

‘Born for a Storm’: Power and Andrew Jackson’s Ethics in the Culture of the Old South

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At an open air meal in Clover Bottom, Tennessee in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, future president Andrew Jackson heard a friend get into a scuffle at the far end of a long table. Unable to make his way through a crowd of nearly 200 people to reach the man, Jackson mounted the table itself and “waded through plates and dishes” to run to him, all the while shouting “I’m coming!”<sup>1</sup> This is, perhaps, a telling look at the personality of the man who would become America’s seventh president. He could be brash, unthinking, and rude, but his loyalty was legendary. In his 1857 work, Charles Gayarre explained the “inflexible consistency” of Jackson by comparing him to “a massive block of granite, hewn in its complete and uniform entity from the same quarry, and presenting on all sides the same hard substance to the touch of examination.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite sentiments like Gayarre’s, then as now, admiration of Jackson was inconsistent. Not only did men of his era often condemn his actions as reckless and, at times, bordering on criminal, but there appear to be instances throughout his life when Jackson’s mental stability was called into question. Henry Clay, admittedly one of Jackson’s most reliable and vehement enemies, publicly criticized the then-president in 1834. In this speech, he denounced what he viewed as Jackson’s unstable behavior and called upon the popular ‘science’ of phrenology to explain Jackson’s character. In order to shed some light on the Jackson administration’s “feverish, fretful, and fidgety” decisions and its lack of “any sober or settled purpose,” Clay went on to suggest that Jackson should, literally, have his head examined, and hypothesized that phrenologists would “find the organ of destructiveness prominently developed.”<sup>3</sup>

Throughout his public life, contemporaries recognized him as an atypical man, and many had their own theories as to why.<sup>4</sup> John Bell of Tennessee posited his theory: that Jackson “had what may be called an intuitive perception of the passions and interests by which the mass of mankind are controlled.”<sup>5</sup> Gayarre attributed it to his “inflexible consistency,” while Horace Binney felt that what set Jackson apart from the rest was pure ego.<sup>6</sup>

When evaluating a person like Jackson, rarely are conclusions about his motivations, his ethics, or even his sanity easily drawn. Both professional and amateur historians have struggled to make sense of a man whose dueling, slave owning, and fierce military reign hardly seem to line up with his fostering of children (including at least three Native American boys), his deep devotion to a vulnerable wife, and his evidently generous treatment of those he held dear.<sup>7</sup> America’s seventh president possessed what has aptly been described by historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown as a “complexity of character truly astonishing.”<sup>8</sup> Satisfactory explanation of this complexity has eluded generations. In an effort to shed a brighter light on Jackson, this paper will argue that, although the honor culture of the Old South played an influential role in the trajectory of Jackson’s life, his behavior departed in notable and socially unacceptable ways from the norms of his day. Furthermore, it will examine the fact that his motivations for these departures appear to have been considerably deeper and less precise than a simple dedication to honor. Rather, his life was often a power struggle, and the ways in which he interacted with contemporaries were often dictated by how they undermined or reinforced his power.

To modern eyes, Jackson's behavior appears so volatile as to betray some undiagnosed mental illness, and efforts have certainly been made to examine what internal motivations Jackson may have had for his behavior. For example, the trauma of Jackson's youth is often used to explain psychological motivations behind much of his behavior and therefore illustrate a vague possibility that he suffered from some form of psychological malady.<sup>9</sup> To diagnose him with such is not as simple as it may seem, however, given the unique "honor culture" of the Old South in which Jackson was living. The South of Jackson's era was one of entrenched social constructs, including a rigid hierarchy, standards of gentility, and strict codes of behavior that honorable men – and honor was widely considered to be the single most important trait of a man – were expected to integrate into their lives. Jackson took these expectations seriously, likely even more so than many of his contemporaries, and this dedication to Southern honor shaped his life and provided the scaffolding for much of his behavior.<sup>10</sup> Southern honor was, for Andrew Jackson, a means to justify conduct that would have been considered hopelessly rash in other regions or eras.

To argue that Jackson was simply a man of his times is, however, too simplistic. It is true that much of Jackson's behavior that is puzzling to modern readers can be adequately, even tidily, explained as normative for Southern honor culture, and the aforementioned Wyatt-Brown thus applied honor to Jackson's life in a 1997 article.<sup>11</sup> Using Wyatt-Brown's analysis, much of Jackson's violent and temperamental conduct can be explained by his devotion to honor. However, there is still enough of Jackson's behavior that departs from this set of principles, and enough harsh criticism of him from contemporaries, that Jackson can be proved atypical even for his day. Historian Steven M. Stowe related the opinion of one contemporary, William Gaston, that Jackson was "weak and violent" in his dealings with emotion and his interactions with honor culture.<sup>12</sup> Gaston's opinion was that honor culture should be characterized by stability, "natural aristocracy," and "public responsibility"; a far cry from the passion and unpredictability often shown by Jackson.<sup>13</sup> Oftentimes, these departures were born out of Jackson's unique way of interpreting and exerting power, a subject that has hitherto been underdeveloped by historians. Jackson's behavior was predicated on the belief that he deserved ultimate authority. Therefore, those who challenged his authority received the brunt of Jackson's tyranny; those who were socially unable to challenge him (particularly women, children, and slaves) received compassion that was atypical of him and many other men of his day.

To illustrate this theory effectively, it is necessary to outline Southern honor culture, including its expectations, its manifestations, and its history, as well as how Jackson maneuvered the tradition. Wyatt-Brown, perhaps the preeminent scholar on the role of honor in the Old South, argues that honor was the primary motivating factor in many Southern social interactions (particularly those of the gentry), and his work offers a thorough analysis of the institution. Primary to the basis of honor culture was self-worth, as defined by both the inner conviction of this trait and how it was projected onto, perceived by, and reflected back by the public sphere. Because it could only be affirmed by the response of observers, the institution built into its population a deep-seated reliance on image and the opinion of others to justify self-worth.<sup>14</sup> This attention to social detail was never expected to allow adherents to avoid conflict, however, and many of the tenets of honor culture related directly to navigating those conflicts when they arose. To be sure, honor was also characterized by "personal aggressiveness," as noted by Stowe.<sup>15</sup>

Honor was the key to social acceptance as well as social mobility – issues that were particularly relevant to Jackson as he left behind a poor, orphaned childhood to pursue a career

of law, the military, and politics. Jackson went from being fatherless at birth and having lost all of his immediate kin by age 14 to his first public appointment as prosecutor for the western districts of North Carolina (the Tennessee territory) in 1788, at the age of 21. This was rapidly followed by his service as a U.S. Representative in 1796, Senator in 1797, judge from 1798 – 1804, and his military service scattered throughout.<sup>16</sup> This service would culminate for Jackson in his leadership through the Battle of New Orleans in 1815.<sup>17</sup> Early biographer S. Putnam Waldo described Jackson's conduct in New Orleans with melodrama characteristic of his most ardent supporters. "Upon the banks of the majestic Mississippi," Waldo wrote, Jackson "soared before his enemies, in sheets of fire – he rendered every defile a *Thermopylae*, and every plain an *Amarathon*."<sup>18</sup> While surely exaggerated by Waldo, Jackson's conduct in New Orleans would, indeed, thrust him assuredly and dramatically onto the national stage and cement his influential place in the young nation.

All of the above roles played important roles in developing Jackson's presence in the honor culture of the South, and he went to extremes in many of them. These extremes are particularly evident in his military career, as demonstrated by Putnam's interpretation of Jackson. Jackson was acutely aware of the importance of public image, and he worked hard to cultivate an image that would serve him well in his future. Given the ways in which he could advance or maintain his career and popularity with its help, it is no wonder that Jackson devoted himself so fully to a social practice like honor. If maneuvered well, it could aid him in his goal of achieving and maintaining power and success.

It did not, however, come without consequences. Honor culture virtually bred into its adherents many of the traits that would appear to be signs of instability by modern American standards. Firstly, Wyatt-Brown notes that, due to the aforementioned habit of basing inner worth on outside interpretations and reactions to behavior, Southerners not only paid close attention to outer appearances, but they also developed a code of ethics that was "almost entirely external in nature."<sup>19</sup> Key to this external ethical code were several components, including the integration of others' opinions into one's "personal identity and gauge of self-worth." Stowe confirms this and notes that the honor code of the South was grounded in social interactions and the ways in which planter-class men acknowledged each other's inherent value.<sup>20</sup>

Wyatt-Brown argues that commitment to this broad system of honor and gentlemanliness was principally a Southern norm, and he attributes this to differences in religion, economy, population distribution, and race between the two regions. Stowe varies this interpretation somewhat and "does not argue for a separate southern culture but does support a thesis of a significant southern emphasis in certain key aspects" of the life of the gentry – namely, dueling and very specific rules for social interaction.<sup>21</sup> The interpretations of Wyatt-Brown and Stowe are not universal, however, and historian Joanne Freeman outlines an American political structure that depended strongly on honor as a pillar of interaction, regardless of region.<sup>22</sup> Even Freeman, however, draws a distinction between the Revolutionary era's usually "sober" manners and the manners of some "hot-headed southerners."<sup>23</sup> Whether or not such an established code of honor took hold in the post-Revolutionary North as well as the South, Jackson would have undoubtedly been exposed to honor culture in his life on the Southern frontier.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, Jackson seems to have settled in an area of the South where honor culture was even more emphasized than in others. John Lyde Wilson, in his 1858 treatise on honor and dueling, noted for his readers that the "uncouth incivility" of Northerners was in sharp contrast to the extreme commitment to gentility seen in "Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia,

and South Carolina.”<sup>25</sup> While levels of commitment may have been extremely high in these areas, the code itself remained the same throughout much of the South.<sup>26</sup>

Jackson integrated the criteria of Southern honor into his life in varying degrees. The first, an intense and almost paranoid awareness of outside opinion, can be seen throughout his life, even as far back as his childhood and adolescence in Waxhaws, North Carolina. As a boy, he was known as the leader of “the rowdies” – a band of young men known for their pranks and wild behavior. He was, by multiple accounts, anxious to fight to defend his reputation, whether the recipient of his temper was a boy who played a prank on young Jackson or any number of locals who might criticize him for his slim appearance, his chronic drooling, or the skin condition that plagued him as a young man. Upon being teased for any of these, Jackson was “always ready to fight.”<sup>27</sup>

Not only did Jackson maintain a dedication to defending his high opinion of himself, but by most accounts he also harbored a deep impulse to distinguish himself through extraordinary actions. This took several forms – in some ways, Jackson distinguished himself by committing to being the most faithful of friends and hospitable of hosts, but there were other, more threatening ways he stood out as well.<sup>28</sup> One man who had been acquainted with Jackson throughout his life in Tennessee noted that, in his early years as a military commander there, some men avoided enlisting to serve under him due to his reputation as being rash and reckless with his forces.<sup>29</sup> Another Tennessean, John Bell, noted a similar sentiment (although he felt it was misguided), that followed Jackson’s time in the military when he wrote that “many careless observers of his early career had their misgivings that a rash valor and his eager desire to distinguish himself in arms might result in disaster.” Opinions about Jackson and his impetuosity, as Bell noted, would not align in his day nor in the inquiries of “posterity,” but time and again contemporary accounts have demonstrated that he came under harsh criticism throughout his career.<sup>30</sup>

A dedication to defending his high opinion of himself also made an appearance in Jackson’s experiences in the Revolutionary War, and, if his biographers are to be believed, one of the defining moments of his life.<sup>31</sup> In 1781, Jackson and his brother, Robert, were taken captive by the British. The 14-year-old Jackson adamantly demanded to be treated as a formal prisoner of war, and he extended this demand to an adamant refusal to polish a British officer’s boots when ordered. For his trouble, Jackson was rewarded with a violent sword strike that left him forever scarred. Robert received similar treatment and later died of illness and injury, and their mother died shortly thereafter after contracting an illness – known as “ship fever” – while tending the sick.<sup>32</sup> Many accounts argue that, following these experiences, and the loss of his oldest brother, Hugh, in 1779, Jackson harbored not only a hatred of the British and their allies (notably, various Native American tribes), but a lifelong legacy of childhood trauma and abandonment.<sup>33</sup> He also carried with him the habit of staunchly, even irresponsibly, defending his interpretation of his place within power structures.

Jackson carried these legacies with him into young adulthood and his early career. Upon his appointment as District Attorney for the western districts of North Carolina, and his arrival in Nashville in 1788, Jackson was 21 years old and without any immediate family; the death of his father before his birth in 1767, and those of his mother and two brothers between the years of 1779 and 1781 had left Jackson starkly alone in a culture in which blood relations were incredibly important to one’s social standing.<sup>34</sup> Upon their deaths, Jackson had left his home in Waxhaws, spent a short time in Charleston (by most accounts gambling away a small inheritance), and finally pursuing a career in law. He did not, however, stay in close touch with what remaining family he did have – aunts, uncles, and cousins – in Waxhaws. Jackson seems

to have walked away from these remaining family members and instead gone about creating a new family for himself in Nashville.<sup>35</sup> He began with a wife.

When it came to Rachel Donelson Jackson, Andrew Jackson's devotion was seemingly endless, and the relationship was fraught with drama from the very beginning. The origins of the Jacksons' marriage also bear out a sense of entitlement and lack of concern over social norms that Jackson often showed when he felt strongly about something. For Jackson, there was often a sense that rules need not apply to him – that he was a special case deserving of special leniency. Such belief on his part can be inferred from much of his conduct as he met, courted, and married Rachel, whose family had its own rocky history in coming to northern central Tennessee.

After a short-lived settlement in the Nashville area in the late 1770s, the Donelsons moved northward to the safer Davies Station, Kentucky area.<sup>36</sup> It was here that Rachel met and married her first husband, Lewis Robards. Following her marriage, the Donelsons returned to Nashville while Rachel and her husband remained in Kentucky until 1788. The marriage was, by many accounts, turbulent. Later that year Rachel arrived in Nashville, escorted by her brother and followed soon after by Robards, who bought 1,700 acres in the area of the Donelsons.<sup>37</sup> Jackson had himself arrived in Nashville as the District Attorney for the area in the same year, and when the Robardses arrived, Jackson was a boarder in Rachel's mother's house; Rachel's father had died before her arrival in Nashville.<sup>38</sup>

What followed could likely be termed a 'whirlwind romance' – Jackson and Lewis Robards argued on multiple occasions about Jackson being "too familiar" with Rachel and Robards too open with his criticisms of her. Neither man liked the other, and somewhere along the way, Robards returned to Kentucky.<sup>39</sup> For generations, it was assumed by many that Robards had "abandoned" Rachel, and that Jackson's marrying of her was a rescue of sorts. While the legality of it was perhaps hazy, it was defensible given Robards's abandonment and the imprecise divorce processes of the time.<sup>40</sup> Historian Ann Toplovich, however, effectively refuted these claims in a 2006 article. Toplovich's research provides extensive evidence that Jackson and Rachel Robards knowingly married while she was still legally bound to her first husband and that it would have been virtually impossible for them to be unaware of divorce and bigamy laws in Tennessee, given Jackson's position as District Attorney and Rachel's familial connections to the territory's legislature.<sup>41</sup>

Instead, Jackson's marriage to Rachel appears as one of the rashest decisions of his young life. Certainly illegal and arguably immoral by the standards of the day, the action was a sharp departure from the honor culture of the South. Again, it is in these departures from the cultural norm that Jackson's behavior becomes harder to explain. The way in which he and Rachel navigated their romance was inarguably irresponsible. They opened themselves up to moral criticism both severe and long lasting; the scandal would follow them the rest of their lives. It is certainly true that it was not readily accepted by many of Jackson's contemporaries, and there was little precedent to argue that it should have been.

However small in their core circle of friends and family, the social consequences of their marriage rippled outwards. A later duel between Jackson and Tennessee Governor John Sevier centered largely around Sevier's assertion that Jackson had performed "no great service" for the country "except taking a trip to Natchez with another man's wife."<sup>42</sup> The marriage, and insults to Rachel's honor, also made an appearance in Jackson's most famous duel, which resulted in the death of his opponent, Charles Dickinson, in 1806, and it famously became a contentious issue in the 1828 presidential election between Jackson and John Quincy Adams.<sup>43</sup> On each of

these occasions, Jackson was eager and vehement in his defense of Rachel's honor. Jackson's marriage to Rachel and the way in which he entered it prompt questions of how power was integrated into this conflict. The vulnerability of Rachel, coupled with the clashes between Jackson and Robards that preceded the marriage, dovetail with Jackson's usual embrace of the powerless and confrontation of the powerful.

It is Jackson's seemingly boundless dedication to his wife that explains several of his socially atypical actions. His hasty marriage, at least one of his duels, and arguably even his later "blind defense" of Peggy Eaton – the young wife of a Jackson friend who had been accused (rightly, by many accounts) of immorality, all stemmed from an inert compulsion to defend the honor of his wife and those who reminded him of her.<sup>44</sup> Jackson's dedication to Rachel eclipsed even his religious faith, in which he had become more and more adamant as he aged. Of the many emotional accounts of Jackson's reaction to Rachel's death, one recounts the soon-to-be president proclaiming "If my wife Is not in Heaven, it will be no Heaven to me, & I don't want to go there."<sup>45</sup> In short, Jackson's character compromised for Rachel where it would not compromise for others.<sup>46</sup>

Whether Jackson's closeness with Rachel's family was in response to his own lack of kin is hard to say. In his own writing about his life, Jackson only occasionally alludes to such long-lasting effects of his early losses. These effects are most notably apparent upon his adoption of Lyncoya, a Creek child who was left with no family after Jackson's militia forces routed his village and killed the boy's relations.<sup>47</sup> When discussing the child, Jackson wrote to Rachel that his adoption of the boy was not only motivated by "charity and christianity" but also a particular understanding Jackson had of him.<sup>48</sup> Jackson, in an uncharacteristic moment of self-reflection, explained his feelings to Rachel when he wrote "when I reflect that he as to his relations is so much like myself I feel an unusual sympathy for him."<sup>49</sup> Writing home to Rachel, Jackson describes Lyncoya pettishly – informing her upon his decision to take the boy that he is sending him home "for" their adopted son, Andrew, Jr., as well as later inquiring what Junior thinks of his "present," and specifying that Rachel keep the Creek child "in the house." Despite these dehumanizing attitudes, it is also possible to see Jackson's reflection on his own childhood and a depth of feeling in the sentiments he expressed to Rachel. Marsha Mullin, curator of the Hermitage and its attached museum, notes that Jackson's language regarding Lyncoya changed over time. While his writing about Lyncoya begins rather coldly, in subsequent years (Lyncoya lived with the Jacksons until his death in 1828), Jackson "discuss[ed the boy] with much more humanity" and even paid for Lyncoya's schooling and found him an apprenticeship with a saddlemaker. This was not an entirely atypical event for Jackson, and records at the Hermitage demonstrate that he fostered at least two more Native American boys – Charlie and Theodore – while managing the Hermitage plantation.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to moments such as Lyncoya's adoption, it is also possible to infer such effects of Jackson's early life in other areas. His behavior betrays some lingering emotion related to his childhood, particularly when considering his sentiment related to orphans, and these are notable ways in which he departed from being guided simply by the honor code. His soft spot for the kinless is seen in several instances, perhaps most notably in his behavior with Lyncoya, but certainly not exclusively. Additionally, Mullin notes that Jackson's deep attachment to Sarah Yorke – the wife of Andrew, Jr. – was due in part to the fact that her parents also died when she was young, and he sympathized with her. He welcomed her unreservedly into the Hermitage household, even going so far as to bring her sister to live there as well.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Mullin hypothesizes that after his arrival in Nashville and his marriage to Rachel, Jackson purposefully gathered her family in close to him as a way of crafting a close

knit kin network to replace that which he had left behind in Waxhaws and which was required by Southern honor culture.<sup>52</sup> Jackson appears to have been strongly committed to gathering family together at the Hermitage, and his commitment did not end with Rachel's kin.

The trend can also be seen in his dealings with some of the many slaves he owned. There were several occasions in which Jackson bought the family members of one of his slaves, at least in part to ensure that families would remain together. In 1813, during his military campaigns against the Creek, Jackson captured a runaway slave known as Polydore. For unknown reasons, Polydore was pressed into military service rather than returned to his legal owner immediately, and in the following years, Polydore married Sally, a slave at Jackson's Hermitage. Nearly ten years later, Polydore's owner, Cataline Satorios, was found, and rather than return the runaway to Satorios, Jackson negotiated with her to buy Polydore for \$500, a standard price for a slave in the era.<sup>53</sup> The purchase was made, and Polydore and Sally remained together and raised several children at the Jackson plantation.<sup>54</sup>

Jackson behaved similarly as President when he was asked by Sarah (then serving as his first lady following Rachel Jackson's death) to purchase a particular slave, by the name of Gracy. Jackson purchased not only Gracy, but several of her family members including two sisters, a brother, and her mother. The notability of Jackson's behavior in these instances was not lost on his contemporaries, and even Hannah, a house slave at the Hermitage, remarked on "Jackson's unwillingness to split families" up by sale.<sup>55</sup> Naturally, these arrangements were beneficial for Jackson as well; slaves with strong family ties were less apt to run away and married couples produced children and thereby more slave labor. However, Jackson's extraordinary efforts to keep or join slave families together are notable departures from standard slaveowner practice.<sup>56</sup>

It was certainly not the case that Jackson avoided slave sales altogether. Indeed, even sales appear to have been motivated by slave wishes at times. In 1830, a slave marriage at the Hermitage ended, and the spouses, Charlotte and Charles, no longer wanted to reside together. Charlotte asked that she be sold to a neighboring plantation, and Jackson acquiesced, explaining to the buyer that Charlotte and Charles had been married prior to his original purchase of her, which had been "at [Charles's] request." With the marriage dissolved, he sold Charlotte and her children, apparently upon their asking. Jackson wrote that he priced Charlotte as low as possible, despite the fact that his uneagerness to sell her and her children, but he maintained that he "did so [so] that she may be contented."<sup>57</sup>

Given this type of consideration, it is perhaps unsurprising that Mullin notes that for those who knew Jackson, it was very good to be on his good side; he would go to extremes to defend and support his friends. However, if a person was unlucky enough to fall out of Jackson's favor, "there was no coming back from the abyss," and this kind of 'all or nothing' mindset can be seen in Jackson's treatment of slaves as well.<sup>58</sup> As seen above, Jackson often went to uncommon lengths to keep (or even join for the first time) slave families together, and this was not the only way in which Jackson as slavemaster strayed from the norm.

Archaeological excavations at the Hermitage have unearthed all manner of surprising items in the plantation's slave quarters. From china shards which imply that slaves did not have the usual clay dinnerware but rather hand-me-downs from the "big house," to coinage which proves they were able to earn and set aside money, to gunlocks, flints, and lead shot from which historians have deduced that the slaves were able to hunt and fish to supplement their diets, the slaves at the Hermitage were likely allowed considerably more agency over their lives than many others.<sup>59</sup> Add this to the lower than average maternal and infant mortality rates at the

Hermitage, and the \$1,500 legal defense Jackson went into debt to provide for four of his slaves accused of murder (despite the free legal counsel provided to slaves by the state of Tennessee), and the case can be made that Jackson treated his slaves comparatively well.<sup>60</sup>

However, this was not exclusively the case. He also went to shockingly harsh lengths at times, particularly when a slave seemingly betrayed Jackson or the social hierarchy of the South itself. In 1804, upon the escape of one of the Hermitage slaves, Jackson placed an advertisement for the return of this “mulatto man slave,” offering a reward of fifty dollars for his return and an additional ten dollars for every 100 lashes the captor inflicted upon the escaped man, up to the amount of 300.<sup>61</sup> Such a harsh punishment would, by most accounts, amount to a death sentence.<sup>62</sup> While such an advertisement was not uncommon for the era, it is interesting when considered alongside Jackson’s aforementioned dedication to slave families and overall treatment of slaves at the Hermitage. In simplest terms, it harkens back to Mullin’s sentiment: to be on Jackson’s good side was to have a strong ally. To be on his bad side, a bitter enemy. There was very little middle ground and to challenge the power structure to which Jackson so strictly adhered was a sure way to find oneself on the wrong side of this equation.

Of course, none of the positive examples included here are to say that slave life on the Hermitage was ‘the good life.’ Even Hannah, who in the preceding pages was quoted to illustrate Jackson’s positive treatment of slave families and her apparent affection for the man, escaped the Hermitage after Jackson’s death and fled North with her daughter before the end of the Civil War.<sup>63</sup> Hannah’s son, Alfred, however, remained at the Hermitage as caretaker and tour guide long after slavery was abolished. Interviewed in the 1840s, shortly after Jackson’s death, Alfred was asked if freedom would not come with unexpected burdens. Alfred succinctly ended this line of questioning with one of his own, “How would you like to be a slave?” and the interviewer reconsidered his approach.<sup>64</sup> Although he remained at the Hermitage for his entire life, first as slave and then as caretaker and tour guide, the balance for Alfred slowly shifted. By the end of his life, the cabin which he had called home for so many years was decorated with furnishings from the Hermitage mansion, purchased at auction after Andrew Jackson, Jr. lost much of the family’s land and property to debt.<sup>65</sup>

Modern readers would relate to Jackson’s ‘positive’ or ‘moral’ behavior in relation to his slaveholding, and it was this behavior that departed most from the honor code of the South. While paternalism was very much built into the Southern plantation system, the level of positive emotional care for slaves shown by Jackson was out of the ordinary. Wyatt-Brown’s work outlines the extreme negative reactions to ‘disloyal’ slaves that we see in Jackson’s runaway ad, but his work does not bear out any universal presence of Jackson’s habit of going to great lengths to not only avoid separating families, but to make concerted efforts to reunite families who were never together at his plantation to begin with. It is also worth revisiting some of the lenient policies seen at the Hermitage.<sup>66</sup> The presence of a gun in slave quarters was not unheard of, and Tennessee law allowed for one slave on each plantation to carry a gun for hunting. However, the number and type of gun parts unearthed at the Hermitage indicate that it is very likely that more than one slave was in possession of a gun at any one time.<sup>67</sup>

There are several more instances that imply that Jackson showed a surprising level of dedication to the slaves at the Hermitage. Jackson traveled often throughout his military and political career, and so the hiring of overseers was a necessity for him. He remained in relatively close communication with the men who held this position throughout the years, and called upon friends and family to check up on their management of the plantation and the ways in which the overseers were treating Hermitage slaves. In an 1823 letter home to Rachel, Jackson insisted that his “hands” should not be “labored too hard” and that they should be “well

cloathed . . . and contented & happy.”<sup>68</sup> It appears that Jackson was more lenient than his overseers would have liked, which resulted in more than one of them complaining “that he spoiled his negroes” and that he would sometimes halt a punishment that an overseer felt was necessary.<sup>69</sup> This dynamic perhaps explains Jackson’s feeling that he had to check up on his overseers while he was away. These things, when accompanied by an earlier letter home in which he advised Rachel not to allow an overseer to “abuse” a particular slave, Clum, demonstrate that Jackson’s level of interest in the details of slave life while he was away from the Hermitage is striking.<sup>70</sup>

Opinions about Jackson’s behavior are not always harmonious, and it is precisely this ambiguity of motivation that makes Jackson’s departures from standard honor culture so difficult to analyze. It is in these departures from standard honor culture that it becomes possible to look for signs of Jackson’s disregard of social norms, and Jackson as slaveholder presents an interesting challenge. While the extreme negative behavior – violence, vindictiveness, lack of empathy – are what would normally signify mental illness, in Jackson’s case these can be considered normative for the culture of the day. It is the extreme positive behavior that is out of the ordinary. Much of this behavior was often directed at those who were otherwise helpless.

It is true that those who could not and did not challenge Jackson received the most notable warmth and care from him. Whether slaves, children, women, or those others who were otherwise required to be socially subservient, the natural submissives were those to whom Jackson showed uncommon dedication and tenderness. Rachel was, by most accounts, incredibly deferential to her husband. She is described in multiple accounts as childlike – “open as a child,” and like “a child in innocence” were phrases recorded by James Parton in his biographical research of Jackson, and Jackson himself referred to her as his “dear little Rachel” in letters.<sup>71</sup> In other accounts, she is described as “incapable of deceit or craft,” “affectingly simple,” and “benevolent.”<sup>72</sup> Given his treatment and idealization of Rachel and his lifelong intolerance of anyone challenging him, it appears Jackson was especially intrigued by those who were implicitly incapable (socially or otherwise) of such challenges.

While it was a social norm for slavery itself to be present in the South, Jackson was in fact an atypical case. He was born into a poor immigrant community in Waxhaws, was orphaned in adolescence, and arrived in Nashville a modest young man lacking connections. For him to maneuver this life to one that saw him become a general, President, and plantation owner holding over 50,000 acres of Tennessee land and owning 150 slaves is truly remarkable.<sup>73</sup> His navigation of and dedication to the honor code of the South was one thing that allowed him to do this and justified some of the more violent and shocking ways in which he accomplished these things. Even Jackson’s duels – and there were several – were at least nominally socially acceptable. Dueling was a viable way of settling disputes and restoring honor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century South, and the practice had established rigid processes and rules to guide participants.<sup>74</sup> Jackson likely courted these solutions a bit too often. In his desire for respect, honor, and power, Jackson turned effortlessly, and often immediately, to violence.

In 1814, Jackson was leading forces through Native American territory when he encountered trouble and, displaying the quintessential Jackson temper, turned again to ferocity. While in command, Jackson oversaw the process of one of his soldiers being court-martialed for the simple charge of refusing an order to clean up trash. Once convicted of the charge of mutiny, “Jackson saw to it that he was shot.”<sup>75</sup> He was unwavering in this decision as he was in so many aspects of his life, and he maintained that any act of disobedience, even one so small as

refusing to clean up “discarded bones,” was mutinous and deserving of the severest of punishments.

His sympathy did not improve with his unauthorized invasion of the Florida territory in 1818, when it was then held by the Spanish. His belief that he was exempted from rules is abundantly clear in these actions, which he justified as the only course of action possible when pursuing a fleeing enemy (the Seminole), even after they crossed out of American territory. Without authorization from the capital (but also without tacit disapproval), Jackson pursued Seminole hostiles into Spanish territory and proceeded to engage not only them but Spanish forces as well, repeatedly invading and occupying Spanish forts and towns. His justifications were twofold: the Spanish, he argued, had been aiding the Seminole, and when Jackson had tried diplomatically requesting (or demanding) cooperation from them, their officials had refused. This, coupled with no instructions from Washington *not* to invade Florida, constituted sufficient reason to do so for Jackson.<sup>76</sup> Jackson maintained that his actions were matters of national security, but when viewed in the most basic of terms, he invaded foreign territory and prosecuted foreign officials for their own diplomatic policy. Even the most sympathetic of Jackson biographers maintain that it was a decision both illogical and reckless.<sup>77</sup> It certainly departed sharply from the strict “obedience to superior rank” expected of honorable Southern men, and which Jackson himself had so harshly demonstrated with the execution of a soldier just a few years before. Instead, these actions appear to be less about maintaining the social hierarchy of the South and more about Jackson maintaining his own ability to exert whatever power he deemed appropriate.<sup>78</sup>

His judgment did not improve with his dealings with Alexander Arbuthnot and Robert Ambrister, two British nationals captured by Jackson while his forces were making their way through Florida. A special court of thirteen officers was convened and the two prisoners were charged with varying forms of aiding and inciting Creek and Seminole forces in war against the United States. The court ultimately convicted each of them, and while it sentenced Arbuthnot to hanging and Ambrister to lashes and hard labor, Jackson remained unplaced. He overturned the court’s sentence of Ambrister and ensured that both men were executed.<sup>79</sup> Coupled with his lack of respect for Spanish territory, Jackson’s reversal of the decision of thirteen seemingly trusted officers makes it difficult to argue that he was simply a man of his times. On the contrary, Jackson was widely condemned by contemporaries for these actions, and both houses of Congress formed investigative committees to evaluate Jackson’s behavior.<sup>80</sup>

Whatever the true reason for Jackson’s exceptionalism – and John Bell was right that historians “[would] probably seek in vain” for it – Jackson was not ordinary.<sup>81</sup> He was a man operating within an established social construct, artificial and imposed, but important nonetheless. Even so, he did not limit himself to these social norms as some argue; his ‘times’ were not the be all and end all of his behavior, and the prominent ways in which he went against Southern honor culture bear this out. He utilized the honor culture of the Old South to the best of his (and its) ability, but when it no longer served the purposes he required, he elevated himself above the rules and chalked his unusual behavior up to strength of will and commitment to his personal code of ethics. Although impossible to condone with any modern sense of morality, his behavior was, in its own way, consistent throughout his life, always bound to a personal interpretation of the larger honor system in which he functioned, and a pursuit of unopposed power. Extreme and difficult to understand, Jackson’s moods were, as the whisky he distilled, “pure as purgatory.”<sup>82</sup>

## END NOTES

† James A. Hamilton to Martin Van Buren, February 23, 1829, Martin Van Buren Papers, Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. The line “I was born for a storm and a calm does not suit me” is attributed to Andrew Jackson by James A. Hamilton.

<sup>1</sup> James Parton, “Notebooks of Southern Trip,” January 1859, transcription by Dr. Thomas Coens, MS Am 2198, James Parton Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Gayarre, *A Sketch of General Jackson By Himself* (New Orleans: E.C. Wharton, 1857), 15, Stanley F. Horn Collection, Vanderbilt University – Special Collections & University Archives, Nashville, TN.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Clay, “Speech against President Andrew Jackson, April 30, 1834,” Amazon Digital Services, Kindle Edition. Additionally, it appears that Jackson did, indeed, submit to phrenological examination several years after Clay’s recommendation that he do so. In 1844, Noyes Wheeler outlined the phrenological characteristics of Jackson, particularly noting the firmness, self-esteem, and combativeness implied by his large occipital region and the largeness of the areas of the head associated with love, friendship, and kindness. The science has most certainly been discredited, but it was prevalent during Jackson’s era, and Wheeler’s observations about him received popular consideration. Noyes Wheeler, *The Phrenological Characters and Talents of Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams, William Henry Harrison, and Andrew Jackson* (Boston: Dow & Jackson, 1844), 24–25.

<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to make this statement about his young life, since the existing first-hand accounts of this time were interviews conducted, of course, after he achieved notoriety. They are, therefore, prone to reflective bias.

<sup>5</sup> John Bell, “Addresses on the Presentation of the Sword of Andrew Jackson to the Congress of the United States,” 1855, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Gayarre, *A Sketch of General Jackson By Himself*, 15; Horace Binney, “Speech Delivered at the Anti-Jackson Meeting, Held in the State House Yard, Philadelphia, October 20, 1832,” 1–4. Stanley F. Horn Collection, Vanderbilt University – Special Collections & University Archives, Nashville, TN.

<sup>7</sup> John Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (New York: Random House, 2008); Robert Remini, *The Life of Andrew Jackson* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009); Robert Remini, *Andrew Jackson and his Indian Wars* (New York, Penguin Books, 2001); Hendrik Booraem, *Young Hickory: The Making of Andrew Jackson* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 2001); Marsha Mullin, interview by author, Hermitage, TN, December 19, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “Andrew Jackson’s Honor,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 17, no. 1 (1997): 4.

<sup>9</sup> Two of the most notable attempts to use psychology to analyze Jackson are Michael Paul Rogin’s 2009 *Fathers & Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* and James C. Curtis’s 1976 work, *Andrew Jackson and the Search for Vindication*. Both works were largely ill received by historians due to their permissive use of psychological platitudes to explain Jackson’s behavior without supporting primary document evidence.

<sup>10</sup> Wyatt-Brown, “Andrew Jackson’s Honor,” 1–2.

<sup>11</sup> Wyatt-Brown, “Andrew Jackson’s Honor.” See the entirety of Wyatt-Brown’s article for his application of honor culture to Jackson’s life.

<sup>12</sup> William Gaston to ?, October 25, 1832, quoted in Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 168.

<sup>13</sup> Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 168.

<sup>14</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor & Violence in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 14.

<sup>15</sup> Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Meacham, *American Lion*, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Meacham, *American Lion*, 31–33.

<sup>18</sup> S. Putnam Waldo, *Memoirs of Andrew Jackson, Major-General in the Army of the United States and Commander in Chief of the Division of the South* (Hartford: J. & W. Russell, 1820), 335.

<sup>19</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Honor & Violence in the Old South*, 26.

<sup>20</sup> Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, xvii.

<sup>22</sup> Freeman’s book, *Affairs of Honor*, traces the role of honor throughout the politicking of the post-Revolutionary era and makes an argument that honor culture was not relegated purely to the South. Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Honor & Violence in the Old South*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> John Lyde Wilson, *The Code of Honor; or Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Duelling*, (Charleston: James Phinney, 1858) as published by The Gutenberg Project, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6085/6085-h/6085-h.htm> (accessed on November 15, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Honor & Violence in the Old South*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Parton, "Notebooks of Southern Trip."

<sup>28</sup> Gayarre, *A Sketch of General Jackson By Himself*, 15; Mullin, interview; Parton, "Notebooks of Southern Trip." Multiple primary and secondary sources note Jackson's virtual compulsion to go out of his way for the benefit of his friends. Notable situations this is apparent in include the Peggy Eaton affair (discussed further in the following pages), his habit of taking in and caring for orphans and other wards, and the numerous times he came to the physical aid of a friend in conflict (note this paper's opening anecdote).

<sup>29</sup> Parton, "Notebooks of Southern Trip."

<sup>30</sup> John Bell, "Addresses on the Presentation of the Sword of Andrew Jackson to the Congress of the United States," 1855, 14 & 17. Stanley F. Horn Collection, Vanderbilt University – Special Collections & University Archives, Nashville, TN.

<sup>31</sup> Remini, *Andrew Jackson and his Indian Wars*, 18; James C. Curtis, *Andrew Jackson and the Search for Vindication* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1976), 11; Booraem, *Young Hickory*, 97; Meacham, *American Lion*, 12-13. Virtually every Jackson biographer has noted the influence of this incident on the young Jackson; this is a small sampling.

<sup>32</sup> Booraem, *Young Hickory*, 109.

<sup>33</sup> Booraem, *Young Hickory*, 97-111; Parton, "Notebooks of Southern Trip"; Remini, *The Life of Andrew Jackson*, 86; Andrew Jackson to Rachel Jackson, August 5, 1814, in Moser & Macpherson, *The Papers of Andrew Jackson: Volume III, 1814-1815* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 105. Historians generally agree on Jackson's feelings toward the British, and Jackson himself wrote to his wife that he owed "Britain a debt of retaliatory vengeance" in 1814, prior to the battle of New Orleans.

<sup>34</sup> Meacham, *American Lion*, 8-13; Wyatt-Brown, *Honor & Violence in the Old South*, 64; Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 7. See Meacham for biographical information; Wyatt-Brown and Stowe for information related to the importance of blood relations in Southern honor culture.

<sup>35</sup> Mullin, interview; Booraem, *Young Hickory*, 122 & 214.

<sup>36</sup> Ann Toplovich, "Marriage, Mayhem, and Presidential Politics: The Robards-Jackson Backcountry Scandal," *Ohio Valley History* 5 (2005): 4.

<sup>37</sup> Toplovich, "Marriage, Mayhem, and Presidential Politics," 7.

<sup>38</sup> Meacham, *American Lion*, 21.

<sup>39</sup> Toplovich, "Marriage, Mayhem, and Presidential Politics," 7-9.

<sup>40</sup> Remini, *The Life of Andrew Jackson*, 18 & 23-26.

<sup>41</sup> Toplovich, "Marriage, Mayhem, and Presidential Politics," 11-12.

<sup>42</sup> Meacham, *American Lion*, 25.

<sup>43</sup> Toplovich, "Marriage, Mayhem, and Presidential Politics," 15-16; Meacham, *American Lion*, 25. Thomas Overton and Hanson Catlet, Arrangements for Duel – May 23 & 24, 1806, in Harold Moser & Sharon Macpherson, *The Papers of Andrew Jackson: Volume II, 1804-1813* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 99.

<sup>44</sup> Meacham, *American Lion*, 68-69. Several historians note that Jackson's defense of Peggy Eaton seemed inspired by the memory of his late wife. Meacham is a prime example.

<sup>45</sup> Parton, "Notebooks of Southern Trip."

<sup>46</sup> Parton, "Notebooks of Southern Trip."

<sup>47</sup> Remini, *Andrew Jackson and his Indian Wars*, 64.

<sup>48</sup> Andrew Jackson to Rachel Jackson, December 19, 1813 in Moser & Macpherson, *Papers of Andrew Jackson, Vol. II*, 494-495.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Jackson to Rachel Jackson, December 29, 1813 in Moser & Macpherson, *Papers of Andrew Jackson, Vol. II*, 515-516.

<sup>50</sup> Mullin, interview; Remini, *Andrew Jackson and his Indian Wars*, 64-65.

<sup>51</sup> Mullin, interview.

<sup>52</sup> Mullin, interview; Wyatt-Brown, *Honor & Violence in the Old South*, 64.

<sup>53</sup> Matthew Warshauer, "Andrew Jackson: Chivalric Slave Master," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 54 (2006): 227.

<sup>54</sup> Catalina Mir Satorios to Andrew Jackson, April 16, 1822 in Harold Moser, David Hoth, & George Hoemann, *Papers of Andrew Jackson, Volume V: 1821-1824* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 173-174; "Andrew Jackson," the Hermitage: Home of President Andrew Jackson, 4580 Rachel's Lane, Nashville, TN 37076, February 20, 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Warshauer, "Andrew Jackson: Chivalric Slave Master," 207. Warshauer also includes more instances of Jackson's efforts to keep or join slave families together at the Hermitage.

<sup>56</sup> Warshauer, "Andrew Jackson: Chivalric Slave Master," 207 & 209.

- <sup>57</sup> Andrew Jackson to Robert J. Chester, November 1, 1830, *The Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, vol. 4 (Washington, D.C., 1933), 198.
- <sup>58</sup> Mullin, interview.
- <sup>59</sup> “Andrew Jackson,” the Hermitage: Home of President Andrew Jackson; Mullin, interview; Warshauer, “Andrew Jackson: Chivalric Slave Master,” 219 & 221; Jillian E. Galle et al., Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery, “Building a Chronology for Domestic Slave Sites at The Hermitage,” (scientific poster presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archaeology, April 2012, Memphis, TN), [http://www.daacs.org/wp-content/uploads/GalleEtAl\\_2012.pdf](http://www.daacs.org/wp-content/uploads/GalleEtAl_2012.pdf) (accessed on February 5, 2013).
- <sup>60</sup> Mullin, interview.
- <sup>61</sup> Andrew Jackson, “Advertisement for Runaway Slave,” Sep. 26, 1804 quoted in Warshauer, “Andrew Jackson: Chivalric Slave Master,” 204-205.
- <sup>62</sup> Warshauer, “Andrew Jackson: Chivalric Slave Master,” 205.
- <sup>63</sup> “Andrew Jackson,” The Hermitage: Home of President Andrew Jackson.
- <sup>64</sup> Roeliff Brinkerhoff, *Recollections of a Lifetime* (Cincinnati: Robert Clark Company, 1900), 61.
- <sup>65</sup> “Andrew Jackson,” The Hermitage: Home of President Andrew Jackson.
- <sup>66</sup> Wyatt-Brown, “Policing Slave Society: Insurrectionary Scares,” in *Honor & Violence in the Old South*, 154-186.
- <sup>67</sup> Warshauer, “Andrew Jackson: Chivalric Slave Master,” 221.
- <sup>68</sup> Andrew Jackson to Rachel Jackson, December 11, 1823 in Harold Moser, David Hoth, & George Hoemann, *Papers of Andrew Jackson, Volume V*, 324.
- <sup>69</sup> Parton, “Notebooks of Southern Trip.”
- <sup>70</sup> Warshauer, “Andrew Jackson: Chivalric Slave Master,” 206.
- <sup>71</sup> Parton, “Notebooks of Southern Trip.”; Andrew Jackson to Colonel Hayes, December, 1796, in Sam Smith & Harriet Owsley, *Papers of Andrew Jackson, Volume I: 1770-1803* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 102, 104, & 111.
- <sup>72</sup> Parton, “Notebooks of Southern Trip.”; Meacham, *American Lion*, 37.
- <sup>73</sup> “Andrew Jackson,” the Hermitage: Home of President Andrew Jackson.
- <sup>74</sup> John Lyde Wilson, *The Code of Honor; or Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Duelling*.
- <sup>75</sup> Andrew Burstein, *The Passions of Andrew Jackson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 104-105.
- <sup>76</sup> Remini, *Andrew Jackson and his Indian Wars*, 157-161.
- <sup>77</sup> Remini, *Andrew Jackson and his Indian Wars*, 156.
- <sup>78</sup> Jackson later elaborated on a more comprehensive and reasoned justification for his invasion and argued that he had, in fact, received instructions from the President, through Congressman John Rhea, to pursue the enemy into Spanish Florida. This “argument in self-defense, [was not] fully articulate[d] until 1830-31, and may or may not be true.” Thomas Coens. Personal communication. E-mail. March 27, 2013.
- <sup>79</sup> Remini, *Andrew Jackson and his Indian Wars*, 157.
- <sup>80</sup> Remini, *Andrew Jackson and his Indian Wars*, 157.
- <sup>81</sup> John Bell’s address, “Addresses on the Presentation of the Sword of Andrew Jackson to the Congress of the United States,” 14.
- <sup>82</sup> Edward Fitzmaurice, *Andrew Jackson: A Drama in Five Acts* (Chicago: A. Schwarz Company, 1901), 15. Stanley F. Horn Collection, Vanderbilt University – Special Collections & University Archives, Nashville, TN. This short play based on the life of Andrew Jackson has but a few redeeming qualities. One of them is certainly the line describing “Jackson’s home, big as a country and . . . Jackson’s whisky, pure as purgatory.”