promises of Confederate politicians. Men saw the grim realities of army life and combat that dampened their enthusiasm for military service. The Confederate government faced a difficult decision on how to keep its men within the ranks and how to recruit new men. By the beginning of 1862, the original volunteers’ enlistment terms were done, and many of these men decided not to reenlist. The Confederate Congress faced a dilemma. Without men reenlisting, the Confederate armies could not continue fighting, but a solution was not easy to reach. A military draft was necessary since many men no longer voluntarily enlisted, but would alienate those who distrusted centralized authority and those who hesitated to leave their families unprotected.31

On April 16th, 1862, the Confederate Congress adopted the first conscription law. The Confederate Conscription Act of 1862 authorized a draft of all white men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five for three years and extended all currently enlisted men to three years of service.

The act also provided a clause that allowed substitution, exempting those who hired substitutes from military service. The exact number of substitutes remains unknown, but scholars estimate between 50,000 to 150,000 men. Many men became

embroiled and impacted by the use of substitutes. For instance, the lowest number estimated is 50,000 substitutes, which means that an additional 50,000 principals existed to hire those substitutes. A total of 100,000 Southern men, at the lowest estimates, participated in substitution. Considering the number of men involved within military service, roughly one million, that number is substantial. The process of hiring a substitute involved several steps. The principal needed to track down an individual suitable for substitution. That man was then obligated to accompany the substitute to their assigned camp. Once at the camp, the substitute under went a physical evaluation to ensure he could perform soldier duties.32

The issue of substitution plagued Confederate conscription officials early in the war, as the idea of paying another individual to serve in your place inherently benefited the wealthy. The price of obtaining a substitute immediately eliminated the lower class. The price for substitutes was high, as some substitutes cost up to $10,000 for their services. Prices that high distinctly favored wealthy planters. For this reason, other soldiers viewed substitutes and their principals negatively. The principals were perceived as avoiding a service to their country, and substitutes, usually men who fell outside of the age limits, as taking advantage of a corrupt system. The other soldiers called the morality of both individuals into question. Some historians claim the use of

substitution hindered the Confederate war effort, since it kept a substantial portion of the male population from fighting.\textsuperscript{33}

Substitution was one of several ways a man might avoid the draft. The Confederate Congress also offered exemptions. In April 1862, the Confederate Congress exempted the following occupations deemed essential to the Confederate war effort: Confederate and State legislative, executive, and judicial officials and their clerks and employees; individuals essential for river and railroad transportation work; workers in iron mines, foundries, and furnaces, telegraph operators, ministers, printers, educators, hospital employees, druggists, and select individuals in wool and cotton mills. In October 1862, the Confederate Congress expanded the exempted occupations to include some farmers and overseers. The Confederate’s army numbers swelled following the institution of the draft. Subsequent legislation extended the age range in increasingly desperate attempts to fill the dwindling ranks. After Antietam on September 27, 1862, the Confederate Congress extended the eligible age to forty five years.\textsuperscript{34}

The first Confederate conscription law’s enactment in 1862 proved difficult to enforce. Even the newly elected Governor Vance viewed the law’s potential backlash as severe. In a letter to Jefferson Davis, Vance questioned the law by saying, “[with] all the popularity with which I came into office, it will be exceedingly difficult for me to execute.” He continued to Davis, “the cry of distress comes up from the poor wives and children of our soldiers.” Vance identified the potential struggles the poor whites could

\textsuperscript{33} Sacher, “The Loyal Draft Dodger?,” 156.

\textsuperscript{34} Shaw, “The Confederate Conscription and Exemption Acts,” 374, 379, 381-382.
face as a result of these conscription laws, but Davis’s inaction to Vance’s letter shows another key problem with many Confederate government policies. Even if a governor, such as Vance, wrote to Davis informing him of hardships, Davis often neglected to take actions to remedy the situation.35

As a means to appease the conscripts, Vance allowed new enlistments to choose which units they were placed in. In a General Order, he stated conscripts “will be allowed to select the Infantry Regiments they wish to join, and unless full, they will be assigned accordingly.” Vance hoped this would ease the pain of serving within the military. Serving with familiar faces could strengthen one’s resolve to fight during combat. It also eased anxieties of being away from home and helped promote the argument of defending one’s home from Northern armies by fighting with other men from your community.36

Other members of the state legislature recognized the difficulty associated with the conscription acts and worried about their effect on the population. Many men questioned whether North Carolina needed to follow the conscription laws. In the first year of the war, the state of North Carolina provided over its quota of soldiers for the Confederate armies. Invoking conscription seemed unnecessary to some. Some individuals still held reservations about the laws. Following the passage of the first conscription act, Congressman Thomas S. Ashe wrote, “it is said by [its] friends...to be the only means of saving the country, but I must confess I fear [it] will be the

35 Zebulon B. Vance to Jefferson Davis, October 25, 1862, VGP, NCSA.
36 Governor Vance's General Order no. 2, September 9, 1862, VGP, NCSA.
inauguration of a strong military government.” Ashe’s comments raise an issue that some politicians had with the growing power of a centralized government. He feared that conscription gave the central government too much influence over North Carolina. The North Carolina Standard, a well-known Unionist paper, called the conscription laws a “monstrous and dangerous measure.” The newspaper also dreaded an increased control of the federal government. The Daily Bulletin, located in Raleigh, published the piece from the Standard. This helped spread the contempt for the laws as well as provide evidence that similar feelings were felt in and around the state’s capital. Secessionists had taken their states out of the Union on the argument that Lincoln had overstepped his power by raising troops against the seceding states. Ashe and other elites rightfully worried about the potential for the newly formed Confederate government turning into a strong centralized government.37

By 1862, soldiers realized the war would last longer than anticipated. One soldier’s report in mid-June from Camp Holmes, located in Raleigh, stated, “the affecting scenes connected with the departure of Volunteers have given way to the heart-rendering sight of men torn away from their families by the strong arm of the law.” Men no longer wanted to fight a bloody and brutal war, but conscription required them to anyway. The report continued, “[men] are forced into the army, their hopes and prospects blighted, if not forever ruined, under the plea of military necessity.” Many of the conscripts faced an uncertain future leaving home and entering the ranks of the

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37 Marc W. Kruman, “Dissent in the Confederacy: The North Carolina Experience,” Civil War History 27, no. 4 (December 1981), 299; Thomas S. Ashe to Kemp P. Battle, April 1, 1862, Battle Family Papers, SHC; Daily Bulletin, April 21, 1862, NCC.
armies, and poor families faced the daunting task of replacing their labor. The report concluded, “some eighteen months ago, we were told that secession would be peacable, and a mere small job to be dispatched in the morning before breakfast.”

Vance recognized the stress put upon his citizens by the conscription laws. In late 1862, Vance stated in a letter to Jefferson Davis that North Carolina yeomen composed a “large class whose labor was absolutely necessary to the existence of the women and children left behind.” The majority of North Carolinians did not benefit from the substitution and exemption provisions of the conscription laws. Men who escaped conscription largely were those who came from wealth and status. Vance hoped to spare some yeomen from conscription, but Davis largely ignored Vance’s requests. Vance reached out to the Confederate government in Richmond hoping to alleviate some of the stresses of his constituents, but found no assistance at this time from the Confederate government. Davis’s inaction and neglect showed a detachment from the hardships caused by conscription. His inaction allowed class dissension to continue to grow through the rest of the war.

Those that escaped conscription angered the soldiers fighting. Private Goddin complained, “men who have furnished substitutes are grinding the poor by speculation while their substitutes have been discharged after a months service as being too old or as invaluable.” Goddin suggested that men with the wealth to escape military service made that wealth through the exploitation of the families of those in service. He also

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38 Peter Mallett, Camp Holmes letter copy book, v. 6, 25 found in Hilderman, They Went into the Fight Cheering!, 30.
39 Zebulon Vance to Jefferson Davis, October 25, 1862, VGP, NCSA.
suggested that substitution further failed to advance the Confederate cause because substitutes could not hold up under the rigors of army life.\textsuperscript{40}

Less affluent North Carolinians criticized the doling out of exemptions and safe assignments to the wealthy. William Clarke wrote to his wife Mary Clarke, “the young men of wealth in our State have shown entirely too much reluctance to going into the field. Look around and see how few of these of your acquaintance are facing danger and enduring privations.” Poor whites questioned the commitment of these wealthy young men, when their own young men fought, died, and sacrificed for the Confederate cause, and as a result many poor distrusted their wealthy neighbors. The existence of bias and favoritism within the government showed through the evasion of military service by rich men and their sons angered the poorer citizens. Many came to claim the war and its fighting as being a “rich man’s war, poor man’s fight,” which caused class tensions to grow within North Carolina over these instances related to the conscription laws.\textsuperscript{41}

Governor Vance tried to remain impartial to the conscription laws, but he provided favors and exemptions from military service for his wealthy counterparts. Vance fought hard to keep any and all government employees exempt from the draft. By doing so, he protected many of the wealthy individuals who held positions of power in both state and local governments. Vance also assisted other wealthy individuals in evading conscription. Daniel L. Russell, Jr. was the son of a wealthy planter in Eastern

\textsuperscript{40} O. Goddin to Vance, February 27, 1862, VGP, NCSA ; Escott, Many Excellent People, 44; Mobley, War Governor of the South, 53.
\textsuperscript{41} William J. Clarke to Mary Bayard Clarke, April 4 1863 found in Escott, Many Excellent People, 39.
North Carolina. When his name came up for conscription, Daniel's father went to Vance to obtain an exemption. Vance found a position for him in the government that exempted him from military service. Many poor men wrote to Vance requesting help in obtaining exemptions and used their family's needs as reasons for requiring exemption, but in most cases, Vance turned down their appeals.\(^{42}\)

Wealthy individual exemptions manifested in several additional ways. Many of the jobs that exempted individuals from conscription benefited the wealthy. The yeomen farmers could not obtain an exemption due to their occupation, and they lacked the financial resources to obtain a substitute. The Confederate government added an additional clause for exemption known as the 'twenty Negro law' on October 11, 1862. This clause within the Confederacy contained a distinct class benefit. The Confederate government wanted to ensure a white man was present on any plantation to keep control over the slaves. The government feared white women being taken advantage of by slaves once the patriarch left to fight the war. As a result, many men received exemptions for overseers.\(^{43}\)

Exemptions based on the number of slaves a person owned caused an outcry amongst yeomen and poor whites. These North Carolinians voiced their concerns and displeasure through letters to the governor. L.K. Walker wrote to Vance a few months after the passage of the slave exemption, "the poor soldiers is fiting for the rich man's Negroes." Walker blatantly puts forth the belief that poor whites are fighting to defend

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\(^{42}\) Mobley, *War Governor of the South*, 66-67.

\(^{43}\) Mobley, *War Governor of the South*, 52.
slavery. Walker wrote to Vance in 1863 and almost a whole year after Goddin complained to Vance about poor men fighting for the rich man’s war. Walker’s anger over fighting for slavery expresses a fading desire of non-slaveholders to sacrifice for their wealthy counterparts interests. In addition, the poor saw their wealthy counterparts enjoy the luxury of staying home while they fought a brutal and bloody war that many of them never wanted in the first place. A year later, J.R. Robertson continued this sentiment stating that the poor men fight for the “rich mans proprty and negars.” Walker and Robertson were not alone in their feelings. By 1863 and 1864 the façade of why they were fighting had worn off. Poor whites questioned why they fought to protect the interests of slaveholders when their home and communities were not being protected in return.\(^4\)

The wealthy also utilized their wealth and took advantage of the substitution clause, as evidenced by Susan Virginia Whitehead and her family. In 1863, her husband died and left her the family plantation. Whitehead also lost one of her sons when he went to fight for the Confederacy. In her estimation, she and her family had suffered enough and given enough blood for the Confederacy. Instead of letting her other son be conscripted, she obtained a substitute for him. Instances such as this one show that those with the ability to obtain a substitute could. Many poorer white families suffered similar or worse bloodshed for the Confederacy, but could not save their own male

\(^{4}\) L. K. Walker to Vance, January 16, 1863, VGP, NCSA; J.R. Robertson to Vance, January 13, 1864, Zebulon Baird Vance Papers, NCSA.
family members. The substitution clause proved to be inherently unequal on a class basis.\textsuperscript{45}

Many soldiers’ wives took to writing letters as a form of contestation to Governor Vance. These women saw the negative effects of conscription upon their families and their communities. Following the passage of the second conscription law in 1862 that raised the age of individuals eligible in the draft, Martha Coltrane, a North Carolina soldier’s wife, wrote to Vance. She stated, “without my husband we are a desolate and ruined family for extortion runs so hie here we cannot support and clothe our family without the help of my husband.” Coltrane raised several important issues. First, she identifies the importance of her husband to the livelihood of her family. She attributes her family’s economic struggles to her husband being gone and extortion. Second, speculation and extortion alienated poor whites and yeomen from the Confederate cause. She continued, “I appeal to you to look to the white cultivaters as strictly as congress has to the slaveholders.” Coltrane cited that the slaveholders held more favor with politicians because many were slaveholders themselves and that the unequal treatment needed to be addressed. Her words reflect clear class divides over the Confederate laws and policies. Once again, the poor within North Carolina raised the reality of wealthy men receiving additional benefits when poor men are forced to fight. She concluded by offering a warning and suggestion for Vance, “I think they men 35 to 45 be hel as reserves at hom to support ther families if they are calld from home its bound to leave a thosan families in a starving condition.” She wanted to keep her

\textsuperscript{45} Myers, Rebels Against the Confederacy, 74.
husband at home and protect her family from the worsening conditions in the Piedmont. Many women made similar pleas to keep their husbands at home for fear of the conditions that would result once their men went to fight. Unfortunately, Vance offered little assistance in helping their men remain at home. Many women’s pleas went unanswered and they watched their husbands and sons go off to war.⁴⁶

The conditions within the Piedmont and other places within North Carolina grew worse as the war progressed. In January 1863, Jonathon Worth, a prominent businessman, lawyer, and slave-owner belonging to one of the wealthier families in Guilford County, reported the countryside he saw as he passed through the Piedmont. Nearly every individual was “on the verge of starvation. Nearly every man I saw…is openly for reconstruction on the basis of the Constitution of the US, if these terms can be obtained.” Worth suggested that the Confederacy attempt to reunite with the Union. The basis of the Constitution is an important part here though because it appealed to Southern slaveholders who argued that the Constitution protected slavery. Some slaveholders recognized that if slavery could continue to be protected and recognized in the United States Constitution then they should stop fighting. These desires for an end to hostilities also reflect a population that increasingly lost the will to fight the longer the war dragged on. His letter came months before the multiple battlefield losses at

⁴⁶ Bynum, Unruly Women, 133; Martha Coltrane to Vance, November 18, 1862, Zebulon Baird Vance Papers, NCSA; Mobley, War Governor of the South, 150-51.
Gettysburg and Vicksburg. These losses proved important because of their impact on conscription.\(^{47}\)

In the latter stages of the war, the Confederate Congress moved to mobilize more white men for the war. Following Gettysburg and Vicksburg on July 15, 1863, men up to forty-five years old were called into service and by the end of 1863, the Confederate Congress decided to eliminate substitution. The age range increased again on February 17, 1864, when seventeen year olds and men between forty-five and fifty were conscripted into serve as reserves for state defense, and the length of enrollments ceased to exist. In addition, the act authorized the use of free blacks and slaves in labor units. And in early 1864, any man who previously supplied a substitute lost their exemption and needed to enlist within the army. By 1864, all white Confederate men, besides those exempt, between the ages of seventeen and fifty were enrolled in some form of military service. Similar to substitution allowances, Congress restricted exemptions in February 1864, which decreased exempt groups by fifty percent. The elimination of substitutions and restriction of exemptions showed the need for manpower in the Confederacy in the waning years of the Civil War.\(^{48}\)

By the end of 1863 and throughout the rest of the war, the Confederate government and people debated over enlisting slaves into military service. In December 1863, Major-General Patrick Cleburne of the Army of the Tennessee convened a meeting to discuss the arming of slaves. President Davis quickly moved to shut down

\(^{47}\) Escott, *Many Excellent People*, 43-47; Jonathan Worth to J.J. Jackson, January 5, 1863, Jonathon Worth Papers, NCSA.

these discussions and ordered the officers to not conduct any more such meetings for the duration of the war. However, by early November 1864, Davis began to believe that this idea of arming slaves may be necessary for the Confederacy’s survival. Some individuals challenged the necessity of arming slaves. Many Confederates continued to oppose this idea until the end of the war. Many believed that arming slaves would weaken slavery’s bonds and would lead to the collapse of the plantation system and white supremacy. Besides these arguments, individuals also contended that armed slaves would run off to the Union side where they would share intelligence and use Confederate guns against Confederate armies. An even more realistic argument emphasized that white soldiers would not fight along side slaves.49

North Carolinians, like residents of many other states, spoke out against the possibility of providing slaves for military service. Governor Vance along with other politicians, like North Carolina Congressmen J.T. Leach and Josiah Turner, Jr. strongly opposed arming slaves. The North Carolina House of Representatives even went so far as to deny the Confederate government the right to impress slaves for arming purposes. The state government actively used its power to prevent the federal government from implementing a potential law.50

Newspapers began to pick up on the low morale within the army and the threat it posed to the war effort. Editors realized the growing concern of North Carolinians to

50 Levine, Confederate Emancipation, 41-42, 46.
put an end to the fighting. The *Raleigh Daily Progress* urged for “any peace that is
honorable...because we believe that peace now would save slavery...(and) because
there has been enough blood and carnage.” The inclusion of slavery in any peace terms
appealed to slaveholders. Any peace in the eyes of slaveholders needed to include the
continued existence of slavery, but non-slaveholders simply wanted the war to end. The
paper also spoke to the views witnessed by citizens, who had grown tired of the
gruesomeness of war. The growing desire for peace was also evident with the elections
of local officials. In the later years of the war many peace-advocating candidates won
local seats within government. These elections further showed that poor whites and
yeomen desperately wanted this war that they no longer wished to be a part of to end.
Their election of peace-advocating candidates shows their efforts to affect change with
what little means they possessed.51

More and more North Carolinians noticed the increasingly short supply of bread
and other necessities as the war years dragged on. Many of these shortages were
caused by the lack of a labor force to properly tend to the fields. As early as the summer
of 1862, Kenneth Raynor recognized declining conditions stating, “suffering among the
poor [...] is dreadful to contemplate.” Raynor possesses an observation of the elites on
the state of the poor whites living around them. They noticed from an early stage in the
war that suffering had started to occur and that suffering only grew worse. At the end of
summer in 1863, John Flintoff recorded the desperate extent to which many individuals
within the Piedmont suffered. “The people have had scarcely bread to supply them till

harvest [...] there is very little meat anywhere to be had.” By the following year, North Carolinian Thos Cotten wrote, “we are getting scarce of almost every article of necessity, from a needle to a scythe blade.” These accounts mark a continued suffering along the home front starting as early as 1862. These shortages caused many men to contemplate their service to the Confederacy and caused some of them to desert.52

With this type of suffering at home, many poor conscripted men faced decisions to desert or stay and fight. Likewise, those men not yet conscripted contemplated the choices of hiding out from conscription officials. One North Carolinian reported, “[he] lay out in the woods 19 months” in order to escape the draft. By evading the draft or deserting, men took control over their situations and subverted the Confederate government. The effects of conscription created a ripple effect within the Piedmont and North Carolina. As the desertion rate and the need for conscripts increased, the Confederate government responded by authorizing Home Guards to round up those men evading service. Peter Mallett, Commandant of Conscripts in North Carolina, used conscripts to chase down draft evaders in 1863 and throughout the remaining war years. This required the individuals, already impressed into service, to do the same thing to those individuals they were tracking down. To make matters worse, local

52 Kenneth Raynor to Thomas Ruffin, June 13, 1862 from J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, ed., The Papers of Thomas Ruffin (Raleigh, 1918) found in Escott, Many Excellent People, 54; John Flintoff diary, August 1, 1863, NCSA; Thos L. Cotten to E.J. Hale & Sons, 1864, Zebulon Baird Vance Papers, NCSA.
officials, home guards, and conscript enrolling officers were often inept and sometimes corrupt. This made Mallett’s job of fielding conscripts even more challenging.\textsuperscript{53}

Local populations, also, resisted the Home Guard and other North Carolina troops stationed within North Carolina, who were tasked with rounding up deserters and conscripts. As the war dragged on, this resistance grew. L.S. Wright wrote to B.S.E. Wright describing the climate of a local population in the western portion of the Piedmont in relation to his unit’s presence. “The people about here are nearly all union people half of them are deserters some of them get very mad when we go to thare house nite before last we had to press our nites lodging and do our own cookin and som treat us well they are a feard of us thare is so many deserters here that the home guard is a feard to go without a heap of them or some of us.” Wright felt the tension between soldiers and civilians as they tried to round up deserters. Describing the local community as “union people” suggests that these individuals harbored ill will towards the Confederacy and opposed Confederate rule within their region. Local communities prevented soldiers from effectively carrying out their duties by protecting dodgers and deserters. In areas, like the Piedmont, North Carolina troops found it difficult to enforce conscription laws in the later years of the war.\textsuperscript{54}

The increase in troop units within North Carolina counties further stressed the class divide amongst North Carolinians. As troops were sent to reclaim deserters and

\textsuperscript{53} Escott, \textit{Many Excellent People}, 63-65; A.K. Pearce to Bryan Tyson, November 25, 1863, Bryan Tyson Papers, Duke; Peter Mallett, April 20, 1863, September 4, 1863, July 11, 1864, C.S.A. Conscription Papers, SHC.

\textsuperscript{54} LS Wright to BSE Wright, 27 November 1863, Wright Family Papers, Duke.
draft evaders, they needed to find a way to sustain their occupancy. This placed further strain on the limited resources within each county. The draft took men away from their farms and left their families with difficulty providing necessities, but also brought additional strains on supplies by bringing troops into those communities. J.H. Foust wrote to Vance informing him of these issues. “We think the Home Guard organizations now sufficient to the purpose of arresting conscript and deserter. But if the county is to be flooded with soldiers, let them buy their provisions in a regular way.” The soldiers had been confiscating the necessary supplies to sustain their units. Forest continued, “[w]hat else can I do, when appealed to by our best citizens, the cause is being damaged by such a conduct.” Vance issued orders to reign in his soldiers, but in reality soldiers continued to use their power against local populations.55

After the Confederate Congress eliminated substitution, men who had furnished substitutes for the Confederacy argued against their names being placed on draft lists. John Flintoff complained, “what injustice having to go myself after hiring a substitute over 50 years old. This is very hard and unjust.” Many wealthy challenged the laws by appealing to North Carolina courts. North Carolina Supreme Court judge Richard Pearson, a states’ rights advocate, ruled that substitutes and principals were not liable for the draft in 1863. In addition, Pearson issued writs of habeas corpus and ordered the release of all deserters by the militia. He argued that the conscription laws were federal laws that the state militia did not have the authority to uphold. Since the North Carolina

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55 Escott, *Many Excellent People*, 68; JH Foust to Zebulon Vance, 30 December 1863, Marmaduke S. Robins Papers, SHC.
legislature refused to pass any legislation that made draft resistance a crime, Pearson believed that the resisters violated no law. His decision questioned the authority of the federal government over individual states and contradicted Confederate nationalism by hindering the war effort. In regards to substitution, Pearson believed that substitution constituted a contract in the eyes of the federal government. Since it was a contract, allowing one man to furnish another man in his stead, the government could not impress the principal into military service after already providing the substitute. This benefitted the individuals who had provided substitutes. Also, well-connected conscripts were able to obtain exemptions and escape service through Pearson. Pearson’s ruling caused contention from the North Carolina and Confederate governments.56

Pearson gave exemptions and excused individuals of service based upon his belief that those procuring a substitute were exempt from military service. John W. Irwin benefited from Pearson’s ruling. Irwin hired a substitute outside of the age range covered in the first conscription law. When the age range widened, Irwin’s substitute fell within the age range. The substitute was then conscripted himself for service within the army. The Home Guard arrested Irwin for draft evasion. Pearson ordered Irwin released and free on his belief the new age range did not apply to substitutes and thus

56 John Flintoff Diary, August 1, 1863, NCSA; Joe A. Mobley, War Governor of the South, 45-46; Armstead L. Robinson, Bitter Fruits of Bondage: The Demise of Slavery and the Collapse of the Confederacy, 1861-1865 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 242; Myers, Rebels Against the Confederacy, 68.
Irwin was not liable for military service since he had already provided a worthy substitute.⁵⁷

Many soldiers heard Pearson’s rulings through newspapers and family members at home and believed that he had ruled the conscription laws unconstitutional. As a result, desertion rates began to skyrocket following the dispersal of the ruling. President Jefferson Davis fumed over the decision and wrote to Vance instructing him to get a handle on the situation. Vance responded, “news of Judge Pearson’s decision went abroad in the Army in a very exaggerated and ridiculous form, soldiers were induced to believe that it declared the conscript law unconstitutional and that they were entitled if they came home to the protection of their civil authorities.” While Pearson did not rule the law unconstitutional, his ruling challenged the conscription laws’ interpretation and enforcement. North Carolina General W.D. Pender worried in a letter to General Lee, “our regiments will waste away more rapidly than they ever have in battle.” A few weeks later Vance admitted, “desertion [...] broke out again worse than before” following Pearson’s ruling. Poor whites and yeomen finally had some support from a government official, but this support did not last long.⁵⁸

The Confederate government could not challenge Pearson’s decision because the Confederacy never established a Supreme Court. For this reason, Pearson’s decision could not be appealed to a higher court. Vance and Davis remained unsure of how to address the problems created by the ruling. Pearson’s ruling centered around one

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⁵⁸ Mobley, Weary of War, 55; General Pender to Lee, forwarded by Lee to Seddon, April 23, 1863, Official Records, I, 25, pt. 2: 746-47. Vance to Jefferson Davis, May 13, 1863, VGP, NCSA.
aspect, which he stated, “the Government agrees to discharge a man in consideration of his putting a sound, able-bodied man in his place, and it is done; this is a valid contract.” The contract entered into individuals through substitution kept them from being eligible for conscription. The North Carolina government moved to repeal the decision.59

The other members of the North Carolina Supreme Court eventually challenged Pearson’s decision. When the Court held its meeting of all justices in 1863, one of the major issues became Pearson’s ruling. The majority of the other judges refused to allow the conscription laws to be labeled as unconstitutional. In addition, the other North Carolina Supreme Court justices received pressure from President Davis and Governor Vance to overturn the ruling. The courts overturned Pearson’s ruling to ensure the conscription laws remained constitutional [in the eyes of the law]. This gave conscription officers and the Home Guard backing to continue to round up draft evaders and deserters. Another interesting aspect of this story involves the circulation of the ruling. The minority ruling, Pearson, actually became more widely distributed than the majority ruling. Newspaper editors gave soldiers an excuse to desert. General Lee wrote to Jefferson Davis later in the summer of 1863, “in one corps, the desertions of North Carolinians, and to some extent of Virginians, has grown to a very serious matter.” Pearson’s ruling coupled with major battlefield losses at Gettysburg and

Vicksburg created a ripe situation for soldiers to desert. The trend continued throughout the next year of the war.\(^{60}\)

By late 1864, nearly two-thirds of North Carolinians enlisted were reported absent without leave, and by the end of the war, North Carolina contributed one-fourth of the Confederacy’s reported 103,400 deserters and roughly one-sixth of its overall manpower. Isrel Lowdermilk, from Alamance County wrote in 1864, “I had to leave my family [and] go in the army or leave the country to keep from going in the Confederate army.” Men faced with these decisions helps to understand why so many deserted by the later years of the war. Many did not want to be in the army, and their families needed them back home. Combined with military defeats and the peace movement in North Carolina their desertions become more reasonable.\(^{61}\)

North Carolina fostered a strong peace movement during the latter years of the war, in 1864 and 1865. The peace movement was an end to a long road of dissension amongst North Carolinians. The yeoman farmers, who made up the majority of the population within the Piedmont, felt victimized by the government. Conscription laws favored the wealthy and well-connected individuals within North Carolina. The hierarchical structure that existed within North Carolina before the Civil War became more pronounced once the war started. The poor white and yeomen population felt the full burden of the war and suffered from a lack of necessities.

William Holden led the peace movement in 1864. He served as the editor of the famous anti-war newspaper *The North Carolina Standard*. His desire for peace led him to run against Vance for governor during the 1864 election. Although, unsuccessful in his campaign he stirred peace sentiments. His most supportive part of the state proved to be the Piedmont region. This suggests that the poor whites and yeomen living in the Piedmont wanted the war to end. Holden provided another source of courage for individuals within the Piedmont to stand up and repudiate the war.

The peace movement utilized the argument over emancipating and arming slaves to fight as a way to garner support for their cause. Holden opposed the arming of slaves, and the peace movement focused on the ways that arming slaves could potentially disrupt or challenge Southern life. Holden believed that if slaveholders were willing to part with their slaves then they might as well end the war. He appealed to individuals who thought that slavery held a slight possibility of being saved if peace could be achieved between the sides. He warned that once the slaves were armed then slavery would eventually fall. Holden spoke to the insecurities of many of his followers, both slaveholder and non-slaveholder, who wanted the war to end. A country built on the premise of slavery could not survive without it.62

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Conscription laws enacted by the Confederate government attempted to maintain the army’s ranks once the war no longer seemed to be ending quickly. These

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Conscription laws stirred class divisions amongst the members of the Piedmont communities. The list of exempt occupations and other clauses aided the wealthy in evading the draft, and substitution favored those individuals with enough money to pay for an individual to go in their place. The poor whites, who survived on subsistence farming, came nowhere close to possessing that amount of capital. Additionally, the twenty-slave clause for exemptions benefited the wealthy planters by allowing these men to remain home to maintain order on plantations. Conscription laws favored those with power, wealth, and connections, while beleaguering the poor, and contributed to the mantra of “rich man’s war, poor man’s fight.”

The poor whites and yeomen within the Piedmont resisted the conscription laws when they could. Desertion proved the primary means for men to thwart being conscripted within the army, and there is no coincidence that North Carolina suffered from one of the highest desertion rates amongst all Confederate states. The main portion of deserters came from the yeomen farmers. In addition, draft evaders hid out and were protected by some communities against the war, forcing North Carolina to allocate vital resources to rounding up these draft dodgers and evaders. Besides desertion, poor whites focused on obtaining assistance from the government. Governor Vance received numerous letters from men and women all over North Carolina, including the Piedmont, but their pleas for help and exemption from service often went unheard by the governor and government. Poor whites became less inclined to fight and give for the cause as a result of the conscription laws.
Confederate conscription laws were designed to assist the war effort and ensure the survival of the Confederacy. By enacting the first draft in United States history, the Confederate government took a bold step in establishing more central government power. While many elites were weary of a strong central government, they protected themselves against the draft or stationed themselves in favorable locations, but the poor were afforded no such luxuries. Poor whites left their farms in adverse conditions because of conscription. Before the war, they typically remained within their community, but conscription brought them out into a fight many did not believe in. Many yeomen opposed secession, and only reluctantly joined the cause after Fort Sumter. Conscription laws and their effects upon communities contradicted many of the justifications for secession, and caused class conflict to come to fruition in the Piedmont during the Civil War.
IV. White Women and Poor Relief in the North Carolina Piedmont

Throughout the Civil War, Governor Vance received countless letters from women all around the state. Soldiers’ wives, who represented a large number of individuals that wrote to Vance, requested assistance and informed him of their struggles. Martha Coltrane, a soldier’s wife and mother, offers a good representation of how Piedmont women appealed to Vance and some of their desired needs. In an October 1863 letter, she penned, “we trust in God and look to you for some help for our poor children.” Coltrane needed help providing for her children because without her husband they were “a desolate and ruined family.” Her letter showed that many poor white and yeomen families struggled once their men left to fight. They faced difficulties obtaining the necessary food and starvation became a realistic problem as the war progressed. Coltrane also appealed to Vance for help through the imagery of her children suffering and the sacrifices she made being a soldier’s wife.63

The Confederacy faced a continuous problem of food shortages and general widespread poverty throughout the Civil War. White Southern women, especially soldiers’ wives outside the planter class, struggled to sustain themselves. Many white women organized, petitioned, and protested extortion and speculation, an unfair distribution of food supplies, and harsh treatment from government officials. These practices were rampant throughout the Piedmont and contributed to disaffection from the Confederate cause. Confederate leaders had called on Southerners to support the war effort to defend southern homes from the Northern invader. During the war, many

63 Martha Coltrane to Vance, October 18, 1863, VGP, NCSA.
white women demanded that the Confederate government stand in place of their absent husbands and provide assistance as conditions worsened on the home front. The Confederate government failed to enact large-scale poor relief for these families, which partially caused them to question the Confederate cause and their required contributions for the war effort.

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The problem of access to necessities proved a significant issue for the women within the Piedmont. The Confederacy faced internal and external problems with food distribution from the beginning of the war. The process of doling out food to areas in need put a strain upon a bureaucracy struggling to maintain itself without infringing upon states’ rights. Due to bureaucratic failure, food became inequitably distributed throughout the Confederacy. Unsurprisingly, the areas that received less food often contained poorer populations of individuals. To make matters worse, Union military victories and blockades hindered Confederate distribution efforts. The Union successfully blocked supply lines by land and sea. While some ships made it past the blockade, imports into the Confederacy all but ceased, and agriculture produced within the state could not make up the lack of food imports. Also, the Confederacy relied upon river travel to transport goods, and this became increasingly difficult as the war progressed and the Union took hold of most of the major waterways.\(^\text{64}\)

The issue of speculation and extortion started in the first year of the war. The North Carolina state convention that voted to secede declared an extortioner or

\(^{64}\text{Smith, Starving the South, 50, 67.}\)
speculator as one who, with the intention of reselling, “shall engross or get into his hands, by buying, extracting, or other means, except by producing, corn ‘or other’ present necessities’” of the people. By taking the time to define extortion and speculation, the state government acknowledged that these problems existed, but did little beyond defining them to eliminate their practices. Speculation and extortion persisted throughout the war even though these actions remained illegal. The government lacked control over merchants and wealthy individuals, who took advantage of the poor by holding onto goods and selling them at high prices. The practice of extortion and speculation caused the poor to mistrust their wealthy neighbors.65

These acts of extortion and speculation also prompted poor white women to act out against them through bread riots later in the war. The concept of bread riots and poor individuals forcibly seizing goods when they felt their price became too high did not originate in the Civil War. E.P. Thompson’s discussion of moral economy and “just price” shows that the practice of bread riots served to correct market issues in previous centuries in Europe. Poor individuals regularly rioted against grain merchants who raised their prices in years of dearth in an attempt to reassert the concept of “just price.” These riots were viewed as more peaceable acts that asserted the feudal rights of individuals to set the price of essential goods in the market. The actions of these white women in the North Carolina Piedmont in seizing food for their families when

merchants refused to give up goods at a “fair price” marks an example of these concepts in practice. It also helps provide reasoning and justification for why women resorted to these acts during the latter stages of the war.\textsuperscript{66}

As early as 1861, some citizens began to recognize the problems caused by speculation. E.T. Graham, a farmer living in the Piedmont, wrote to Governor Clark on November 20, 1861, “extortionists...in every locality” took advantage of poor men and women by hiring them to “produce [goods] for the exchange of articles, and paying them a little sort of no kind of a price for the produce by putting disgracefully high prices on their articles of exchange and making the Poor believe things cannot be had possibly for a lower price.” Graham believed that merchants intentionally set their prices high and meant to extort the poor. He portrayed the wealthy as misleading the poor about prices and implored Governor Clark to do something about setting just prices for goods. His letter came months after the secession convention that made extortion and speculation illegal. Graham also noted that the poor were already beginning to feel hopeless at receiving fair prices from these extortionists. E.T. Graham went on in his letter to predict that mobs would form in protest unless the government gained control over the speculators and extortionists. His predictions offer ideas of “just price” and the appropriate actions that individuals may take to set those prices. These ideas turned into actions in the winter of 1863.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{66} E.P. Thompson, “Moral Economy of the Crowd”.
\textsuperscript{67} Bynum, \textit{Unruly Women}, 120; E.T. Graham to Governor Henry Clark, November 20, 1861, Henry Clark Governor Papers, NCSA.
Even some members not faced with food shortages recognized its threat the poorer population. In June 1862, Walter Gwynn wrote to his friend Thomas Ruffin, a wealthy planter and politician, “I fear...starvation, meal is three dollars per bushel and other necessities of life in like proportion. I have witnessed great distress, among the lower and poorer classes.” Although Gwynn was not a politician himself, by reaching out to a friend and politician, he sought to address the problem. However, nothing in his letter offered a means to alleviate the distress of the population. He appeared concerned for the poor whites throughout his letter, but recognized no realistic options for helping them. Instead, Gwynn deflected the burden of assisting his poor neighbors to the government.68

Refugees further compounded the problem. As the Confederacy lost battles and ceded land to the Union armies, Southerners fled out of the war zones and to the state’s interior. Refugees consumed vital resources in areas already pressed to their maximum capabilities. A slow or absent response by the Confederate government allowed these issues to grow.69

During the war’s early years, the Confederate government largely allowed such problems to continue. Its leaders failed to acknowledge the potential calamities already set in motion between 1861 and 1862. They ignored plans for fixing these problems because they feared a strong central government, yet many of these problems required a collective effort that went beyond what any state could possibly do.

68 Walter Gwynn to Thomas Ruffin, June 13, 1862 from Hamilton, The Papers of Thomas Ruffin found in Escott, Many Excellent People, 54.
69 Smith, Starving the South, 67; Mobley, Weary of War, 35.
Since the federal government remained the enemy, southern state governments committed money for welfare programs by the second year of the war. Local and county governments allocated millions of dollars for poor relief. The state later supplemented such efforts with several more millions. North Carolina also passed four different laws during the war to help the poor. The laws aimed to shift the onus from the county level to the state level. Governor Vance told the legislative body in 1863 to “feed the poor whose supporters and protectors are in the army.” Vance’s remarks show a commitment on some level to aid the soldiers’ wives who comprised the majority of his correspondents.70

The state legislature had appropriated a significant amount of money towards welfare relief by the time the war ended. This significant capital outlay showcases the importance poor whites held within the legislators’ minds. Legislators recognized that the government needed to attempt actions on behalf of the poor in order to maintain the war effort. In 1862, the legislature allocated $400,000 for provisions for the poor. In February 1863, they assigned another one million dollars toward poor relief. The timing of this allotment suggests a response to the initial bread riots and some of the complaints made by North Carolina women. A few months later, in December 1863, the legislature allotted another million dollars for use as poor relief. In a matter of a year, then the North Carolina government more than quadrupled its welfare spending. In May 1864, another million dollars became available for apportionment to the poor. The

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70 McCurry, Confederate Reckoning, 200; Vance to North Carolina Legislature, Journal of the House of Commons of the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina of its Adjourned Session, 1863, NCSA.
final assignment of poor relief came during the last months of the war in 1865, when three million dollars more became available for distribution. This indicates a significant response to the bread riots and political constituency women had formed.\(^71\)

Early forms of relief varied in effectiveness and type. North Carolina originally gave strictly monetary relief to the poor. As conscription took men away from the household, soldiers’ wives needed some form of support to make up for lost labor production. Vance pledged in February 1863 to the women of North Carolina that he would “see that [the women] do not starve in the absence of their husbands.” He wanted to reassure soldiers and their families that the government would provide aid to ease the impact of men leaving for war. Vance knew he needed to keep soldiers focused on fighting and not on their families at home. If the government could keep suffering to a minimum, then threats of desertion would diminish. Yet proclaiming his intent to give the aid necessary and actually providing enough were two completely different things.\(^72\)

A group within North Carolina known as the Regulators responded to perceived class disparities within the state. These individuals wrote in February of 1863 to Vance complaining of extortion and speculation perpetrated by the wealthy. They threatened to take action if the wealthy planters continued selling corn at unreasonable prices. In their message to Vance, they stated, we are “determined to have bread out of these barns and that at a price that we can pay or we will slaughter as we go.”

\(^{71}\) Mobley, *Weary of War*, 44.

\(^{72}\) McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 153, 193; Silia Hoge to Vance, February 15, 1863, VGP, NCSA.
Regulators accused their wealthy neighbors of keeping food from them when many faced starvation. Their open threat of violence against the wealthy suggests multiple things occurring during the winter of 1863. First, class divisions sharpened amid the stresses of war. Second, their threat of violence suggests that the conditions reached a point of desperation. The Regulators wanted the government to regulate prices in some shape or form and were practicing the basic concepts of setting a “just price” and the ability of poor individuals to take actions into their own hands.73

The continued inclusion of more and more men in the Confederate army reduced the labor force at home and created shortages of supplies. Joseph Worth, a member of the planter class, worried in January 1863 “about the chances for people to live much longer if this war continues […] If more men are called to the field […] many must starve.” O. Goddin, a North Carolina soldier, raised the issue in February 1863: “by taking too many men from their farms, [government officials] have not left enough to cultivate the land, thus making a scarcity of provisions.” Men resented the conscription acts not just because they endangered their lives but also because they endangered their families’ survival. Goddin raised a serious problem that was hardly addressed for poor whites and yeomen. Like many other Confederate soldiers, Goddin worried about the wellbeing of his family once he left to fight.74

73 Mobley, Weary of War, 68; Regulators of North Carolina to Vance, February 18, 1863, VGP, NCSA.
74 O Goddin to Vance, February 27, 1863, VGP, NCSA; Joseph A. Worth to Jonathan Worth, January 23, 1863, Jonathon Worth Papers, NCSA; Escott, Many Excellent People, 44; Mobley, War Governor of the South, 53.
Women continued to express their needs for protection and help from the government and suggest that Vance and the state government were failing to provide it. In February 1863, Margaret Smith of Orange County wrote to Governor Vance emphasizing, “without help we must starve.” She continued, “you our governor of North Carolina has promust the soldiers that there familieys shod shar of the last” and “wee think it is hie time for us to get help in time of our need.” Smith referenced the previous proclamation made by Vance in 1862 that assured soldiers and their families the state would care for them. She wanted Governor Vance to assist her and other soldiers’ families, who were struggling through the rough winter of 1863. Smith went on to describe her situation. “We hav seen the time when we could call our little children and our husband to our tables and hav a plenty, and now wee hav becom beggars and starvars an now way to help ourselves.” Smith highlighted the impact of the war on her family: their shift from “plenty” to starvation. Her description of women as beggars and “starvars” reflect the desperate need of many women in the Piedmont. Smith concluded, “I hav scuffled for them as long as I could.” In doing so, she emphasized that she had reached the limits of her ability and now desperately needed help. Smith turned to her government for assistance in sustaining her family while her husband served his country.75

Starvation and desperation drove many poor white women to conduct aggressive actions in order to obtain necessary foodstuffs. Bread riots proved the

75 McCurry, Confederate Reckoning, 143-145; Margaret Smith to Vance, February 4, 1863, VGP, NCSA; Smith to Vance, February 4, 1863, VGP, NCSA.
culmination of their frustrations and needs. The first reported within North Carolina came in February 1863. Women in Bladensboro in Bladen County raided a grain depot and obtained food supplies. Following this incident, women at Sanders Mill, North Carolina, confiscated supplies from a Confederate supply center. Most bread riots occurred either before or after the winter, times when women and families were most desperate for food and necessities. This was the case for the bread riot in the Piedmont, in Salisbury, North Carolina. At the beginning of March 1863, some women who later participated in the Salisbury bread riot wrote to Governor Vance informing him of their desperate situation. One woman wrote, “many of us have been shoeless this whole winter except the cloth shoes we can make for ourselves which are not protection even against the cold.” While food remained a much-needed necessity, clothing and other goods were also in short supply for the entire community. Another woman, also involved in the riot, pleaded, “I have 6 little children and my husband in the army and what am I to do.” This soldier’s wife echoed the similar sentiments that women who gave up their men to the army, but could not sustain themselves at home. By identifying herself as a soldier’s wife she placed herself within a group of women that would be more easily identified as deserving aid. Giving up their men contributed to their sacrifices that many used in attempts to obtain aid from the government.76

Poor white women in the Piedmont expressed their plight to Governor Vance, but received no response and little assistance, which prompted them to take matters

76 Smith, Starving the South, 50, 51, 64; Escott, Many Excellent People, 149; Soldiers Wives to Zebulon B. Vance, March 21, 1863, VGP, NCSA; Michael Brown to Vance, March 18, 1863, VGP, NCSA.
into their own hands. Salisbury, like many Piedmont towns, experienced a difficult winter between 1862 and 1863. Its male population had been ravaged by conscription, and local women felt the extensive pressure that accompanied their men’s absence from home for over a year. On March 18, 1863, a group of poor white women in Salisbury and some neighboring areas marched into town. This group of about forty to fifty came armed and targeted the government depot located in town. In addition, the women’s aggression also aimed at storeowners they deemed speculators.77

While the Confederate government failed to respond to welfare needs, it was proactive in shaping media coverage of bread riots. The Confederate government ordered newspapers to not publish anything on the bread riots throughout the South. One Northern spy reported the silence of Confederate newspapers, writing, “bread riots are frequent, yet newspapers do not mention them lest the intelligence reach their soldiery. They are not confined to one or two places, but are universal in every town and city throughout the south where the poor, starving families can be brought together.” While this report overstates the extent of the riots, it acknowledges that newspapers failed to report bread riots due to the Confederate government. The report also suggests that if the news of riots reached the ranks then they could lead to problems with soldiers deserting. Newspapers aided the Confederate government by shifting the blame away from supply problems on the home front. Instead, some

77 Smith, Starving the South, 50, 51.
Confederates blamed starvation and poverty on the Union's attempt to starve out the
Confederacy. 78

Contemporary accounts of the riot are muddled, but a vague sense of what
occurred between the women and the townspeople emerges from extant documents.
Storeowners feared the armed women and prevented them from entering their
establishments. According to one account, the women stated, "we took our little money
wit us...but the speklators refused us anything or even admittance into their premises."
According to another account, the women "then forced our way in and compelled them
to give us something." Many women expressed their peaceful intentions and only
resorted to force once storeowners refused to provide food for a just price. When
authorities "threatened to shoot us and drawed their pistols over us," the women
retreated. The use of force by the Home Guard or magistrates underscores the
perceived threat that women's riots posed to government institutions. Even more
important their actions signify a belief that the government needed to fix the many
issues that remained present within the Piedmont. Merchants needed to work with
these soldiers' wives in order for them to feed their families. Also, their portrayal as
soldiers' wives helps justify their actions. Their husbands left their homes to serve in
the military and expected that their women would be cared for. Their actions invoke

78 Smith, Starving the South, 59; “Interesting Information from a Federal Spy in Secession,” Boston
Herald, January 14, 1864, found in Smith, Starving the South, 65.
sympathy from other community members because of their families perceived sacrifice.\(^79\)

Editors at the *Greensborough Patriot* initially lauded the female rioters, who they classified as wives and mothers of Confederate soldiers. They supported their actions against the corrupt government officials and speculators. The newspaper’s stance changed though following other instances of forcible seizure of property by women. The editors wrote, “we would fondly hope that this will be the last frolic of the kind that will be attempted.” Further reprimanding the actions of these women, the editors reminded them that the war was being fought on their behalf. Their men fought to protect their families and homes from invasion. These female rioters hurt the homes that men valiantly protected. The editors claimed that the female rioters undermined the war effort and endangered Confederate victory by resorting to violence and encouraging their husbands to desert. They even went so far as to condemn women food rioters as the unchaste female component of “the elements which wage eternal war against society...and against which society must wage eternal war.” The editors feared the negative affects of disorder on the Confederate cause. Soldiers fought in defense of southern homes, but soldiers’ wives, they suggested, were upsetting the social order and undermining the war effort. \(^80\)

Eventually, the Confederate Congress moved to regulate food distribution, but focused on supplying the Confederate armies instead of helping the home front. The

\(^{79}\) Mobley, *Weary of War*, 35 & 43; Soldiers Wives to Zebulon B. Vance, March 21, 1863, VGP, NCSA; Michael Brown to Vance, March 18, 1863, VGP, NCSA.

\(^{80}\) *Greensborough Patriot*, February 19, March 12, & April 9, 1863, NCC.
Confederate Congress stated in April 1863, it is “of the utmost importance, not only with a view to the proper subsistence of our armies, but for the interest and welfare of all the people that the agricultural labor of the labor should be employed chiefly in the products of a supply of food to meet every contingency.” The Confederate Congress passed a tax-in-kind law later that month to help supply the Confederate armies. Moreover, the Confederate Congress encouraged farmers to plant more food. These actions to address the supply problems in the Confederacy failed to address the roots of the problem. The Confederate government simply tried to increase supply without addressing why the supply remained so low in the first place.81

Following the Salisbury bread riot, women continued to face unjust treatment from merchants. Lydia Brassfield, a soldier’s wife living in Orange County, like many of the women who wrote Vance, begged for some form of assistance when dealing with merchants. The mother of three claimed that she had borrowed money and walked for five days to buy corn, but merchants had refused to accept Confederate money. She wrote, “pore soldiers [are]…wading thue mud and water for our beeloved cuntry while urthers at home [are] specerlating.” Her description of who is sacrificing and who is taking advantage of the poor women at home shows class divisions. These women saw poor men struggling with army service, but wealthier individuals at home taking advantage of the poor. She wanted Vance to address the continued problem of speculators within the Confederacy and aid the soldier’s wives. Brassfield’s complaints

about speculators resemble similar problems from the beginning of the war that the citizens expected the government to address. Her letter in 1863 shows the government’s continuing inability to alleviate these issues.\(^\text{82}\)

Governor Vance openly addressed the growing problems in early April 1863. After receiving countless pleas for assistance and hearing of several bread riots, he published a written argument against the use of forcible seizures of food. Vance warned, “Broken laws will give you no bread, but much sorrow; and when forcible seizures have to be made to avert starvation, let it be done by your county or state agents.” The state of North Carolina had set up a system to aid in the distribution of welfare programs that relied upon several figures at both the local and state level. First, leaders formed a subcommittee to oversee the relief distribution. Second, each county elected a relief agent in charge of distributing aid at the local level. Finally, the subcommittee selected a three-man committee to determine who qualified for relief. These committees and the multiple levels of bureaucracy created problems with distributing food and ensuring that every family’s needs were met. Vance warned women against seizing goods illegally and instructed them to consult with their government officials to alleviate starvation. His suggestion failed to address the actual problem and reasons for why women rioted: The state and local agents were unable to provide enough food for them. Also, these women did not always trust local and state agents.\(^\text{83}\)

\(^{82}\) Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 126; Lydia Brassfield to Vance, March 27, 1863, VGP, NCSA.  
\(^{83}\) McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 200; *Greensborough Patriot*, April 9, 1863, NCC.
Many civilians criticized government officials as the problem, not the solution. C.W. Walker, a resident of Orange County, wrote to Vance in May 1863 complaining about the militia and government officials stationed within the county. He claimed they were "ruining the poor at home." Through excessive force and unfair distribution of resources, officials exacerbated the problems they were supposed to be solving. He continued, "I Her you carry out to these men to stop extortion when they are the men that is doing the business." He identified a reason why so many poor whites and yeomen distrusted the local officials. They often committed the same exploitations they were supported to be combating. Walker and many others recognized that the government officials Vance asked people to entrust with their claims were just as guilty of extortion as the merchants.84

Some Piedmont women objected to the treatment they received from food commissioners. For example, Martha Allen issued a complaint against the food commissioner of Orange County. Allen was a soldier’s wife and a mother of three. In May 1863, she ran out of the rationed food given to her in April 1863 and would not receive any more food until July 13, 1863. She pleaded with Governor Vance to allow for more food to be given to her. When Vance contacted Commissioner Jehial Atwater, he responded, "She has herd of some women writing to you and getting help and no doubt that’s the main cause of her letter." He described Orange County as experiencing very little suffering from extreme material deprivation and accused Allen of lying. Besides

84 Greensborough Patriot, April 9, 1863; Bynum, Unruly Women, 128; C.W. Walker to Vance, May 8, 1863, VGP, NCSA.
misconstruing the conditions within Orange County, Atwater also wrote off the plea for help as a trick that Allen copied from other individuals.85

Atwater was not completely wrong though in assuming that some women attempted to cheat the system. The Fayetteville Observer published an article on March 30, 1863, that claimed women sometimes lied to obtain yarn and other necessities. In order to obtain the necessary goods, some women falsely identified themselves as soldier’s wives. The article claimed, “a single woman, with no husband or children in [who] borrowed the children to enable her to get the yarn to sell again at nearly 3 times as much as she paid for it.” Poor single women likely resorted to such misrepresentations because the government only provided assistance to soldiers’ wives. Single women faced possible starvation as a result of the conditions caused by the war: scarcity of foodstuffs on the homefront and inflated prices for what little remained after the taxation, impressment, and relief agents had done their duty. If a single woman suffered, there was no assistance available for her. A high number of single women lived in the Piedmont, which complicated matters for county officials. Commissioners had to be ever vigilant for women attempting to scam the system. Sometimes this came at the price of women who desperately needed the supplies.86

County officials perpetrated physical violence against Piedmont citizens in addition to being accused of exploitation and mistreatment. Vance and other high-

85 Bynum, Unruly Women, 126; Martha Allen to Vance, April 1863, VGP, NCSA.
86 Fayetteville Observer, March 30, 1863, NCC. A significant population of poor single women with children existed in the Piedmont. Before the war, Orange County held a high number of female-headed households. The county contained 383 households run by women, approximately 16.7% of the total number of households within the county. Of that number, only 44.3 percent of those households owned any property. Bynum, Unruly Women, 32.
ranking military officials faced a troublesome task of dealing with these incidents. Often verifying the claims proved problematic and made their job of policing the home guards more difficult. Government officials used many excuses to justify their actions against Piedmont citizens as well. For example, a Lt. Colonel in the North Carolina home guard, who came from a wealthy family, justified excessive use of force against Piedmont citizens because it was a place where “few respectable people live and [where people have] little or no refinement.” These acts of violence represented not only corruption of government and military officials, but also the views held by some upper class white North Carolinians of the lower class white North Carolinians living in the Piedmont. They saw poor men and women as being less sophisticated and not deserving of the same treatment given to the wealthy. This could explain why corruption occurred within the Piedmont and why so many poor whites and yeomen distrusted their wealthy counterparts.87

Providing money to soldiers’ wives did not solve all the problems. Two Orange County women shared a similar complaint about merchants not taking Confederate money in exchange for goods. Louena Cates and Lucinda Glenn complained about the Orange Factory. In two separate letters months apart, Cates and Glenn claimed that the factory owner refused to accept Confederate money for cotton yarn. Cates wrote to Vance in late July 1863 and Glenn followed up in late October 1863. With months between the letters and the same complaint arising, the lack of action taken by Vance

becomes apparent. Vance could have remedied the situation by enforcing the validity of Confederate money. The worthlessness of Confederate money exemplified one of fundamental problems with governmental relief efforts. Government agents provided cash relief to soldiers’ wives, but merchants and manufacturers refused to accept Confederate money. These women held a valid complaint about the system, but nothing was done to effect change. The inaction in the face of similar complaints represents a fundamental reason why women took to rioting and forcible seizures of goods.\textsuperscript{88}

Vance received letters from non-slaveholders later in the war questioning the unbalanced treatment of non-slaveholders and slaveholders. One North Carolina woman wrote to Vance in October 1863 announcing, “I have worked as hard as some of the rich man’s darkey’s and din make much.” She expressed her disdain for the amount of work put forth by the poor white population in supporting the Confederate cause while receiving little for their efforts. Poor whites gained suffering and little else from the war. Martha Coltrane demonstrated similar class discontent a few weeks later in her letter to Governor Vance. Coltrane wrote, “as we are nonslave holders in this section of the state (and) I hope you and our legislator will look to it and have justie done our people as well as the slaveholders.” This shows the attempt to make the case that a war in defense of slavery also benefited non-slaveholders was unraveling. Coltrane accused the governor and legislators of favoring the wealthy and neglecting the interests of the poor. She also suggests that since the Piedmont claimed a low portion of the

\textsuperscript{88} Bynum, \textit{Unruly Women}, 127; Louena Cates to Vance, July 25, 1863, VGP, NCSA; Lucinda Glenn to Vance, October 29, 1863, VGP, NCSA.
slaveholders from the state that the government did not look upon the residents of that region as favorably. She simply wanted the non-slaveholders to hold the same significance within the eyes of the government. Poor white women recognized that planters dominated the political sphere, saw them receiving preferential treatment from the government, and simply wanted equal assistance from their state. These letters reveal the cracks developing within the slaveholders’ defense of slavery. Amid the stresses of the war, non-slaveholders could hardly perceive significant benefits from slavery.89

Women expressed their discontent with the government’s actions through more than just letters to the governor; they also initiated and signed petitions sent to the government leaders. Over five hundred women, from all over the state, including many from the Piedmont, signed a petition in October 1863, entitled “A Petition of the Women of North Carolina,” that found its way to Governor Vance. It defined their stated objective, “We ask for relief and protection.” These women wanted the government to ensure that they could acquire the necessary provisions. By providing these provisions for the women then the government acted as their protector and replaced the role of their husbands. These demands also continue the belief of soldiers’ wives that the government needed to fill the role of their husbands fighting. The common theme that

89 McCurry, Confeder ate Reckoning, 149 & 165; Anonymous to Vance, October 9, 1863, VGP, NCSA; Martha Coltrane to Vance, October 18, 1863, VGP, NCSA.
presented itself amongst the poor white women of a need for relief and protection can be seen through the petition.\textsuperscript{90}

Further proof that the aid sanctioned did not alleviate enough problems came roughly a year later in March 1864 when another riot occurred. This time the state capital, Raleigh, found itself at the center. Based on extant reports, twenty “respectable” people engaged in an “insignificant” riot. The classification of “respectable” women could mean that they came from the yeomen or even planter class. The wording could also be used to downplay the riot. By claiming the riot as insignificant and conducted by respectable people, the report differentiated the action from the Salisbury riot from the previous year. The participants took flour, wheat, and corn, though the exact details of the riot and the quantity of foodstuffs taken remain unknown. Whereas the Salisbury riot gained media attention, the Raleigh riot received little publicity. For one, it was much smaller; more significantly, its location in the state capital influenced the amount of information made public. The government’s ability to control newspapers and other reports could explain the lack of information available, what is certain is the absence of an adequate response by the government. By 1864, the war’s outcome began to look bleak and any negative news could further shatter Confederate unity.\textsuperscript{91}

Rapid inflation of Confederate currency and escalating prices added to problems of accessibility later in the war. The Confederate government needed to create revenue

\textsuperscript{90} McCurry, \textit{Confederate Reckoning}, 141, 143, 159; “A Petition of the Women of North Carolina” to Vance, October 9, 1863, VGP, NCSA.

\textsuperscript{91} Smith, \textit{Starving the South}, 64; Myrtle C. King, ed. and comp., \textit{Anne Long Thomas Fuller’s Journal, 1856-1890: A Civil War Diary} (Alpharetta, GA: Priority Publishing, 1999), 32.
and one way it did so was by printing more money. This resulted in rapid inflation, which affected the poor white populations around the Confederacy. One North Carolinian in 1864 attempted to explain the motivations of women’s bread riots by stating, “females had begged in the streets and at the stores until begging did no good, and many had been driven to robbery.” Poor whites simply could not afford food or other necessities, and Confederate soldiers’ pay did not meet the escalating inflation prices. As Anne Fuller, a member of a wealthy and respectable family in the Piedmont, reported in January 1864, “the high price of provisions is alarming, Pork is selling at $2 per lb., corn at $50 and flour $75 and $80, and everything else in proportion. Clothing, too, is enormously high.” These prices help explain the reasons so many women resorted to rioting for food. Many families simply could not afford food at that high of a cost. Inflation and a lack of price controls allowed the goods to become too expensive. Fuller wrote in April 1864, “the scarcity of all kinds is alarming.” Fuller came from an affluent family, and her recognition of scarcity raises the question regarding what poorer whites and their families faced in the spring of 1864. This entry also suggests that besides the problems of high prices actually finding food proved difficult in the later years of the war. Poor women must have faced similar situations as Fuller, but would have been unable to obtain goods as easily. Fuller again wrote in her diary in November 1864, “the prospect for the winter is gloomy indeed. Prices are exorbitant. The poor must suffer, I’m sure. I hear there are a number of families in our community who have been without meat for months.” Her entry suggests that she and her family
did not suffer the same fate as their poor community members. This suggests that the wealthier families were able to solve the problems of food scarcities while the poor families were not. Also, she made no mention of attempting to assist these poorer individuals. This represents a common theme of wealthy individuals identifying the problems of the poor, but not acting to assist them. As that winter continued, conditions increasingly worsened in the Piedmont.\textsuperscript{92}

Another woman, Susan Wallace of Alamance County, in 1864 told Vance to “pressure provisions from those men that has it, for if ya don’t I am afraid women will have to do it and I don’t want to press anything if I can help it.” She believed that the wealthy men in her community had supplies, but they chose not share them. These men held supplies that poor women desperately needed and exemplified the problem speculators created for local communities. Wallace used the threat of violence to garner Vance’s attention or at least attempted to. With the bread riots from the previous year in the back of everyone’s minds, the threat of more forcible seizures by women drew attention. The conditions across the Piedmont only worsened since the 1863 bread riots, so Wallace’s threats only proved to be more real. Especially since this letter followed the riot in 1864. These threats held some weight as there existed examples of women actually committing violent actions. These threats coming immediately after a riot also suggest that women outside of Raleigh felt similar ways to those that rioted.

\textsuperscript{92} Smith, \textit{Starving the South}, 52; John B. Jones, \textit{A Rebel War Clerk’s Diary at the Confederate States Capital} (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippencott and Co., 1866), 277; King, \textit{Anne Long Thomas Fuller’s Journal, 1856-1890}, 32.
Women recognized their position within the government and used it to address their needs. Women around the Piedmont shared Smith’s concerns and feelings.\(^9^3\)

County court records from the Piedmont also showed individual instances of women stealing necessities. Before the start of the Civil War, poor women appeared within civil and criminal courts within North Carolina. During the war, charges of larceny, forcible entry, and rioting increased dramatically. The combined total of these crimes in Orange, Granville, and Montgomery counties totaled eight between 1850 and 1860. The counties saw those numbers spike to a total of 43 between 1861 and 1866. Why did these crime rates jump? The deteriorating economic conditions explain the steep rise in poor women committing these crimes, and many of these thefts occurred later in the war as conditions rapidly deteriorated. In May 1864, three women were found stealing in Durham. Rebecca Davis, Nancy Bowers, and Nancy Carroll, all property-less white women from Orange County, raided William McCown’s mill. North Carolina charged all three with forcibly trespassing and helping themselves to flour. Again in January 1865, two different women stole numerous provisions. Orange County courts charged Elizabeth Gilbert and Hawkins Browning with stealing bed cloths and blankets. Both instances reflect women obtaining supplies that they lacked. Additionally, all of these women came from small farm or labor families, who were most affected throughout the war by shortages.\(^9^4\)

\(^{93}\) McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 174; Susan Wallace to Vance, April 3, 1864, VGP, NCSA.
\(^{94}\) Bynum, *The Long Shadow of the Civil War*, 112-113; *State v. Rebecca Davis, Nancy Bowers, and Nancy Carroll*, May 1864, Criminal Action Papers, Orange County, NCSA; Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 128;
Many women also utilized the threat of desertion as leverage for their demands. Desertion caused a serious problem within the Confederate military, and the government understood the ability of women to influence their husbands to leave their posts. Nancy Richardson of Orange County expressed these opinions in an October 1, 1864, letter to Governor Vance stating, “I tell you if such as we has to give the tenth our husbands ses they in tend to dye at home that (they) are just waiting for the (tithes) to be takend from us they will desert just as soon as it is dun.” Richardson referenced the Confederate law that allowed the government to seize one-tenth of all agricultural production from the state. As poor whites saw their much-needed food supplies go toward areas outside of their community, women of this class recognized that part of their political power derived from their husbands’ service in the army. They used their influence with their husbands to constitute themselves as important political constituents. The threats of desertion could hinder the Confederate war effort and in this late part of the war many men did in fact desert the army’s ranks. 95

Local officials faced difficult circumstances in maintaining loyalty and order without upsetting the majority of their constituents. Martha Sheets’s letter to Sheriff Aaron Sanders provides an example claiming Sanders had done nothing for the “pore wiming” and threatening “if you don’t bring that grain to my dore you will sufer, and that bad.” She probably meant that she would obtain the necessary supplies herself through whatever means necessary. Sheets also could have been implying that more

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95 Nancy Richardson to Vance, October 1, 1864, VGP, NCSA; McCurry, Confederate Reckoning, 163.

State v. Elizabeth Gilbert and Hawkins Browning, January 1865, Criminal Action Papers, Orange County, NCSA.
women than just her felt this way and were ready to take action against the county. This seems more plausible after considering the actions undertaken by other women in the Piedmont. Local officials were unpleasantly tasked with carrying out government laws and regulations that many people within the Piedmont region opposed. Poor white women saw local officials unjustly acting on behalf of the state.96

County records help to understand the scope of the poor relief. For example, Orange County, North Carolina, reported distributing relief to 508 women and 735 children in 1863 and to 600 women and 800 children in 1865. These numbers show the increase in government coverage of the poor as the war progressed. They also suggest that the actions of poor white women influenced the increased number of women accepted for relief within the Piedmont. By the end of the war, 20 percent of the female population and 35 percent of the children’s population in Orange County qualified and received relief. Such numbers reflect a significant portion of families receiving aid within Orange County alone and suggest the degree to which poverty affected areas of the Piedmont. The state worked vigorously in the later years of the war to help its starving population.97

For all the state government contributed in poor relief, the Confederate government proved slow to react. One of the main premises that kept the Confederate government from acting was states’ rights. Even after bread riots commenced in 1863, 

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96 Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 148; Martha Sheets to Sheriff Aaron Sanders, January 27, 1865, Criminal Action Papers, Montgomery County, NCSA.
the Confederate government remained on the margins of poor relief efforts. The *Raleigh Standard* questioned its actions, reporting, “bread riots have commenced, and where they will end, God only knows.” The wave of bread riots caused concern amongst individuals at the local level and caused them to question how to prevent them. The Confederate government offered a meager attempt to curb the bread riots with Jefferson Davis declaring a day of fasting. With inflation rampant and wages not climbing to meet prices, the future looked bleak. On March 27, 1863, Jefferson Davis asked his supporters to participate in a day of fasting. He thought this would help people cope with the scarcity of goods. National days of prayer and fasting were supposed to promote Confederate nationalism and bring the country together; instead they only angered the population more.98

Instead of helping the situation, Davis’s response only further upset the local populations. White women within the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, reacted to Davis’s request by rioting and looting stores on April 2, 1863. Davis misunderstood the needs of Southerners, and as a result never fully implemented a national welfare relief effort. Davis’s inaction represented a key problem with him and the Confederate government. They never fully understood the needs of the poor whites and yeomen that comprised the majority of the population. This lack of response caused

many of these individuals to grow disgruntled with the Confederate government. Inaction also allowed conditions to deteriorate and caused dissension to worsen. 99

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The degree of correspondence between women and the governor marked a shift from previous political norms. Traditionally, men assumed the role of politician for the family and represented the family’s interests. Once these men went off to fight, however, women assumed this political role on behalf of their family’s interests. More than anything else, these poor white women demanded assistance from their government. Women expected the government to fulfill the role that their men assumed when at home. When its leading men failed to do so, women began to express their needs directly to the governor. These poor white Southern women living in the North Carolina Piedmont also threatened Governor Vance through the possibility of encouraging desertion. Many men claimed a reluctance to fight without knowing that their families and communities were taken care of in their absence. As a result, women played direct roles in the inner conflicts occurring between North Carolina and its citizens within the Piedmont. 100

White women came to take charge of their households and communities. At the same time, poverty and starvation occurred as a result of a population strained to the brink. The lack of government response did not mean Southerners quietly went about their every day lives. In particular, white Southern women became active within their

99 Raleigh Standard, March 25, 1863, NCC; Chesson, “Harlots and Heroines”; Smith, Starving the South, 55.
100 McCurry, Confederate Reckoning, 149; Bynum, Long Shadow of the Civil War, 29-32.
states, and those of the North Carolina Piedmont proved no exception. After 1863, the majority of the private correspondence received by Governor Vance came from women. While elite planter women initiated this concept of self-representation, poor white women soon emerged as the main constituency. North Carolina Piedmont’s women organized, petitioned, and protested the horrible conditions they confronted. Women’s actions during the war brought them into the center of politics. The state of North Carolina responded to women’s pleas for help and recognized them as a critical constituency by the later half of the war. While the relief efforts proved little more than a superficial fix and the core problems of food distribution were never solved, the spread of monetary relief and supplies reflected the successful petitioning of poor white women at the state government level.101

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101 McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 135, 141, 144.
V. Tax-in-Kind and Impressment in the North Carolina Piedmont

In 1861, the Confederate government faced the difficult task of generating revenue and acquiring the necessary goods to establish and sustain an army. Initial efforts to finance and supply the war effort focused on taxation and tariffs. These efforts jump started mobilization for war, but failed to maintain a steady stream of supplies for the army. The Confederate government resorted to the implementation of impressment and tax-in-kind laws to address the army's supply issues. When impressment and tax-in-kind were passed in 1863, yeomen and poor whites objected to the confiscation of goods they deemed vital to their survival. The North Carolina Standard protested the passage of tax-in-kind laws in the summer of 1863. The paper stated, “taking from the hard laborers of the Confederacy one-tenth of the people's living, instead of taking...currency, is unjust and tyrannical, and we solemnly protest against that act.” It continued, the tax is being “oppressive, and a relic of barbarism, which alone is practiced in the worst depostisms.” The Standard described the laws as oppressive, barbaric, and tyrannical. Politicians and elites contrasted the North and South at the outset of the war by using the same language to describe the North. Now, a North Carolina paper drew upon that language to describe the unjustness of Confederate policies.102

North Carolinians faced unequal treatment from Confederate impressment and tax-in-kind laws. Both laws were designed to assist the entire population and serve as

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102 Escott, After Secession, 104; Williams, Rich Man’s War, 4; Escott, Many Excellent People, 72; North Carolina Standard, August 25 & 26, 1863, NCC.
the main support for the armies. However, the laws created problems for different classes. The planters felt victimized by slave impressments, and farmers suffered from tax-in-kind as their valuable agricultural income was taken away from them. Non-slaveholders felt the laws most keenly. They contended that the government favored slaveholders and did not respond to their needs. These economic privations tested the will and commitment of poor whites and yeomen to the Confederate cause. While the Confederate government acknowledged the difficulty of each law, they did not believe there existed any other way to keep the Confederacy fighting.

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The Confederacy struggled to keep its army supplied, whether with food, ammunition, clothing, and men. In addition, the Confederacy needed to form an entirely new operating government at the beginning of the war. The treasury department was just one of the many government institutions that needed to be formed quickly and successfully if the Confederacy possessed any hope of winning the war. The Confederate government's taxation policies influenced the outcome of the Civil War. Their reliance on tax-in-kind and impressment hindered support for the war effort. A tax-in-kind required farmers to provide a percentage of their crops to the government. This allowed the government to eliminate merchants as middle men and receive food directly. Impressment worked similarly to tax-in-kind when used for food. Army units or government officials were allowed to take food and other goods from local
communities to sustain themselves. Impressment also applied to allocating slaves labor work on Confederate defense, railroads, and other manual labor projects.\textsuperscript{103}

Why did the Confederacy resort to tax-in-kind and impressment laws? The answer to this questions lies in the failure of early tax policies and a desire to standardize the impressment process. One of the earliest attempts of the Confederate government to raise revenue came on February 9, 1861. This first act came before all of the states, including North Carolina, joined the Confederacy. The Confederate Congress enacted US tariff laws for the Confederacy. They reasoned that the tariffs would raise $25,000,000, but this proved far off. The Union blockade prevented foreign goods from coming in, and the Confederate Treasury was unable to acquire that revenue. The total receipts over the entire war were less than $3,500,000. Making matters worse, the Confederacy failed to export many goods. Confederates exported an estimated $30,000 total in goods. In addition, the Treasury refused to extend any export duty beyond cotton. The sorry state of the Confederacy’s coffers forced the Confederate Congress to impose a direct tax on the people.\textsuperscript{104}

A few months after the tariff tax, the Confederate Congress provided its first direct war tax by approving a loan act on August 19, 1861. The act stated, “for the


special purpose of paying the principal and interest of the public debt, and of supporting the government, a war tax shall be levied." The Confederacy faced trouble coordinating and implementing wide scale tax plans. The federal government tax plans proved difficult, as states were slow to assess uniformly the value of property. The Confederacy expected each state to pay its share, but often the states failed to meet these goals. Nevertheless, the Confederate Treasury gathered $17 million of the expected $19 million for 1862, and North Carolina was one of three states to pay their quota in full. Many states actually used loans for the tax money collected to alleviate the stress on their citizens. While this tax proved effective at raising some money, the Confederacy needed additional revenue sources to support their armies and war effort.\textsuperscript{105}

Confederate leaders targeted Unionists. Early in the war, the Confederate government attempted to obtain resources through the sequestration of goods. On August 30, 1861, the Confederate Congress passed “an act for the sequestration of the estates, property and affects of alien enemies, and for the indemnity of citizens of the Confederate states, and persons aiding the same in the existing war with the United States.” This act justified the seizure of goods without compensation of individuals who supported the Union. Officials could utilize this act as an excuse to confiscate goods from poor whites and yeomen.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{105}Todd, Confederate Finance, 132, 133, 134, 136.  
\textsuperscript{106}Todd, Confederate Finance, 160, 165-167.
Confederate tax laws disproportionately burdened non-elite southerners. States—largely under the control of the slaveholding elite—had long failed to tax slave property at their full value on the argument that slaveholding was different than other forms of wealth ownership. If slaveholders experienced higher taxes, they would respond by working slaves harder. As a result, yeomen should be more heavily taxed than slave owners. The Confederate Congress continued this practice. Taxes rose on everything except slaves through the early years of the war. New Confederate revenue measures enacted to feed the Confederate armies continued to disproportionately affect yeomen and poor whites.107

The Confederate government adopted impressment to fix several of the ongoing problems that occurred within the Confederacy. Impressment involved the seizing of supplies from farmers and merchants as well as slaves for manual labor. Slaves often went to work on fortifications or performed other manual labor deemed vital to the Confederate cause. While the official enactment of impressment occurred in 1863, the Confederate government relied upon impressment as early as 1861. The Confederate government turned to impressment to address exploitation of resources and to sustain its armies. By passing legislation, the Confederate government felt more in control of the entire process by which supplies were collected and distributed to the armed forces.108

108 McCurry, Confederate Reckoning, 264; Escott, After Secession, 66-67.
The act of impressment was a time-honored practice that armies and navies had engaged in for centuries. For the Confederacy to turn to this was not unbelievable or unheard of. There were three types of seizures of funds and property that occurred typically in the Confederacy. The Confederate government confiscated US specie, bullion, and property in the South; sequestered property, real and personal, of alien enemies; and impressed military and naval supplies produced and held by citizens of the Confederacy. The Confederate Impressment laws passed on March 26, 1863, mandated that state governments appoint an impressment commissioner or agent, who established the price schedule and arbitration system. The Confederate Commissary Department controlled the impressment of food, forage, livestock, wagons, and other private property, as well as free blacks and slaves as a labor force. They were also charged with ensuring owners received payment for their goods and slaves.\textsuperscript{109}

The impressment act attempted to protect the citizens from unlawful seizures and unfair compensation. The act stated, “the right of the protection of life, liberty, and property is the right inviolate of every citizen of the Confederate States, and...all seizures or impressment of any such property are in violation of the plainest provisions of the Constitution...and are therefore void.” The act gave every citizen equality under the law, but the actual execution of the law proved difficult in practice. In addition, it also used the word citizen, but did not clarify who that entailed. Slaves and even free blacks were certainly not considered citizens by the government or treated fairly under the law. The impressment act defended, “property necessary for the support of the

\textsuperscript{109} Smith, Starving the South, 42-43; Todd, Confederate Finance, 157; Mobley, Weary of War, 46.
owner and his family, and to carry on his ordinary agricultural and mechanical business...shall not be take nor impressed for public use.” This stipulation could apply to the impressment of slaves by the government. Slaveholders used the necessity of slaves as property to defend against their impressment. The law represented slaves as property without any standing in the eyes of the government. Protecting property proved important, but food and other necessities did not fall under that categorization. While these provisions were put in place to protect citizens, the reality often escaped the actuality. Impressment exploited many people and caused a great deal of resentment towards the Confederate government.¹¹⁰

The process of impressment featured several pitfalls. Soldiers impressed items when they needed them or when supply systems failed. However, individuals with less means felt the burden more stringently. Some counties suffered more from army occupation because they often drained local resources quickly. Areas, like the Piedmont, experienced high numbers of troop occupancy when the army attempted to find deserters and draft dodgers that stressed their resources. While the Confederate government always admitted that impressment was unequal, they also deemed it a necessity. Although necessary, the compensation was often too low and hindered the overall success of the impressment laws. Impressment also affected states differently. For example, in early 1863 the Army of Northern Virginia was in desperate need of food. North Carolina lent the Confederate government a portion of 50,000 bushels of

corn, which the state had accumulated to feed the families of soldiers. These foodstuffs were needed on the home front. ¹¹¹

Impressment did not just affect farmers, who gave up their crops, but also slave owners. Many slave owners gave their slaves with the assumption that their service would be brief. However, this often was not the case, and slave owners pushed back against the Confederate Congress as it tried to enact legislation for slave impressment. Legislators feared infringing upon planters’ rights, which led to slow moving legislation. Additionally, it proved difficult to work through states whose governors and legislators saw it as their job to protect their constituents’ interests, which included slaveholders’ rights. While slaves presented one avenue for labor, free blacks provided another potential source of labor. In fact, Governor Vance encouraged the use of free blacks as a vital labor force. The March 1863 act included the impressment of free blacks and operated under Confederate Conscription officers. ¹¹²

After the battlefield disasters in 1863, prices rose and money value dropped. Impressment became much more important in this context. Secretary of State James A. Seddon reported to President Jefferson Davis that the Confederacy relied heavily upon impressment in fall 1862. Seddon reported that by 1863 the Confederacy relied solely upon impressment because civilians refused to sell food. These reports showed the

¹¹¹ Escott, After Secession, 66,110; Smith, Starving the South, 44; Vance to Seddon, February 23, 1863, Official Records, ser. 4, vol. 2, 413.
¹¹² McCurry, Confederate Reckoning, 264–65, 275–76; Mobley, War Governor of the South, 69.
necessity of impressment, but failed to acknowledge its affect upon the people living in the Piedmont.\footnote{113 Todd, \textit{Confederate Finance}, 160, 165-67.}

Also in 1863, the Confederate government took an additional step to assist in the war effort. On April 24, 1863, the Confederate Congress passed the Tithe Tax or Tax-in-Kind Act. The tax did not apply to real estate, personal property, slaves, and income from education, charitable, and religious institutions. In addition, the law placed a ten-percent tax upon purchasing and selling goods. The act also included a tax-in-kind of one tenth on agricultural produce. The act proved so important that the Confederate Congress later reenacted it on February 17, 1864. The tax-in-kind helped in securing the necessary goods for the armies. North Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama were the main contributors with nearly two thirds of the proceeds accredited to them.\footnote{114 Todd, \textit{Confederate Finance}, 140-141, 145, 147; Escott, \textit{Many Excellent People}, 53.}

Tax-in-kind laws aimed to fix many of the same issues as impressment laws. The previous tax laws did not work and the rapid printing of money created significant inflation. The Southern press demanded higher taxes to correct redundant currency and reduce prices. In order to do this, Secretary of the Treasury Memminger devised a tax on property and income. Memminger defended his stance, “it seems to me that a tax upon property and income is so much to be preferred to stamp duties, excises, licenses, and other like taxes which call for a machinery vexations in its character and expensive in its operation, that there will be little hesitation on the party of Congress in its
acceptance.” By taxing property, the government ensured that planters paid some taxes and that poor whites or yeomen could not claim unfair treatment. 115

Many North Carolinians considered impressment and tax-in-kind a usurpation of their rights. These actions contradicted their beliefs in Confederate nationalism, and animosity grew between the government and North Carolinians in the late months of the war. They disagreed with the price schedule being replaced with “just price.” A “just price” was supposed to prevent the exploitation of goods, but encountered resistance from poor whites because it failed to fix these issues. Who set the just price and who enforced just prices also angered many poor whites and yeomen. Many of these government officials were wealthy and often exploited the poor in confiscating goods. The government recognized that it created a vast inequality, but there was little alternative that they saw for the incorporation of taxes. North Carolinians also became discontent over the pricing in general. On top of that, citizens were outraged over troops leaving only vouchers as a form of payment. These vouchers were essentially worthless for the poor whites and yeomen that received them. Merchants would not accept vouchers as acceptable forms of payment and the likelihood that the vouchers were filled later often remained slim. Later in the war, farmers began to refuse accepting certificates of credit and government bonds as payment. Economic conditions

115 Todd, Confederate Finance, 137-139.
worsened as the war progressed and not receiving compensation for their goods hurt the yeomen class significantly.\textsuperscript{116}

The corruption of officials confiscating what they did not need forced the government to act. The military had issued an order in 1862 that targeted military officers who bought supplies for the purpose of selling them again at a profit. Congress had also later passed a law against officers and government officials purchasing food and other goods. Both, however, proved ineffective as the government had little ability to enforce them. Cases of military and government officials taking goods from members of communities within the Piedmont continued throughout the war. By the later years of the war, home front conditions reached a point that citizens resorted to concealment or removal of their threatened property. All of these things compounded the disdain citizens held for the laws.\textsuperscript{117}

States, such as North Carolina, opposed the impressment and tax-in-kind laws. Vance and the North Carolina legislature moved from obstruction to open resistance of slave impressment in 1863. Vance made every effort to cooperate with the War department. He wrote to Secretary Seddon, “the call for aid to the army has met with a liberal response from the generous people and I trust all fears may be dismissed.” Vance attempted to use North Carolina’s sacrifices for the Confederate cause to detail the extent to which the state deserved some reprieve. He tried to workout a compromise

\textsuperscript{116} Mobley, \textit{War Governor of the South}, 68; Todd, \textit{Confederate Finance}, 169; Williams, \textit{Rich Man’s War}, 4; Smith, \textit{Starving the South}, 41-42; Escott, \textit{After Secession}, 129.

\textsuperscript{117} Mobley, \textit{War Governor of the South}, 68; Todd, \textit{Confederate Finance}, 169; Williams, \textit{Rich Man’s War}, 4; Smith, \textit{Starving the South}, 41-42; Escott, \textit{After Secession}, 129.
between the needs of the Confederate government and the home front population. His contest of slave impressment though held class implications. Slaveholders held enough power within North Carolina to receive government help in contesting the laws to the Confederate government.118

Vance also defended poor whites and yeomen on several occasions. In January 1863, he objected to a cavalry detachment impressing food and other goods within North Carolina. Vance defended the wives and children of soldiers to Seddon, noting that these citizens were struggling in the county. He knew that the unlawful impressment of food forced poor whites and yeomen to endure more stringent privations. Compensation at half the going rate further hurt a county attempting to recover from the previous year and already facing a challenging winter. When Seddon failed to respond, he penned back:

[North Carolina made] every possible disposition to and in the support of the army, I have the strongest reasons conceivable--the existence of my own people--for declining to permit these horses to remain in that section of the State. When the question of starvation is narrowed down to women and children on the one side and some worthless Calvary horses on the other, I can have no difficulty in making a choice. Unless they are removed soon, I shall be under the painful necessity of calling out the militia for the adjoining Counties and driving them from the state. I hope however to be spared such a proceeding.

Vance adamantly defended his people with this reply. His tone showed the importance of protecting these individuals from unfair confiscations. He also suggested that for everything he and his constituents provided to the Confederate government they deserved a response to address their problems. This also encapsulates one of the larger

118 McCurry, Confederate Reckoning, 276; Zebulon Vance to James A. Seddon, April 27, 1863, Vance Governor Letter Book, NCSA; Mobley, War Governor of the South, 164.
problems with the Confederate government. Confederate leaders failed to adjust and accommodate for the struggles of their constituents. Vance's threats of violence with the forcible removal of the cavalry indicate that he pondered extensive measures at times to defend the rights and welfare of his citizens. Vance felt he needed to make a statement after Seddon ignored his earlier requests to remove the unit. The Confederate cavalry vacated that area of North Carolina, resolving the issue.\textsuperscript{119}

Later in 1863, Vance again complained to Seddon about another cavalry unit’s consumption of goods while stationed within North Carolina. In December 1863, Vance protested to Seddon,

“if God almighty had yet in store another plague- worse than all others, which he intended to have loose on the Egyptians in case Pharaoh still hardened his heart, I am sure it must have been a regiment or so of half-armed, half-disciplined Confederate Calvary! Had they been turned loose among Pharaoh’s subjects, with or without an impressment law, he would have become so sensible of the anger of God that he never would have followed the Children of Israel to the Red Sea, No sire not an inch!”

The Biblical comparison, Vance’s message for Seddon comes clearly through. Vance demanded the Confederate army stop arbitrarily seizing food and other necessities from the people of his state. His description of the Confederate cavalry also shows that they did not follow the military orders that restricted impressment. His letter to Seddon further emphasized that little was done to correct the problem of unjust impressments by Confederate military units in North Carolina throughout 1863.\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{119} Mobley, \textit{War Governor of the South}, 164; Vance to Seddon, January 22, 1863, VGP, NCSA; Vance to Seddon, February 25, 1863, VGP, NCSA.

\textsuperscript{120} Mobley, \textit{Weary of War}, 47; Escott, \textit{Many Excellent People}, 53; Vance to Seddon, December 21, 1863, VGP, NCSA.
Vance showed a desire to help his citizens oppose unjust federal impressment, but many states, including North Carolina, still impressed themselves. Citizens also complained over the collection of more goods than there was shelter for and the heaping up of supplies in inaccessible places. The over collection of goods resulted in stockpiles of provisions being neglected and allowed to rot. The wasting of precious commodities aggravated the population as they struggled with their own supply levels. Many North Carolinians openly complained about the rotting products that were much needed elsewhere.121

Yeoman farmers disapproved of both tax-in-kind and impressment as they thought they received the harsh end of the bargain. Prior to the war, yeoman farmers had lived with indirect taxes, but now their sons were conscripted and impressment and the tax-in-kind laws felt unjust. The direct taxes caused many poor farmers to resent the government. Farmers also disagreed with a tax placed on the profits of crops and not on the gross value. Additionally, yeoman farmers resented being forced to give up a portion of their meager produce to the government.122

The economic disruption and suffering placed heavy demands on the mechanisms of interclass unity and tested the devotion of the ordinary non-slaveholder to his country’s cause. Poor and middling farmers saw an inequality of who the tax-in-kind law targeted and the yeoman did not benefit from it. The tax-in-kind laws taking half of any family’s meat supply seemed excessive to yeoman farmers because there

121 Williams, Rich Man’s War, 104; Todd, Confederate Finance, 169.
122 Escott, After Secession, 68; Todd, Confederate Finance, 142; Williams, Rich Man’s War, 4.
were still wealthier families who stood to gain far more from the war. The *North Carolina Standard* protested the passage of tax-in-kind laws in the summer of 1863. The *Standard* did not stop at just simply protesting the laws. The paper also offered some suggestions for tax laws, stating, “we are in favor of a just and equitable system of taxation so that all classes may bear their burden equally; [but] we are...opposed to the tithe system...discriminating against and taxing the labor and industry of the agricultural class.” The *Standard* makes a clear class argument for the taxation of Confederate people. The paper accused that taxation was spread unequally amongst the population and poor whites and yeomen carried the majority of the burden. The paper wanted the government to enact legislation that spread the weight of fighting the war throughout every class.\(^{123}\)

Corrupt impressment practices targeted poor farmers during the war. Some people posed as impressment agents and stole goods from farmers, with soldiers’ wives and widows the most common victims. Many North Carolinians regarded impressment officers as “robers” and could not believe that any “orders from [the] Gen’l” justified rampant “robing and plundering. We have a bad way of getting a long and if these fellows are allowed to remain here they will ruin our people.” Poor farmers witnessed militia and cavalry taking the food and destroying the crops of suffering farmers. A group known as the Regulators, from the Guilford and Alamance county region, in early 1863 were “determined to have bread out of there barns and that at a price that we can

\(^{123}\) Escott, *After Secession*, 104; Williams, *Rich Man’s War*, 4; Escott, *Many Excellent People*, 72; *North Carolina Standard*, September 1, 1863, NCC.
pay or we will slaughter as we go.” The Regulators wrote this to Governor Vance in opposition of impressment officials. They bluntly threatened the lives of government officials who stood in their way. The Regulators provide an example of yeomen farmers banding together against the injustices they perceived were caused by Confederate impressment agents. The threat of violence also showed the extent the Piedmont population would go to protect themselves from perceived injustices. It was common for impressment agents to speculate goods or confiscate property without official authorization. These actions also show a distrust for government officials and a lack of control that some practiced in their execution of Confederate laws.124

Tax-in-kind laws also openly pushed people to hope for an end to the hostilities. Philip Hodnett, a Caswell county farmer, voiced his opinion to Governor Vance in July 1863. Hodnett warned Vance, “the Confederate tax in kind will produce dissatisfaction if not opposition from the people.” Hodnett believed the population could not handle the seizure of a percentage of their crops, nor would they view the act as fair. He continued, “there seems to be no escape for us from these sore troubles but to make peace with the North on the best terms we can, and I solemnly beleave that three fourths of the people of Caswell desire peace now, while we have power enough to assure our constitutional rights.” His desire for peace during a time of military defeats and worsening conditions. His suggestion that the only way for the troubles of poor whites and yeomen to end was peace with the North shows the waning commitment of the

124 Williams, Rich Man’s War, 104-5, 141; Escott, Many Excellent People, 72; Regulators to Vance, February 18, 1863, VGP, NCSA; Mobley, Weary of War, 46.
yeoman and poor white classes. Confederate leaders had promised a short war, but failed to deliver on that promise. Hodnett also probably was willing to accept emancipation as a part of his “best terms.” Since he was a non-slaveholder, Hodnett’s potential acceptance for the end of slavery shows cracks in Confederate unity. This suggests a continued faltering of Confederate ideology. 125

Besides poor farmers, planters also voiced their objections to tax-in-kind and impressment laws. Slaveholder John F. Flintoff put it accurately when he condemned “this bloody and cruel war” with its tax-in-kind and “very heavy” money taxes. His complaints signal a growing unwillingness to sacrifice financially for the cause. While planters gave their slaves to the war cause at the beginning of the war, the number of slaves impressed decreased as the war went on. Slave owners feared the possibility of death, injury, and escape. Planters often cited slaves’ own objections to the labor as a key impediment to compliance. By 1863, Slaveholders widely resisted the mass seizure of slaves, when even Seddon hesitated making slave impressment officially a law. 126

Slaveholders complained to Vance about how the impressment of slaves hindered their farms’ productivity. Vance wrote to Seddon, “the very existence of the people required them to labor on their farms.” The planters needed their slaves to survive and with them gone for long stretches it made it difficult for the plantations to run properly. Richard Smith, a slaveholder, opposed the use of slaves on road crews in a letter to Vance. Smith grumbled to Vance, “you are aware that one fifth of the road

125 Mobley, War Governor of the South, 71; Philip Hodnett to Vance, July 30, 1863, VGP, NCSA.
126 John Flintoff Diary, August 1, 1863, NCSA; Williams, Rich Man’s War, 71; McCurry, Confederate Reckoning, 267, 276, 281.
hands is practically one half of the able bodied men upon most farms.” Smith’s description emphasizes the amount of slaves that were impressed by the government. It also shows that planters needed these men to ensure their livelihoods were maintained. Further, Smith and other planters pressured Vance to oppose the use of slaves. Slaves also had a greater opportunity to run away when they left plantations to serve in manual labor units. These issues angered slaveholders who worried about losing their labor force.127

A few days later, E.J. Blount, a Pitt county slaveholder, wrote to Vance complaining about slaves running off during work details. Blount stated, “from althorough knowledge of the disposition of our slaves and the ease with which they can make their escape to the enemy, making an attempt to carry them off of even enrolling them will have a very bad influence.” He experienced, “the last draft for that purpose caused several to run off and will certainly make more do so if there is an attempt made to carry them off now.” Blount and slaveholders wanted to keep slaves on the plantation where they were less likely to run away. Fear of losing their property influenced slaveholders desire to keep their slaves away from impressment officials. He pressured Vance to overturn the impressment decision. Slaveholder offered more opposition to slave impressment than conscription.128

Planters and yeoman farmers alike contested impressment and tax-in-kind laws. The Confederate government enacted them in order to sustain the war effort, but these

127 Mobley, War Governor of the South, 73; Vance to Seddon, Feb 12, 1863, Vance Governor Letter Book, NCSA; Richard H Smith to Vance, Oct 13, 1864, VGP, NCSA.
128 E.J. Blount to Vance, Oct 18, 1864, VGP, NCSA; McCurry, Confederate Reckoning, 284.
laws further aggravated a struggling home front. Vance attempted on many occasions to alleviate some of these stresses and appealed to Seddon or other Confederate government officials, but usually found little assistance. These issues showed a disengagement of the Confederate government from the needs of the people that experienced severe economic privations during the war. This disengagement explained why many poor whites and yeomen grew to detest impressment and tax-in-kind that confiscated food and other necessities that they desperately needed. Tax-in-kind and impressment laws made life more difficult for the poor. Also, planters opposed the use of their slaves as labor for the Confederate government. While affected differently, planters and yeoman shared a discontent toward impressment and tax-in-kind laws.
VI. Conclusion

When the Southern states seceded, North Carolina hesitated and proved to be one of the last states to join the Confederacy. White North Carolinians left the Union with a somber heart. Most wanted to stay within the Union and secession was a last resort. Confederate leaders attempted to unite the non-slaveholders and slaveholders in North Carolina once the state seceded, but these attempts at formulating a Confederate ideology that united the classes proved difficult. The overall impact of secession became much larger once the war raged on for longer than any person expected. The war that pitted the country against one another challenged the North Carolina home front in numerous ways. Class disparities largely went unnoticed before the war, but became much more pronounced as the war raged on.

The unequal distribution of power and wealth prior to the war caused class tensions to be more prominent during the struggles of war. Confederate policies created pockets of resistance and strife that taxed the responsiveness of local, state, and national government. These policies exasperated the non-elite North Carolinians, especially as the war continued on into the later part of 1863. Yeomen and poor white families within North Carolina could not meet the deep and concerted effort required to maintain the Confederate armies. Conscription laws took their men, who provided essential labor on family farms, and shipped them off to war. Many of these men would never return, and their families were left to survive without them. These yeomen also saw their wealthier neighbors escape conscription through the early years of the war by
hiring a substitute. Others obtained exemptions by working jobs deemed necessary for the war effort.

Even though the wealthy escaped military service at times, they still suffered alongside the other members of society. The difference between the wealthy and middling and poor North Carolinians came with their ability and means to handle the struggles of war. Wealthy families often owned slaves and could afford to lose their men to military service, if they could not escape conscription; however, the same could not be said for yeomen and poor whites.

Poor white North Carolinians grew to mistrust government officials that carried out the laws. Many yeomen and poor whites reported that the local government officials were corrupt. They accused them of paying too little or giving an unfair portion of the relief. The positioning of Home Guard groups within the Piedmont and other parts of North Carolina worsened conditions on the home front. These regiments further strained resources within the region. The government at times failed to realize the needs of the people within the state. Many women were left without their husbands or other male support. The government officials and merchants found it easier to swindle or cheat women when confiscating or purchasing goods.

White women became incredibly active throughout the Piedmont and influenced many actions within North Carolina. Poor white women took action against unfair prices in the spring of 1863 and raided several different merchant and storage facilities. These women largely acted un-violently, but obtained what they viewed as their fair
share of the goods. Further, women took it upon themselves to make their voices heard with the governor. White women sent in hundreds of letters to the governor in order to plead for his assistance. These women urged him to save their men from conscription, take action against the rising food and essentials scarcity, and punish corrupt officials.

Overall, the Confederate government’s policies of conscription, relief, and tax-in-kind and impressment laws exacerbated class divisions within the Piedmont. This region contained an overwhelmingly yeomen population that coexisted with wealthy planters and merchants. Once goods and men became scarce during the war, the harmony was broken and the population splintered into separate factions. Poor whites and yeomen resented a war that they perceived as being fought for the slaveholders. Even though justifications for defending their homes and protecting themselves from the tyrannical rule of the North eased them into secession, their struggles during the war broke the façade of their commitment. The war required numerous sacrifices in blood and resources from many poor whites and yeomen. The class tensions between North Carolinians in the Piedmont grew worse as the war raged on, but also show the failure of the Confederacy to unite the entire population under one cause for the entire war.
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