Two American Communities on the Eve of Civil War: 
An Experiment in Form and Analysis

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This article has two goals:

* to analyze the social, economic, and political structures of two communities on the eve of the American Civil War
* to use forms of digital scholarship to present historical arguments of enhanced intricacy, depth, and connection
ANALYSIS: Summary

The nature of the differences between the North and South have been a topic for debate as long as there has been a United States. Since the Civil War, in particular, historians have imagined those differences in a wide variety of ways. Some have argued that slavery made the differences run deep, into the fabric of the culture, economy, and politics of the North and South, into the very personalities of white Northerners and Southerners. Others have argued that slavery exerted a less pervasive influence, leaving the whites on either side of the Mason-Dixon Line far more alike than different, sharing a common language, religion, history, ethnic background, political structure, economic orientation, and fundamental ideas about race.

Each interpretation adopts a frame of reference that reinforces its assumptions. Those who focus on nationwide political parties find similarity, while those who focus on political conflict between North and South find differences. Those who focus on market orientation find common notions of property and profit, while those who focus on labor relations and the role of contract find profound antagonism. Those who focus on the religious beliefs of abolitionists and proslavery advocates find great differences, while those who focus on general doctrine and practice find that Protestants shared fundamental beliefs across the nation.

The arguments have combined and conflated several related arguments. Sometimes, the debate has been over the extent of differences between the societies of the North and the South. Other times, people have disagreed more narrowly, over the difference slavery made as a political issue. Those who focus on fundamental social differences often treat politics merely as a manifestation of those differences; those who focus on politics often take the social differences for granted or rely on the most general kinds of indices of social difference.

The differences between North and South have been understood most often as a question of modernity, the North often portrayed as the embodiment of an emergent modern society based on capitalism, democracy, literacy, reform, gender relations, and industrialization, contrasted to a South stunted in these aspects of development. Other historians, by contrast, emphasize that the white South, by international standards, was quite modern in virtually every way, ranging from the role of print to railroad building, from political engagement to the adoption of technology.

Much of the debate has been framed by the work of Eugene Genovese who has explained the South as a pre-modern, pre-capitalist region where dominant planter elites enveloped society, economy, and politics. "Planter hegemony" set the South apart and explained the inevitable collision with the North in war over slavery. Genovese put the master-slave relationship at the center of his argument about the South, arguing that it determined class and social relations, as well as ideology, law, political expression, and nearly every facet of southern life. The South, according to Genovese, was sharply different from the North, but not so different from other premodern societies in history.
Another axis of debate has turned around the differences among whites North and South. Most of the scholarship has focused on the class structures of North and South, finding in both intense inequalities. One school of interpretation, following the Republican critique of the 1850s, has emphasized the damage slavery did to nonslaveholders, limiting their economic opportunities and political freedom. Another school has emphasized exactly the opposite: the benefits of racial domination to all whites, elevating them psychologically, socially, and politically.

Yet another axis of debate has turned around the politics of sectional conflict. Historians of the North have struggled with the role of slavery in dividing the Whigs, Democrats, Know-Nothings, and Republicans from one another, weighing the divisions over slavery against those of class, religion, ethnicity, and economic orientation. Historians of the South have struggled with the role of slavery in similar ways, trying to discern the way that slavery shaped party orientation and voting from the Jacksonian era through the secession crisis. Thomas Alexander, Joel Sibley, Peyton McCrary and others' studies of party strength in the South found that Southern parties did not divide along class lines or slaveholding and that slavery did not create a different political outlook or process in the region. Some have seen slavery as a central dividing issue while others have been struck by the salience of competing kinds of definition.

Studies of economic development and structures in the North and South have found important areas of overlap, similarity, and divergence in various facets of economic life. Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's work, as well as Gavin Wright's, portrayed a thriving and prosperous South, not especially different in its fundamental economic patterns from the North. The antebellum South, economic historians concluded after several decades of intense scholarship, was bourgeois at its core, interested more in profit maximization than social hegemony, and startlingly successful.

Periodically, someone has paused in this outpouring of scholarship to offer an overview of current thinking. The *American Historical Review* offered a roundtable on the issue in 1980. There, Edward Pessen asked, "How different from each other were the antebellum North and South?" His answer was: distinctive, yes, but not fundamentally different, especially if one focused on property distribution among whites. In fact, Pessen argued, North and South were not so much different as complementary, joined through mutual benefit in their economies and common social and political structures. He relied on a range of research, most notably Gavin Wright and Lee Soltow's analysis of the basic similarities in wealth distribution and income between the sections. Pessen concluded that the North's and South's similarities might have more to do with the coming of the Civil War than their differences. He pointed to "similarly selfish interests--or perceived interests" rather than to "differences in their cultures and institutions" as the most compelling explanation for the Civil War.

One participant in the forum, Stanley Engerman, noted that much of the scholarship Pessen reviewed examined only either the North or the South. Few works were explicitly comparative, testing the similarities and differences across the sections. Another participant, Thomas Alexander, concluded with a discouraging, if accurate, summary: "there is still little agreement on how all of these [factors] interacted to bring about an intersectional war, nor is there agreement on which of the similarities and
differences are central to understanding antebellum life."

In the twenty years since Pessen's article, the pursuit of this problem has become ever more sophisticated and no less energetic. If the South and North were more similar than different, why did they go to war? Books, articles, and dissertations have appeared devoted directly to this question. Many of these recent works have taken a comparative approach, usually focused on places in the Upper North and Lower South for their tests, comparing Massachusetts and Michigan, say, with South Carolina and Alabama. Such comparisons make sense for many purposes, but they necessarily emphasize difference. Still, as they dug deeper into localities and states, historians kept coming up with fundamental similarities in social institutions, political cultures, and economic structures. John Quist's study of nineteenth-century reformers in Michigan and Alabama, for example, emphasized that in both places reform grew in soil rich with evangelical revivals and growing markets. Quist found deep and striking similarities.

Historians of politics and social life have focused on the complex connections and loyalties of between national parties and individual voters, and they have been especially interested in the upper South and lower North. Michael Holt, Daniel Crofts, and William Shade have compiled the most detailed studies of party formation in the antebellum period for Pennsylvania and Virginia. Their studies suggest several important patterns. First, ethnicity and religious affiliation were important determinants for party identification in this period in both places. Second, party leadership in both places shifted in the 1850s, becoming less differentiated by socioeconomic factors. Third, strong economic growth and prosperity in the 1850s challenged the patterns of party loyalty and allowed party institutions to weaken. Fourth, local issues, such as taxes, schools, and courts were crucial in creating party alignments and in many cases overshadowed the importance of national issues. Finally, all three studies point to the neighborhood or local network as the most important variable in determining how individuals voted and aligned themselves with political parties.

At the local level men divided into parties for reasons so subtle that we can hardly reconstruct them. The most recent and complete study of voting patterns in Virginia, by Daniel Crofts, reveals that residence, slaveholding, and religion—in that order—explained how men voted. The confluence of "family, neighborhood, partisanship, slaveholding, agricultural production, and religious affiliation" depended on local geography, its cultural and social settlement patterns and the natural features around them. This portrayal corresponds with those of other parts of the United States, including Harry Watson's pioneering study of Cumberland County, North Carolina, and a remarkably detailed study of Washington County, Oregon, by Paul Bourke and Donald DeBats. The most recent community-level study, by Glenn Alschuler and Stuart Blumin, examines local political activity and institutions in eight nineteenth-century American communities and found a shockingly low level of participation and political activism in these places. They found that politics occupied a tenuous "space" within the lives of ordinary Americans. Politics, the authors suggested, did not enter everything in American society and life in these years; instead, it competed for the attention of Americans who viewed parties as rude, base, self-aggrandizing institutions, far from the virtuous and altruistic presence in their lives of religion, civic duty, republicanism, and liberalism.
Up close, sweeping assertions about the correspondence between social identity and political identity dissolve and even disappear. This is even the case for the connection between slaveholding and political involvement. From the most general perspective, the war pitted a slave South against a free North; the states with the largest proportion of slaves in their populations seceded first and those with lower proportions seceded later. But when we push below this plane of simple state-level analysis, the picture immediately becomes more complex. Aggregate studies have found no consistent correlation between slaveholding and counties' votes on secession—especially in the Deep South. Yet slavery proved the key in the Upper South states that seceded later. Their reluctance to secede did not grow from a weakened devotion to slavery. Slaveholders led the movement out of the Union and won the most votes in the Upper South where slavery was most entrenched.

Our key precept, however, is this: for an argument about the differences and similarities between North and South to be persuasive, it must embrace the full complexity of the evidence and it must be explicitly comparative. We begin by noting that as useful as earlier comparative studies are, they neglect a large portion of the United States: the borderland that encompassed vast areas of what became the Federal and Confederates sides in the Civil War. Kevin Phillips has argued in a recent book that "Together, the Lower North, Upper South, and Border counted off half of the U. S. states and two-thirds of the population." That may be a bit extravagant, depending on how one does the math, but it is not far wrong if we count, say, all the Northern counties along the Mason-Dixon Line, Ohio River, and Mississippi River in which a significant number of men voted against Lincoln in 1860 and 1864 or if we count all the slave states south of that line that either did not secede or seceded only in April 1861. Only one study, published in 1927, has been devoted to the role of the border in the Civil War. In it political scientist Edward Conrad Smith contended that the border constituted a distinctive and "homogeneous" region of "essential unity," containing nearly five million people. He called the area "The Borderland" and included in it Kentucky, Missouri, western Virginia, southern Illinois, and southern Ohio. The historical geographer D. W. Meinig describes the challenge of mapping the sections very well: "we must surely have something more than a simple map of North and South, of a Mason-Dixon Line (even as a shorthand term), of the Union and the Confederacy as two entities, if we are to have any sense at all of what 'secession' meant in this complicated geopolitical structure during its unprecedented crisis."

But, the "Borderland" can be a misleading term if it implies that the dominant characteristics of region were muted in these places. They were not: slavery remained strong in the Upper South and Northern identity remained strong in the Lower North. Instead, we need to see the networks—commercial, geographic, familial, social, and legal—connecting communities along the Border and how those trans-local networks shaped identity. Their identities were shaped and defined close to home, in their neighborhoods, churches, farmsteads, and businesses.

One of our major arguments is that the differences between North and South, especially the role of slavery, might be understood more clearly by disassembling slave and non-slave societies into their constitutive elements. Our conclusions will only be clear after readers have examined the array of evidence, but we can offer some general points of argument here.
Slavery worked at every level of American society in 1860, from the most intrinsic and thus invisible to the most self-conscious ideological and political. Slavery exerted a more profound difference for being complex, multifaceted, problematic, and unpredictable. Material conditions and relations were expressed in oblique, counter-intuitive, and self-defeating political ways, according to an ever-changing situational logic that did not always accord with social logic.

Ideology, though bounded and channeled by social experience, was full of latencies. People on both sides in 1860 were ideologically prepared to act in profoundly different ways, ranging from peace, union, and continued slavery on one hand to secession, war, and emancipation on the other. The social orders of the North and South, free labor and slave, could have created and sustained any of these possibilities. In Augusta men voted overwhelmingly to send committed Unionists, two of them Whigs and one a Democrat, to the secession convention in 1861, and 93 percent of the voters in Augusta demanded that they have a vote to approve or reject whatever the convention decided. Eighty percent of the eligible voters participated in this election. The event was one in a long line that brought Augustans to a set of political choices. These opportunities were not foregone conclusions, since structures did not govern their outcome or even the range of outcomes.

To understand why events followed some possibilities and not others, we must understand the physicality of ideology, its intimate and intricate connection to lived experience, to institutions, events, and daily life, its flux in time. Despite similarity in many aspects of their lives, war came to Americans when politics failed to manage the profound differences.

Economic Structures

Both Augusta and Franklin were prosperous and diversified. Blessed with the advantages of rich soil, abundant water, and seasonable weather, both places grew vast quantities of grain, sustained towns, and depended on railroads that came into their counties. Both generated industry, sustained commercial newspapers and internal trade networks, traded intensely with other cities, and provided similar employment opportunities.

The white class structure did not differ markedly between the Northern and Southern community; similar proportions of propertyless and unskilled whites lived in both places. Non-slaveholders were not pushed onto marginal land in the Southern county, instead sharing equal proportions of the finest land and distributed in the same proportion as slaveholders across the landscape. The same availability of excellent soil characterized the Northern county. Occupations did not differ between the two places and the laboring classes were comprised of the same general age and wealth.
In some significant ways, though, the economic structures of these places differed. In almost every category of wealth, whites were better off in Augusta, for they owned more property and had larger farms than whites in Franklin. Some whites in Augusta accumulated huge fortunes in slaves as personal property. Women in Augusta outpaced their counterparts in Franklin, amassing larger real and personal estates. In addition, free blacks in Augusta obtained a higher level of wealth than black residents in Franklin. In the view of many whites in Augusta, their society was responsible for a higher standard of living, one that benefitted all whites. Slaves, too, according to Augusta's whites, benefitted from these advantages. Slaves, Augusta's whites told each other, were better off in slavery than free, and better off than the free laborers in the North.

Other differences in the distribution of wealth requires closer scrutiny of the geographic locus of wealth in these communities. For example, although household wealth was distributed in the same proportion in each county, wealth's geographic location was different. Augusta's wealth was proportionately greater in its town areas, while Franklin's was greater in its rural areas. Franklin's towns were more densely settled than Augusta's and more populated by lower classes, and Augusta's towns were the preferred locations for the residences of the county's wealthiest planters. Slaves as property boosted the wealth of town dwellers in Augusta, whether those slaves lived in the town or worked on outlying plantations.

Slavery exerted profound effects in the very structures of population and production of Augusta. Slaves worked throughout the entire county, on every type of soil and in every kind of labor. The southern county generated smaller towns and created industries confined to lower levels of processing. Farms that
looked quite similar to their Franklin counterparts in fact devoted their resources to different crop mixes. Slaveowners shifted slaves from agricultural to quasi-industrial work as the seasons changed, with slaves that worked in wheat fields also working in distilleries, forests, and mines. The institution of slavery proved remarkably adaptable, and Augusta whites who did not own slaves hired them in great numbers.

A quiet difference between the communities lay in their approaches to agricultural production, which constituted the basis of the economy in both places. Franklin and Augusta both grew large amounts of wheat, corn, hay, livestock, and other grains. Franklin's commitment to wheat production far exceeded Augusta's, and Franklin's wheat farmers were more productive on average and on a per acre basis than their Augusta counterparts, especially on the best soil. Augusta's corn production far exceeded Franklin's on average and on a per acre basis, and Augusta's farmers were more productive with this crop than Franklin's. The difference was more than one of preference. Corn was undoubtedly the crop that fed slaves in Augusta and neighboring counties. In Franklin wheat was considered the crop of a free labor society. Yet Augusta's white planters increasingly concentrated their slave labor on wheat, producing on the largest plantations a high level of productivity.

Just as crop choices showed subtle differences, so did both places' investment in manufacturing. Augusta residents used slave labor to create localized agricultural systems and semi-finished manufacturing enterprises that exploited the availability of unskilled labor. Franklin residents, from small farms and skilled workshops, produced high-value goods sold through national and international
markets. Property-owners in both places made efficient use of the resources of labor they commanded. Augusta planters chose to enter the wheat economy and deployed their slave labor across an array of agricultural and industrial tasks. Augusta’s handful of skilled artisans eschewed slave labor, while Franklin’s numerous artisans made substantial capital investment in the county.

Just as Augusta and Franklin’s agricultural production exhibited subtle differences in crop mixes, so too did their infrastructure. While both places were highly networked with infrastructure, Franklin built more miles of major roadway per square mile in the county while Augusta concentrated on the minor roads connecting farms and smaller towns. Augusta’s corn crop required local distribution on minor roads and Franklin’s wheat required greater access to markets through major roads. Augusta’s wheat investment, though, was significant and so was its commitment to the major roads and railroads necessary to move it out of the county. Augusta built major roads when measured on a per capita basis just as energetically and successfully as Franklin.

By their own lights, white people in both Franklin and Augusta were highly successful in 1860. Property-holders and businessmen in both places had adjusted their resources to take advantage of the labor, land, transportation, raw materials, and skills available to them. In this respect Augusta and Franklin represented the wide region of the border, stretching from Virginia and Pennsylvania across Ohio and Kentucky. Along the border of slavery southern counties achieved a high cash value of their farms while northern counties secured a higher value per acre on their farms. This pattern held as well for the contiguous neighbors of Augusta and Franklin.
Social Structures

Augusta and Franklin bore many profound similarities in their social structures. Their churches, schools, newspapers, and political parties were clearly variants of the same kinds of institutions. People in both communities drew on the same cultural traditions, found the same topics, trends, and fads fascinating, adopted the same fashions, and read the same books. They eagerly employed the same new technologies. White women found similar opportunities above and below the Mason-Dixon Line. Free black people faced similarly restricted economic opportunities in both places. While both counties had some immigrants, the population of each was heavily native-born. White residents in both places often treated African Americans with disregard and contempt.

Yet slavery had insinuated itself into every facet of life in Augusta. Slavery touched every corner of Augusta, reaching into its mountains, valleys, and hollows. The institution was found at every elevation, on every soil type. The newspapers were filled with the business of slavery and business adapted itself to the opportunities and constraints of bondage.

The most startling and observable difference on the ground was the difference in population density. In the North the average population per square mile was 32 persons. Ninety-five percent of Southern counties had a lower density of white residents than the Northern average. In Franklin County the population density was 55 persons per square mile, while Augusta held just 28 persons per square mile (22 white residents per square mile). Historians have suggested that such a thorough and persistent
difference might account for other sectional differences in economy, social structure, or understanding of political power.

For many contemporaries the difference between North and South was observable and real, visible on the ground in the ways buildings looked, were arranged or cared for, in the ways crops were planted, tended, or harvested, in the ways roads and towns intersected and developed. Northern travelers looked at the relative sparseness of people on the land in the South and viewed it as a lack of progress and energy. The Northerners saw scattered schoolhouses and churches, isolated villages and empty roads. White Southerners, however, thought they lived in places more beautiful and more humane than the crowded rural districts of the North. They argued that their farms, plantations, and towns were just as productive as those of the North, that white people in the South were actually better off than those in the North.
Political Structures

Both Augusta and Franklin maintained vigorous political parties. Residents of both places were linked through networks of party structure, patronage, and interest into national institutions. Party activists in both places used the newspapers to mobilize supporters and disparage opponents. As they chose representatives and party leaders in the months preceding the election of 1860, residents of each place followed patterns established in previous political contests.

The connections between political expression and economic and social life prove far more complicated than aggregate numbers suggest. While we can discern patterns in the detailed numbers and maps,
neither in the North or in the South did the way a man voted simply reflect his material interests, ethnic background, or geographic location. Historians have developed sophisticated techniques for measuring ethnic and religious correlations with voting and party preferences in period from 1830s to the election of 1860. William G. Shade's work on Virginia concludes that the Valley region's political alignments correlated closely with the region's religious and ethnic groupings--Valley Scots-Irish Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists preferred the Whig Party, while German Lutherans, Mennonites, and Reformed found the Democrats attractive. Within Augusta County, however, the geographic location of churches, for example, bore little relationship to voting patterns at the precinct level.

Still, some patterns in Augusta and Franklin's voting in 1860 seem clear. In Franklin Abraham Lincoln won precincts where blacks lived, even though they could not vote. These precincts were also geographically connected, stretching across the urban middle of the county and up its eastern edge, and had a larger proportion of young voters in their twenties and thirties. Franklin's Democrats voted mostly for Breckinridge, following the local party leadership's decision to spurn Stephen Douglas, and they carried precincts far from the urban centers of the county. In Augusta where Constitutional Unionist John Bell easily won, the Democrats secured support in the rural areas most closely linked to large-scale slavery. In the mountains and towns, where Whig sensibilities were predominant, Bell's commitment to slavery and union together represented their interests and they turned out for him.
Political events must be understood in the particular flux of time and event, as new situations and calculations confronted voters. The outcomes in Franklin and Augusta were by no means self-evident in 1860. Lincoln's election in Franklin and Bell's in Augusta depended on a cascade of events within the context of each communities' social and economic structures. Both moved toward secession cautiously, with realization that much could be lost. But the larger network of political action framed the choices for Augusta and Franklin residents in 1861. These changes can best be portrayed through a narrative that traces change across time.

**Conclusion**

Despite these subtleties and complexities, the loyalties that abruptly emerged from the swirl of events proved remarkably strong, both North and South. Augusta residents in 1861 almost overnight switched from staunchly unionist to Confederate loyalists, mobilizing for war with little debate. In Franklin residents eagerly prepared for war as well. Thus, we are confronted with both daunting complexity and seductive simplicity. It is tempting to set the former aside, since the latter triumphed with enormous consequences and because apologists for the Confederacy have seized on the complications as excuses to avoid the central role slavery played. Impatiently brushing aside the complications in favor of some elemental bottom line, however, is a mistake because it misses the fundamental slippage that produced the Civil War.
It was the very overlap, convergence, and certainty of compromise on the border that drove some Northerners and Southerners to believe that they could say anything they wished because the conflict would be worked out, because the other side would back down. It was the very existence of the gray area across the middle third of the nation that led advocates on both sides of extreme action to act with what the whites in the middle saw as recklessness. If we combine the paradoxes, in other words, they cease to be paradoxes. If we embrace the complexity, variance, and range, we can see the process far more clearly than if we try to suppress those very real aspects of the differences between the sections. Slavery drove secession, but the crisis of 1860-1 was a long, uneven process that swept over thousands of communities, following and then effacing the contours of local social order.

Both places saw their arrangements as successful and productive, but ironically, that very success exacerbated sectional tensions. The physical experience of citizens, the arrangements of their institutions, towns, farms, and businesses, differed between Northern and Southern communities in profoundly subtle but meaningful ways. Republicans and Southern Democrats created aggressive political movements that appealed to large numbers of white male citizens by championing their regionally distinct visions of appropriate economic and social strategies and obscuring the complementary nature of the Northern and Southern economic approaches. When faced with the binary choice of separating from the Union or challenging the economic and social systems that had served them so well for so long, most white men South and North made their decision quickly and with conviction. The binary choice posed by Republicans and Southern Democrats washed out the similarities between the North and South and emphasized their contrasting visions of the proper ways to create and manage labor and economic production in the U.S. In defense of those contrasting visions, people from both regions committed themselves to war.