

*The Southern Plantation Overseer: A Re-evaluation*¹

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No figure occupied a position of greater importance in the managerial hierarchy of the southern plantation system than did the overseer. It was this agent, who, in great measure, determined the success or failure of planting operations on the larger estates devoted to the production of staple agricultural products. Among the major responsibilities of the overseer were the welfare and discipline of the slaves, the care of livestock and agricultural implements, and the production of staple and subsistence crops. He assigned gangs to work, apportioned tasks, and supervised the labor of slaves in the field. He was expected to be sufficiently acquainted with contemporary medical practices to determine whether ailing slaves needed professional attention and to treat minor complaints without outside help. To the overseer was given the responsibility for insuring that the slaves were properly fed and that they kept themselves reasonably clean. He was obliged to make periodic inspections of slave cabins and was responsible for the distribution of Negro clothing. Finally, upon the overseer depended, "to a large extent, the security of the whites against uprisings of slaves."²

Although his key importance in the plantation regime of the Old South has been acknowledged by most observers, the overseer has heretofore been subjected to rather harsh treatment by many authorities in the field of southern history.³ He has usually been portrayed as an uncouth, uneducated, dissolute slave driver, whose twin delights consisted of abusing the Negroes under his control and sabotaging the progressive goals of his employer. The myth of the general ineptness of the overseer class was created by members of the planter community and has been perpetuated by writers whose chief insight into the character of the overseer has been gained through the eyes of his employer. Most of

the available information which bears upon the management of southern plantations is contained in diaries and journals authored by members of the proprietary group and in the accounts of travelers whose principal contacts were with persons of the same group. Moreover, many researchers have erred in their evaluation of the data included in contemporary plantation records. It does not require a spectacular imagination to discern that instances of mismanagement were more likely to be recorded by disenchanted proprietors than were examples of good management.

One important factor which contributed to the unsavory reputation of southern overseers was the existence in the Lower South of a large floating population of amateur overseers, whose general lack of competence provoked a storm of abuse from cotton belt planters. The members of this group moved from one plantation to another, offering their services at lower rates than those demanded by better qualified overseers. In 1854 a writer in *The American Cotton Planter* condemned "the present loose system of doing business" which enabled incompetent overseers to gain positions and, as a consequence, to give their profession a bad name. Said he:

...there are too many individuals going about over the country seeking employment as over-

¹ This article is based upon material contained in a doctoral dissertation submitted by the author to the faculty of the University of North Carolina in August, 1961. In preparing that study, data were compiled chiefly from three types of primary sources: (1) manuscript plantation records in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; (2) manuscript census returns in the National Archives, Washington 25, D. C.; and (3) contemporary agricultural periodicals. The author is deeply indebted to Kenan Professor Fletcher M. Green of the University of North Carolina for his incisive criticism and stimulating guidance throughout the long period of research and writing.

² V. Alton Moody, "Slavery on Louisiana Sugar Plantations," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, VII (April, 1924), 209.

³ For example, see Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, 2 volumes (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1933), I, 502, 557; Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929), p. 310.

⁴ *The American Cotton Planter*, II (December, 1854), 372-373.

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seers, at reduced rates, that have neither the capacity or qualifications to discharge the responsible duties of overseer. The failure of these unworthy men, is visited not upon their own demerits, but indiscriminately upon the character of all overseers.⁴

The shortage of qualified managerial operatives was particularly acute in Mississippi. John H. Hairston, explaining his decision to retain a veteran North Carolina overseer as the manager of his uncle's plantation in Lowndes County, Mississippi, complained bitterly of the quality of overseers in that state. "I was determined," said Hairston, "not to employ a half way overseer without I should have been taken in as there is plenty of that kind in this Country, and others very scarce."⁵ Progressive Mississippi agriculturist, Martin W. Philips, experienced such great difficulty in procuring the services of competent overseers for his Hinds County plantation that he was obliged to change overseers no fewer than sixteen times in seventeen years. Typical are his experiences during the year 1856. Less than a month after engaging one, Champion, to overlook his "Log Hall" plantation, Philips had become disenchanted with his new overseer. Champion had been drunk continually, didn't "seem to desire to govern negroes," and refused to enforce plantation rules requiring Negroes to attend preaching. "He says it is a sin to *make negroes* attend, and against his conscience," recorded Philips.⁶ The overseer was discharged, but on the following day, Philips decided to allow him to remain after Champion pledged himself "to abstain from liquor while here; also to join a temperance society, if one be in Raymond."⁷ The reformed overseer retained his post until July 6, when he departed after vowing vengeance against Philips because of a misunderstanding which had developed between the two men over the ownership of a slave.⁸ Philips employed two more overseers during the same year without finding one who proved to be satisfactory.

Articulate representatives of the better class of overseers recognized the pernicious effect which the activities of such incompetents had upon the managerial profession as a whole, and they sought in vain to dissuade proprietors from engaging such ill-qualified men to manage their agricultural enterprises. Alabama overseer Daniel Coleman, charging that

the reputation of his profession had been seriously damaged by the activities of "charlatans and pretenders," urged proprietors "to give good wages to a man fully qualified, rather than to pick up at a low rate a mere pretender."⁹ Another veteran overseer complained that there were "too many farmers who do not give the subject of getting good overseers, the right bearing, and for the sake of getting a man for a few dollars less, will take a man into their employment, to manage their domestic affairs, who is wholly unfit for the place, or occupation for which they are employed." If proprietors would strive to procure competent overseers by offering them adequate pay, he continued, "our country would soon get rid of a floating population, as overseers, and our farmers would have honorable men following, what every man should look upon as an honorable occupation, which would do honor to themselves and to that class of men who are willing and expect to do their employer's justice."¹⁰

Despite such pleas, the "charlatans and pretenders" continued to find employment, and the reputations of their more competent colleagues suffered accordingly. Primary responsibility for the perpetuation of this inept group must therefore be assigned to those planters who continued to employ such persons simply because they could be engaged for a few dollars less than could more experienced and better qualified members of the overseeing profession. Unfortunately, many secondary writers have equated the entire class of southern overseers with this group of ill-paid, inexperienced, unqualified wanderers, thereby producing a stereotyped image of the southern overseer which does not accord with the facts.

A number of factors militated against the establishment and perpetuation of a more

⁴ John H. Hairston to Robert Hairston, February 13, 1838, in Peter Wilson Hairston Papers, the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

⁵ Franklin L. Riley, "Diary of a Mississippi Planter, January 1, 1840 to April, 1863," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, 14 volumes. Edited by Franklin L. Riley (Oxford, Mississippi: Printed for the Society, 1909), X, 453.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

⁸ Daniel Coleman, "A Few Words About Overseers," *The Southern Cultivator*, VII (September, 1849), 139.

¹⁰ *The Southern Cultivator*, XIX (May, 1861), 151.

competent class of overseers. In the first place, the task of directing slave labor was distasteful to many and was held in social disrepute by a large segment of the general public. In an address delivered at the first anniversary meeting of the United Agricultural Society of South Carolina in December, 1827, White-marsh B. Seabrook referred to the "degrading function" which overseers exercised "in public esteem."¹¹ As a result, the overseer was relegated to a status in southern society far beneath that of the planter and even below that of the small independent farmer.

With few exceptions, members of the proprietary class failed to accord their overseers the respect to which their responsible position entitled them and did little to encourage them to take pride in their profession. Moreover, many planters imposed demands upon their overseers which few men could reasonably be expected to meet. Few planters really appreciated the difficulties faced by those who directed their agricultural operations. A Burke County, Georgia, proprietor depicted the life of an overseer in the following terms:

Thus, master of his own actions, and responsible really to no one, he rides over the fields, and inspects the work and the stock, at his option; experiments with implements and with soils at pleasure, and always fruitlessly, since he is unaided by the knowledge of any scientific principle; and, knowing that neither his situation or his reputation will be compromised while his crop can compare with those of his neighbors, the better paid of them, sometimes indolently visits his charge in a carriage, and often keeps his dogs and his boat, and indulges in the agreeable pastimes of the chase and the rod. Happy lot is that of overseer—for a man without education generally, and born to labor. He is well paid for playing the luxurious part of gentleman, and possesses, for the time, the plantation in his care, with all its means of contributing to his comfort and pleasure.¹²

To say the least, the life of the average overseer bore little resemblance to the idyllic existence portrayed above. Overseer Garland D. Harmon, the most vocal spokesman for his class in the Lower South, complained of being continually plagued by requests from his Negroes at night. "I can't even read at night, after the toils of the day is past," declared Harmon, "without being bedeviled with 40 niggers—here after everything you can mention,"¹³ Another overseer who had no illusions regarding the onerous nature of the

duties borne by members of his profession was Moore Rawls, manager of a Louisiana sugar estate. In the following portion of a letter addressed to his absentee employer, Lewis Thompson, Rawls complains of the difficulty of managing Negroes and of the long hours of labor during the harvest season:

I think this is all I Can Say about business matters, as I have not time to write long. for I tell you we have Cold rains here more than half the time. and at Such times I have to Stay at the Sugar house all the time of nights. I left my house at 7 o'Clock last night had to Stay at the Sugar house until 5 this morning then in the field until 9 which was 14 hours and I know that there was not one minute in the whole without rain & hard too. I Cant get a negro on the place that will make the hands work in Such times, any longer than I Stand by them.¹⁴

It remained for a Georgia overseer to furnish the most forceful expression of disillusionment with his occupation, which this writer has encountered. "If there ever was or ever will be a calling in life as mean and contemptible as that of an overseer," he declared, "I would be right down glad to know what it is, and where to be found. I am just tired of it, and will quit it, as soon as I can find a better business."¹⁵

Another factor which lessened the attractiveness of the occupation was the social isolation which overseers were obliged to endure. Shunned by his employer, forbidden to fraternize with the slaves, discouraged from entertaining company, and obliged by the nature of his arduous duties to remain constantly at his post, the overseer lived in a virtual social vacuum. In May, 1858, Louisiana overseer Moore Rawls was questioned by his employer about the progress of the crops in his neighborhood. Rawls replied that he had "not been off of the plantation since the 3rd of oct. . . . So you Can judge that I Can-not

¹¹ *The Southern Agriculturist*, II (November, 1829), 521.

¹² *The Southern Cultivator*, II (June, 1844), 97.

¹³ Garland D. Harmon, "Overseers and Their Enjoyments," *The Southern Cultivator*, XVIII (May, 1860), 151.

¹⁴ Moore Rawls to Lewis Thompson, December 24, 1857, in Lewis Thompson Papers, the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

¹⁵ James Calvin Bonner, "The Plantation Overseer and Southern Nationalism as Revealed in the Career of Garland D. Harmon," *Agricultural History*, XIX (January, 1945), 2; quoting *The Southern Cultivator*, XX (1862), 287.

know much about the crops in our vicinity." "The truth is," added the harassed manager, "no man can begain [*sic*] to attend to such a business with any set of negros, without the strictest vigilance on his part."¹⁶

The confining nature of the overseer post is illustrated by an agreement of 1842 between William Lewis Sharkey, distinguished Mississippi jurist, and his overseer, Noah A. Ward. The latter, according to the agreement, was not to leave the plantation "except on pressing private business or for the benefit of the plantation, nor is he to have company with him on the plantation."¹⁷ Similarly, the overseer of wealthy Louisiana planter, William J. Minor, was placed under the following restriction: "He must not leave the plantation except on business of his Employer—He must never remain off the place at night under any circumstances without the consent or knowledge of his Employer—"¹⁸ Such restrictions were general on plantations throughout the South. Thus, the overseer, burdened with exacting duties and weighty responsibilities, was doomed to lead a lonely life among his ignorant black charges.

Inadequate pay, coupled with brevity and uncertainty of tenure, were other disadvantages which tended to discourage ambitious young Southerners from entering the overseeing profession. Although overseers received more substantial incomes than did most other white operatives on southern plantations, their wages were not commensurate with the vast responsibilities which they were called upon to shoulder. The case for the overseer was never more forcefully stated than by a Columbia, South Carolina, overseer writing in the September, 1849, issue of *The Southern Cultivator*. Said he:

For wages scarcely if at all in advance of that given to the Irish ditcher, an Overseer is obliged to manage the interests of a planter whose estate yields him from five to twenty thousand dollars a year. He has to punish and keep in order the negroes, at the risk of his life, and besides all this, he is virtually excluded from his kindred, and fellow creatures, and compelled to lead a life as secluded, in fact more so than the inmates of Sing-Sing prison, and all this is expected from him without any profit to himself whatever.¹⁹

There is little doubt that the more attractive economic opportunities afforded by other occupations seduced many competent young

agriculturists away from the overseeing profession. Similarly, the disposition of many proprietors to change overseers frequently, no matter what degree of ability the latter had displayed,²⁰ and the inclination to hire a less capable overseer if he would agree to work for lower wages than the incumbent, were other practices which retarded the development of a more distinguished group of managers. An irate Alabama overseer aired his resentment against such practices in the following terms:

This annual changing of overseers is, in my opinion, one grand cause why employers have but little confidence in them. By the time each party becomes sufficiently well acquainted to understand each other and get along well with business, another comes along in want of employment, and for fear of being turned away, offers his services for less than the one you have knows it is worth to attend to your business. Of course, the cheapest takes the place.²¹

Arguing that no man could "prove his talents as a good manager" in a single year, the Alabamian urged proprietors to "get a man and prove him, before changing for another; untie your pursestrings, and do not let money separate you from a man that pleases you in every respect but his high wages."²² Unhappily, few planters in the Southwest heeded such advice.

The lack of opportunity for advancement within the overseeing profession induced many of the best-qualified managerial functionaries to seek employment in other occupations. Although an overseer might graduate from the management of a small plantation to the overseership of a larger estate, his pay was not usually increased sufficiently to compensate him for the added duties and responsibilities of his new post. A few overseers were elevated to positions as stewards, but the opportunities for such a promotion were extremely

¹⁶ Moore Rawls to Lewis Thompson, May 9, 1858, in Lewis Thompson Papers.

¹⁷ Francis Garvin Davenport, ed., "Judge Sharkey Papers," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XX (June, 1933), 76.

¹⁸ Joseph Carlyle Sitterson, *Sugar Country: The Cane Sugar Industry in the South, 1753-1950* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1953), p. 60.

¹⁹ *The Southern Cultivator*, VII (September, 1849), 140.

²⁰ For the most candid exposition of this viewpoint, see Milton Baggs, Jr., "Changing Overseers," *The Southern Cultivator*, XVIII (July, 1860), 207.

²¹ *The America Cotton Planter*, II (May, 1854), 149.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 150.

limited. The only real chance for advancement lay *outside* the overseeing profession. Thus, the most ambitious managers aspired to positions as independent farmers and small slaveholders, thereby impeding the formation of a corps of topflight, professional overseers. Such a conclusion is confirmed by statistics derived from the state census returns, which reveal that about four-fifths of those engaged in the business of overseeing in 1860 were below the age of forty.²³

Finally, the propensity of plantation owners to bombard their overseers with a constant stream of complaints and criticism engendered an atmosphere of discouragement and low morale among members of the overseer class. The average planter was not noted for his penetrating discernment of the difficulties faced by the man who directed the labor of his slaves and supervised the cultivation of his land. No matter how zealously an overseer endeavored to fulfill the wishes of his employer, the latter usually found some point upon which to criticize him. As one discouraged Alabamian phrased it, "the poor overseer . . . is oftener blamed for not doing more than praised for what he has done. . . . There are some persons in the world that never suffer one chance to escape to say something derogatory to the reputation of poor overseers."²⁴

During the year 1857 E. A. Knowlton, manager of R. R. Barrow's vast sugar estate in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana, became increasingly concerned with the failure of his employer to proceed with dispatch in making necessary repairs to the sugar house equipment on the estate. Despite Knowlton's persistent efforts to accelerate preparations for the sugar harvest, Barrow did not hesitate to reprimand his manager when the grinding season extended through Christmas and into the new year. Early in January, 1858, the headstrong proprietor directed Knowlton "to write [in the plantation journal] and say that any man who was grinding & Roolling at this time a year he considered that such a man is no manager and has no buisness [*sic*] with a Sugar Plantation and he considered such a man nothing more than a DAM Jack ass—"²⁵ In the light of such circumstances, it is little wonder that an air of frustration and discouragement pervaded the overseer group.

Those within the overseeing profession were confronted by additional difficulties which proceeded from the very nature of their position in the plantation establishment. The overseer was pulled in two incompatible directions by the concurrent planter emphases upon production of a large staple crop, on the one hand, and upon the care of Negroes, livestock, and farm implements and buildings on the other. His plight was rendered increasingly difficult by the failure of the planter class to reach a general unanimity of opinion on this subject. An overseer might manage the interests of a proprietor who regarded the size of the crop as paramount and then find himself, in the following year, with an owner who placed primary emphasis upon long-range agricultural considerations. The fact that few overseers remained in one situation long enough to decipher the personality of their employer added to the magnitude of their predicament.

Another problem engendered by the nature of the overseer system concerned the division of managerial responsibility between planter and overseer and the consequent degree to which the activities of the latter were subjected to supervision by the owner. Understandably, few proprietors displayed much willingness to entrust to hired subordinates complete authority over agricultural enterprises which frequently represented investments amounting to many thousands of dollars. On the other hand, the overseer argued with considerable logic that he should be given control of routine matters associated with the operation of the plantation if he were to be held accountable for the results.²⁶ It is difficult to discern how this fundamental conflict between planter and overseer could have been resolved with mutual satisfaction to both principals.

²³ Computed from a survey of more than fifteen hundred overseers in seventeen sample counties throughout the South.

²⁴ *The American Cotton Planter*, II (May, 1854), 149.

²⁵ R. R. Barrow Residence Journal, January 5, 1858, in Southern Historical Collection, University of N. Carolina.

²⁶ In 1854 Mississippi planter, Martin W. Philips, and Garland D. Harmon, renowned Georgia overseer, engaged in a vigorous literary debate on this subject. See *The American Cotton Planter*, I (December, 1853), 377; II (July, 1854), 214; II (September, 1854), 281-282; II (November, 1854), 347.

In assessing the personal character and managerial acumen of southern overseers, three important factors must be considered: (1) the size of the plantation; (2) the place of residence of the owner (whether an absentee or resident proprietor); and (3) the geographical area in which the plantation was situated. There is little doubt that the best overseers tended to secure employment with the largest and most affluent planters. The management of a large agricultural establishment with its concomitant slave force clearly necessitated the employment of an experienced and capable man. Moreover, upper-class planters were able to pay salaries which were sufficiently high to attract the most talented managers. In like manner, the added responsibilities and higher pay associated with the management of absentee estates usually resulted in the procurement of able overseers for those units. In addition, the greater freedom of action accorded to overseers of absentee plantations appealed to ambitious and self-reliant managers and rendered such a post more desirable than a situation on a resident plantation of comparable size.

An analysis of the state census returns of 1860 reveals a significant differentiation in overseer characteristics between the various staple regions. As a group, overseers in the rice and sugar districts were superior to those in any other staple area. Men of considerable ability, experience, and judgment were required to manage the intricate and complicated operations associated with the production of rice and sugar and to control the large slave gangs which predominated in those regions. In addition, the higher salaries offered by affluent rice and sugar planters attracted more competent managerial personnel.²⁷

The demand for overseers of superior ability was probably greatest on the South Carolina-Georgia rice coast, where unhealthy climatic conditions induced many proprietors to leave the direction of their agricultural affairs in the hands of hired subordinates during the crucial planting and harvesting period from mid-May until mid-November. Consequently, the overseer became the most important single element in the managerial hierarchy of the rice belt.

Some veteran overseers on the South Carolina rice coast accumulated large holdings in land and slaves during the course of their managerial careers. Census returns for 1860 indicate that two Colleton District managers, Alexander J. Anderson and Nathaniel B. Adams, were astonishingly prosperous. Anderson, the overseer for A. R. Chisolm, owned thirty-one slaves and listed \$10,000 in real property and \$35,000 in personal property. The combined land and slave property of Adams, who was overseeing for James King, was valued at \$40,000. Adams owned no fewer than forty-two slaves. Spectacular as were these holdings, they did not quite match those of John J. Anderson of Prince George's Parish in Georgetown District. The latter owned forty-seven slaves and listed combined property holdings of \$45,000.²⁸ Of course, such holdings were exceptional, but they do indicate the amount of property which could be amassed by top overseers on the rice coast.

The more settled nature of society along the Atlantic seaboard had the effect of producing a more stable and permanent group of overseers than that which developed in the newer slave states of the Southwest. Overseers in the tobacco and rice areas tended to be slightly older than their counterparts in the Lower South, and a substantially greater percentage were married and owned some property.²⁹ Another important consequence of the social stability which prevailed in the older slave states was the tendency for overseers in those regions to continue in the service of a single employer for longer periods than was generally the case with those who directed agricultural operations in the Southwest.

Continuous managerial terms of ten, fifteen and even twenty years or longer were recorded by some overseers in Virginia and the Carolinas. In the course of his agricultural survey of South Carolina in 1843, Vir-

²⁷ Overseers on Governor William Aiken's vast Jehossee Island rice estate off the South Carolina coast received annual salaries ranging from \$1,800 to \$2,000 during the 1840's. Private Diary of Edmund Ruffin—Agricultural Surveyor in South Carolina, March 1, 1843, in Edmund Ruffin Papers and Books, the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; Solon Robinson in *De Bow's Review*, IX (August, 1850), 202.

²⁸ Manuscript census returns, 1860 (National Archives), Colleton District, South Carolina, Schedule 1 (volume 3), Schedule 2 (volume 3); Georgetown District, South Carolina, Schedule 1 (volume 4), Schedule 2 (volume 4).

ginia reformer Edmund Ruffin visited the Santee River rice plantation of Major Samuel Porcher and had warm praise for the latter's overseer, S. Hawksworth, who had "been in his present employment for more than 20 years." Such a term of service, remarked Ruffin, was "sufficient evidence of his great merit as a manager, as well as of his regard for his employer & faithful support of his interests."³⁰ Another outstanding South Carolina low country overseer, Jesse Belflowers, served for twenty-five years in the employ of Robert F. W. Allston, a leading Georgetown District rice planter. The highly-esteemed Belflowers managed Allston's "Chicora Wood" and adjoining plantations from 1842 until his death in 1866 at the age of fifty-nine.³¹ The longest continuous term of service by a single overseer, which the author has encountered, was that of Johnson G. Giles, who remained in the employment of North Carolina planter, Peter Wilson Hairston, from 1843 until 1876—an uninterrupted term of thirty-four years.³²

Overseers in the Lower South were frequently subjected to greater pressures by their employers, and this too tended to promote a rapid turnover of overseers in that region. Plantation owners in the seaboard slave states were, in general, well-established and financially secure. In many instances they had inherited their land and slaves and, as a result, were not oppressed by financial worries. Moreover, opportunities for the expansion of planting operations were not present in the same degree as they were in the Gulf states. On the other hand, many of the enterprising men who had acquired plantations in the fertile cotton and sugar states of the Southwest had not yet made their fortunes. Consequently, intense pressure was brought to bear upon overseers in those areas to produce large staple crops.

The overseer of a cotton plantation in the Lower South was given one year—if he were lucky—in order to prove his ability. If he did not harvest a bountiful crop during his initial year of service, he was likely to find himself looking for a new position the following year. Georgia overseer Garland D. Harmon, assaying a comparison between planting methods in Georgia and Mississippi after moving to the latter state in 1856, concluded reluc-

tantly that the cotton bale was the all-controlling motive in Mississippi.³³ Similarly, an English traveler, writing to the London *Daily News* from Mississippi in 1857, declared that "*the future of the overseer depends altogether on the quantity of cotton he is able to make up for the market.*"³⁴ Maunsel White, wealthy Louisiana merchant and planter, made his position unequivocally clear in contract negotiations with one of his overseers in the fall of 1847. In response to a query from the overseer regarding possible salary terms for the following year, White replied that he was "perfectly willing to employ you & desire you to stay but the Figure of Salary must surely & certainly correspond with the amount of gain, from the pursuit you direct. . . ."³⁵ One unfortunate result of such pressure upon the overseer was to increase the latter's tendency to disregard the welfare of the Negroes in his determination to make a good crop.

As a consequence of the factors enumerated in the first portion of this paper, southern overseers did not, as a group, measure up to the exacting standards set for them by members of the proprietary class. Nevertheless, the majority of overseers performed their duties with a surprising degree of energy and efficiency. Ironically, it was the planter class—the group most disposed to crucify the overseer—which was primarily responsible for many of the flaws which did exist in the

³⁰ A statistical analysis of more than fifteen hundred overseers based upon the state census returns of 1860 yielded the following figures:

	Upper South	Rice Coast	Sugar Parishes	Cotton Belt
Average age	34.0	33.8	33.8	30.6
Per cent married	67	66	57	46
Per cent owning personal property	56	66	40	44

³¹ Private Diary of Edmund Ruffin—Agricultural Surveyor in South Carolina, March 22, 1843, in Edmund Ruffin Papers and Books.

³² James Harold Easterby, ed., *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), pp. 25–26, 278.

³³ Peter Wilson Hairston Papers.

³⁴ Garland D. Harmon, "Georgia and Mississippi Planting," *The Southern Cultivator*, XIV (April, 1856), 111.

³⁵ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1860), p. 61. Italics in original.

³⁶ Maunsel White to James N. Bracewell, October 4, 1847, in Maunsel White Papers and Books, the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

managerial system. It was the planter who refused to pay just and adequate wages, who failed to accord his overseer the respect to which his responsible position entitled him, who constantly and capriciously changed managers, who persisted in the practice of hiring ill-qualified operatives merely because they could be secured for lower rates, and who contributed to the low morale of the overseer group by his irresponsible criticism.

Despite his deficiencies, the overseer remained a key figure in the plantation-slavery regime until the end of the antebellum period. He was, in fact, an indispensable agent in the commercial agricultural system which flourished in the Old South. The over-all success of the overseer system is conclusively demonstrated by the following developments: (1) the consolidation and expansion of the plantation slavery organization during the decades immediately preceding the Civil War; (2) the retention, despite frequent complaints, of the overseer system by the overwhelming majority of those planters whose agricultural units were sufficiently large to justify the employment of such an agent; and (3) the storm of planter protests which greeted the efforts of Confederate authorities to draft overseers into military service during the Civil War.

No greater testimony to the utility of the overseer system could be offered than that contained in a letter of November, 1861, from a South Carolina rice planter, James B. Heyward, to the Confederate military authorities in his district. Protesting against "the withdrawal of the Overseers from this neighborhood," Heyward warned that, if such action were taken, "not only individual interests but the whole community will suffer evil consequences." The South Carolina proprietor further asserted that civil control of the slave population was preferable to military control, and he characterized "the Overseer system as the best civil police system that can be invented."³⁶

In the final analysis, the conclusion seems warranted that, within the limitations imposed by their background and by the vast responsibilities with which they were burdened, the majority of southern overseers performed their duties with commendable energy, efficiency, and competence.

³⁶ Letter of James B. Heyward, November 12, 1861, in Heyward-Ferguson Papers and Books, the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; see also Dudley Avery to Major General Richard Taylor, June 2, 1864, in Avery Family Papers, the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

MERITS OF GOOD AND POOR SOIL

As to the comparative value of soil, it has been justly remarked, that too much can hardly be paid for good soil, and that even a low rent will not make a poor one profitable. The labour of cultivating a rich and a poor soil is nearly the same; while the latter requires more manure, and consequently is more expensive. Poor soils, at the same time, may have such a command of lasting manures, as lime or marl, or even of temporary sorts, like seaweed, or the refuse of fish, as may render them profitable to cultivate. It is a wise maxim in husbandry, that the soil, like the cattle by which it is cultivated, should always be kept up in good condition, and never suffered to fall below the work it may be expected to perform.

Loudon's Encyclopedia of Agriculture
(London, 1831)