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Landscape and “Cotton Culture in the U.S. South, 1865-1965”

The 2010 NEH institute “Cotton Culture in the U.S. South, 1865-1965” focused on two words: cotton and culture, with the main emphasis on culture; the culture which resulted from King Cotton and the Cotton Kingdom. While most of our attention during the five week institute centered on the history and literature relative to the cotton South, another method of assessing the culture relates to the cotton landscape.

Creating the Cotton Kingdom of the early nineteenth century involved clearing the great pine forests of the southern U.S., plowing the land, and replacing numerous plant species with only a few, principally corn and cotton, although rice and sugarcane also became important in certain subregions of the South. Two hundred years after the spread of cotton across the U.S. south, the cotton landscape, although much reduced from its nineteenth century zenith, remains in place. Just as cotton differentiated the South from the North and led to a distinctive culture, cotton also spawned a distinctive southern landscape. A further alteration of the landscape came with the spread of textile production across the land some one hundred years after the initial invasion of cotton.

So the concept of landscape offers another perspective from which to consider the “cotton culture in the U.S. South.” The word landscape itself comes from a compound of land and scape. In German, land originally referred to a plot or field rotated annually. In English land meant the earth, soil: a plowed field. By the Middle Ages the word land in English referred to a particular section of the earth’s surface. “Scape” comes to us from words like shape (at one time a composition of similar objects) and sheaf (a bundle of stalks). Combining the two compounds, land and scape (sheaf), we find that the word referred to a collection of lands or rural farm spaces. Thus, a landscape refers to a human space, a place created by human modification of the land. Such is the cotton landscape in the U.S. South.¹

Much of our understanding of the concept of landscape comes from J. B. Jackson who spent his career studying the idea of landscape. He concluded that at its most elementary level, a landscape refers to a “portion of the earth’s surface that can be comprehended at a glance.”² To many people landscape as such does not exist; it merely represents territory to speed through on the interstate between two points. Too often we ignore the landscape. We do not take the time to look at, to study what is right before our eyes. The state of Kansas presents an example. Ask most people about the landscape of Kansas and they will reply “flat.” Ask people who have travelled I-70 across Kansas what they saw and they will say things like: it’s flat; there’s nothing out there; it’s all the same; it’s boring. Such people did not really look at the landscape. They merely accepted the received wisdom that Kansas is flat. Travelling across the

state they see the landscape through this preconceived notion. The received wisdom becomes the perceived notion.

Yet the landscape through which you travel on I-70 across Kansas passes through the Flint Hills and Smokey Hills. They are hills, not mountains. But they are not flat. Compared to many other states, Kansas is relatively flat. But it is not flat. There are incredibly varied landscapes to be seen (even from the interstate), unless you accept the notion that the land is flat and do not look for yourself. Driving across Kansas and actually observing the landscape itself, you will “see” a much different landscape than you would by simply looking at the same scenes through the received wisdom that Kansas is flat.

T. S. Eliot wrote in “Little Gidding”:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

Learning to observe the landscape around us leads to a fuller understanding of the places through which we travel and even the place where we live.³

One of my interests, my reasons, for attending this institute related to the cotton landscape. What does the cotton landscape look like today? I also wanted to study the mill towns that grew up around cotton mills. Now that nearly all cotton mills have moved out of the South, what has become of the mill towns? Finally, I wondered how cotton was depicted in American art. What could artistic renderings of the cotton landscape reveal about cotton and southern history?

The power point slides that make up my institute project are not lesson plans. They are simply images, observations and ideas gleaned during the five weeks of the institute. During field trips (organized by the institute scholars and more informal, personal travels on the weekends), I observed the Georgia landscape, thinking about the material presented in readings, lectures, and discussions. Each teacher who finds something useful in my project will determine how to use the images and ideas in their classes. Individual teachers will decide whether the characteristics of the cotton landscape represented in my power point slides relates to their teaching. Individual teachers will choose those images which will aid their teaching of the history or literature of the South.

We constantly take in images every day, throughout the day. Images flood our conscience as we consider ideas. Mention a major city and a view of that city enters our mind, even if we never visited the place. When speaking of our experiences, images flash into our thoughts. Images help us understand and explain our ideas. Images illustrate our thoughts, ideas, stories, teaching. I collected images throughout the institute. I organized the images into three power

point collections: "Cotton Landscapes," "Mill House Landscapes," and "Art and the Cotton Landscape."

Cotton Landscapes

These images relate to teaching about cotton itself and the landscape which evolved as the plant helped differentiate a unique southern landscape. When teaching about the South in U.S. History and Geography classes, we naturally deal with cotton. As I traveled, I stopped and took pictures of cotton fields. Compared to the immense fields of today's mechanized, industrial agriculture, cotton fields are relatively small. This relates to the physical breakup of the concentrated (nucleated) plantations of the Antebellum Old South into the dispersed plantations of the post Civil War New South. The plantation landscape of the cotton South changed following the Civil War.

The perceived landscape of the cotton plantation represents a view of a large field worked by scores of slaves. As geographer Charles Aiken wrote: "Mention of the American South conjures vivid images, which are stronger than for any of the nation's realms with the exception of, perhaps, the American West. . . . Central to the images of the South are the plantation and a host of related features, ranging from the abuses of African American slavery to objects of mythical places. The plantation is also among the most misunderstood institutions of American history. The demise of the plantation has been pronounced many times by different scholars, but the large industrial farms survive as significant parts of, not just the South's, but the nation's agriculture."⁴

With our attention deflected by our misunderstanding of a plantation, Americans readily accepted the idea that the cotton plantation died with the end of slavery. Yet the abolition of slavery simply shifted the form of labor employed on cotton plantations and with it the landscape of the cotton plantation. Aiken thus notes our failure to comprehend the very concept of a plantation and the resulting deflection of our attention to "mythical places." To many Americans "plantation" means an antebellum scene of large cotton fields worked by scores of slaves surrounding the mansion "big house." Thus we tend to think of a plantation as an agricultural process dominated by slavery. In fact, as Aiken delineates, a plantation is an agricultural organization characterized by high capitalization; an emphasis on one commercial crop (although some subsistence crops for laborers may also be grown); a large land holding; a large labor force; centralized management; and a unique geographic form.⁵ This more comprehensive definition goes well beyond the common sense of a plantation as a place dominated by slave labor and a mansion.

Our confusion of the reorganization of the plantation with the demise of the plantation lies in several sources. Following the Civil War many planters lamented the end of their old life by referring to the demise of the plantation. Census takers reinforced this misunderstanding by

counting tenants on the old plantations as individual farms. In many instances the landholder remained the same before and after the Civil War. The workers often also remained the same. The relationship between landholder and worker changed, however, just as did their names: master and slave became landholder and tenant. Freedmen following the Civil War sought more control over their lives to reflect their new status. One method of accomplishing this freedom was to move out of the old nucleated settlement pattern of the slave quarters and into a separate cabin on the land which the new tenant now worked on a sharecropping basis for the landholder. The workers on the new, post Civil War plantation scattered their homes throughout the plantation resulting in a dispersed settlement pattern in contrast to the nucleated pattern of the old, slave dominated plantation.⁶

In a widely cited 1881 article on “A Georgia Plantation,” David Barrow described the change in the plantation landscape. He pointed out that “looking at the plot of the plantation, ‘as it was,’ all the negro houses were close together, forming ‘the quarters.’” Following emancipation the freedmen, however, sought a new arrangement: “each man feeling the very natural desire to be his own ‘boss,’ and to farm to himself.” The resulting landscape “has been so changed that the place would now hardly be recognized by one who had not seen it during the past sixteen years.” Barrow included a pair of much reproduced maps of his family’s plantation which visually depict the change in the plantation landscape.⁷ This plantation landscape endured well into the twentieth century, as evidenced by a 1940 description: “The plantation which the visitor in the South sees today, is generally an estate, with a group of little farms, cultivated on shares. Dilapidated cabins are sprinkled over the estate, one to each tract or farm. . . . This general and typical special pattern of the present-day Southern plantation, [is] a special pattern quite different from that of slavery.”⁸

The plantation itself did not disappear. The spatial arrangement of the plantation, the plantation landscape, contributed to the confusion. The plantation remained. A new spatial arrangement appeared which reflected the changed relationship between the landholder and workers. No longer did the workers live in a nucleated settlement reflective of the days of slavery. Now the workers on a plantation lived scattered throughout the plantation in homes near the fields which they worked. The plantation (landholding) remained, but the land worked by the plantation laborers were now divided into individual “farms” which together still constituted the entire plantation. The plantation landscape changed, while the plantation itself remained. The change in the plantation remains today in the smaller fields of the cotton landscape.

Notes

¹ See John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984, pp. 3-9.

² Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, p. 8.

³T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1943, 1971, p. 59.

For more ideas relative to “landscape” and traveling to observe landscapes see:

John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984, pp. 3-9.

John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994.

Michael Kimmelman, “The Art of the Pilgrimage,” in Michael Kimmelman, *The Accidental Masterpiece: On the Art of Life and Vice Versa*, New York: Penguin, 2005, pp. 175-209.

Erin Hogan, *Spiral Jetta: A Road Trip through the Land Art of the American West*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

⁴ Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, p. xi.

⁵ Aiken, *Cotton Plantation*, pp. 5-7.

⁶ Aiken, *Cotton Plantation*, pp. 9-10.

⁷ David C. Barrow, Jr., “A Georgia Plantation,” *Scribner's Monthly*, vol. 21 issue 5, March 1881. Available at: <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/Emancipation/ContViews/barrow.html>

⁸ Aiken, *Cotton Plantation*, p. 17.

ART AND THE COTTON LANDSCAPE

THE PLANTATION LANDSCAPE IN AMERICAN ART

We are literally surrounded by landscapes. As a “portion of the earth’s surface that can be comprehended at a glance,” the landscape we observe at any moment depends on our point of view. Landscape in art presents a different perspective. In a landscape painting, the artist selects and creates the scene, the image we see. When we view a landscape painting, we see the scene the artist wanted us to see. Landscape painting did not become a part of American art until the early nineteenth century. The southern cotton plantation did not become a subject until the late nineteenth century. Even then few paintings dealt with plantations.¹

In the most comprehensive study of landscape paintings of southern plantations, anthropologist John Michael Vlach explains that such works depicted their scenes differently before and after the Civil War. Antebellum plantation art focused on depicting the planter’s house. These paintings documented a particular place, a specific landscape. Usually seen from below, the viewer looks up at the house, placing the planter on a higher plane. Missing from such paintings were the slaves who made the plantation and the planter’s house possible. Hiding the blacks who provided the foundation of such scenes made these antebellum works of art “documents of denial,” according to Vlach.²

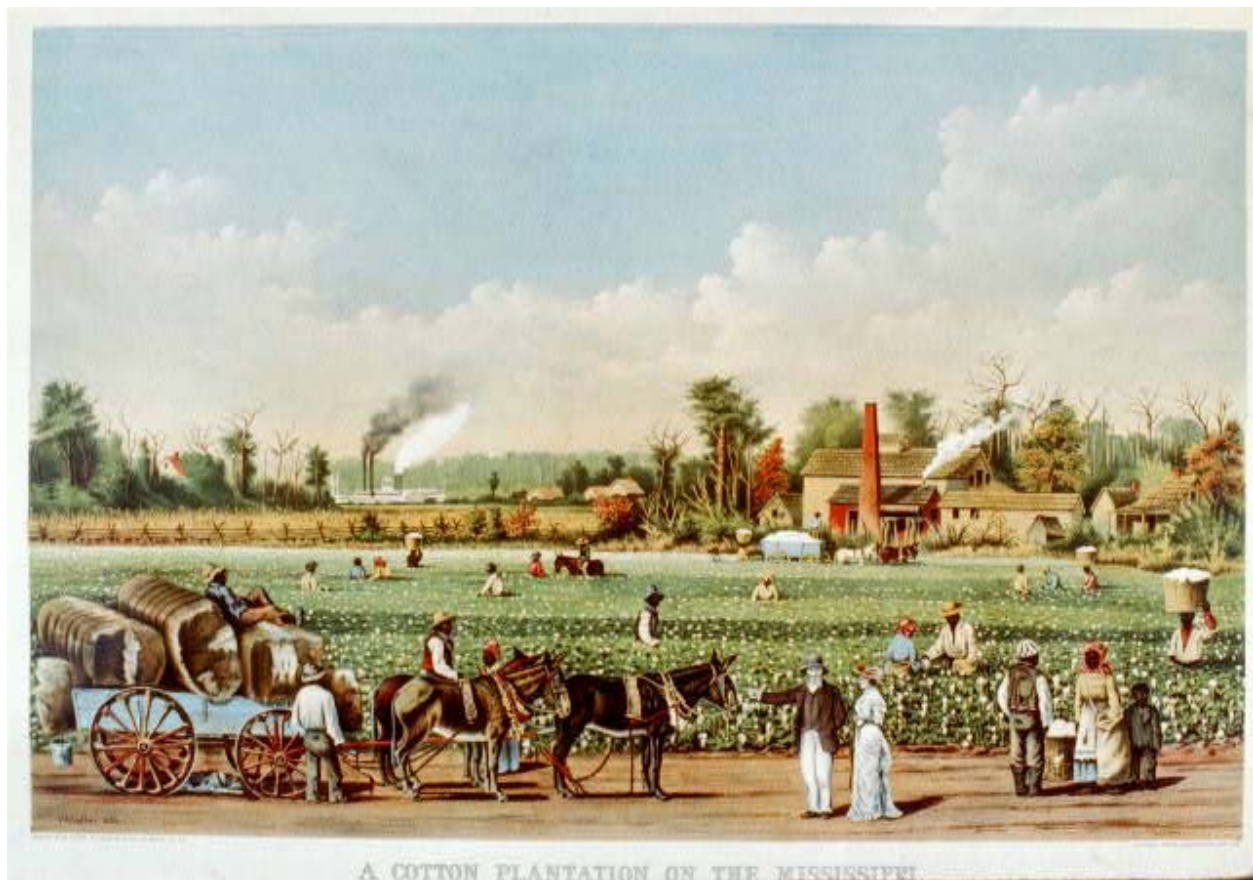
Following the Civil War, artists depicted plantation landscapes with a nostalgic theme. Rather than documenting the postwar cotton landscape, these paintings instead presented symbolic scenes looking back to the supposed simpler world which became codified in the myth of the Lost Cause. As C. Vann Woodward pointed out: "One of the most significant inventions of the New South was the 'Old South'—a new idea in the eighties, and a legend of incalculable potentialities." More recently David Blight has noted that "that virtually all major spokespersons for the Lost Cause could not develop their story of a heroic, victimized South without the images of faithful slaves and benevolent masters." Thus, artists painting cotton landscape scenes following the Civil War participated in the creation of the "Old South" by depicting scenes giving visualization to one of the main themes of the Lost Cause myth: a supposed idyllic period before the war. Blight provides a telling example of this in a quote from Jefferson Davis' memoirs: "Their servile instincts rendered them contented with their lot, and their patient toil blessed the land of their abode with unmeasured riches. Their strong local and person attachment secured faithful service . . . Never was their happier dependence of labor and capital on each other."³

William Aiken Walker painted the most well known southern cotton plantation scenes following the Civil War. His pictures represent genre paintings more so than depictions of specific plantations. Their formulaic quality becomes apparent in Walker's technique and composition. His cotton landscapes are divided into three parts. He painted the lower portion with sienna for the ground, the upper section blue for sky, and the middle green for the cotton field. Finally he added people, cotton, buildings and other details. He also usually had three groupings: the owner/overseers in the foreground, blacks working cotton in the middle, and buildings and rivers in the background.

Walker was born in Charleston, SC in 1838. He fought for the Confederacy, was wounded at the battle of Seven Pines and served until late 1864. After the war he began a career of living at southern resorts where he could sell his pictures to wealthy tourists. Until his death in 1921, he traveled through North and South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana, composing hundreds of paintings, many depicting blacks in the South.⁴

Walker's works fall into the category of genre painting: scenes of everyday life. His plantation paintings consist of landscape paintings depicting everyday life on idealized southern plantations. Yet, as one art historian has noted: "Walker recreated an 'everyday' life that never was: Walker depicted blacks as stereotypical happy slaves on antebellum Southern plantations for viewers who wanted to maintain the old racial hierarchies even to the extent of rewriting the past."⁵ Just as a landscape depicts a "portion of the earth's surface that can be comprehended at a glance," the landscape we observe at any moment depends on our point of view. So a genre painting creates a scene which the artist wants us to see. For while a genre scene appears as an innocent depiction of an everyday scene comprehended at a glance, who is represented and what activities are depicted depend on "cultural phenomenon that develop in certain economic and social circumstances and meets social needs peculiar to a specific audience." "Genre painting in the United States might have been about ordinary people," Elizabeth Johns notes, "but it was not about ordinary matters."⁶

The 1883 painting *A Cotton Plantation of the Mississippi*, by William Aiken Walker, depicts a cotton landscape following both the Civil War and Reconstruction. In 1884 Currier & Ives issued a print of this work, making it available to a national audience. Thus, we may view this painting as an iconic representation of the post Civil War cotton landscape. Vlach provides an extensive description of the scene: “A Cotton Plantation on the Mississippi presents a wide cotton field under a pleasant cloud-filled sky. Three separate groups of figures stand on a dirt road in the foreground. The plantation owner and his wife are not only centermost, but they also stand slightly forward of the two groups of black workers, three cotton pickers who gather to their right and three men to their left are attending to a mule-drawn wagon. The cotton field spreads across the middle of the picture from edge to edge. Painted so that the rows of plants run across the picture plane, the field is rendered as a wide sea of green plants flecked with white bits of cotton. Here sixteen diminutive figures, waist deep in their task, are shown either gathering the bolls of fiber into large baskets or carrying loads of harvested cotton on their heads to a wagon in the distance. A man on a horse at the back of the field, presumably the overseer, superintends their work. Behind the field stand the plantation's buildings. The steam-powered cotton gin with its large brick chimney is particularly prominent, while the other structures—most of them apparently houses for the overseer, field hands, and possibly the owner—blend with the trees. Through a gap in the vegetation, Aiken provides a glimpse of a passing steamboat. The three parallel settings seen here—detailed figures in the foreground, cotton field in the middle ground, and a background of buildings—constitute the organizing formula that Walker employed in all of his known plantation landscapes.”⁷



A COTTON PLANTATION ON THE MISSISSIPPI

What do the elements of this painting depict? The plantation owner and wife in the center, a gang of blacks working in the fields with a man on a horse superintending the work. This is a painting of an Antebellum cotton plantation, an Antebellum cotton landscape presented as a post Civil War scene. Antebellum plantation scenes were of specific places, usually plantation mansions with few, if any blacks included. This post war scene is an idealized landscape. It presents the New South cotton landscape as a scene from the Old South. As Woodward noted that the Old South was a creation of the New South and Blight added that such depictions of the Old South required the presence of benevolent masters and faithful slaves, so the idealized cotton landscape of the New South presented not a rendering of a specific cotton landscape, but instead a scene mirroring the idealized characteristics of the Old South.

While slave labor represented a defining feature of the Old South plantation, few blacks appeared in Antebellum plantation scenes. The omission of blacks from such paintings provided a subtle indication of white superiority, of white domination, of the Old South plantation landscape. Following the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, Vlach notes “what these planters wished for was a return to the old days, when their orders were followed without question or complaint.” Thus, the depiction of black labor became an important element in post Civil War plantation landscape scenes. Such landscapes required the depiction of black laborers; but shown as a reflection of the old days, the old ways. Whites and blacks could now be shown together, with the whites overseeing and directing unquestioning, uncomplaining black workers. As Vlach notes: “Postbellum paintings that presented large gangs completing their assigned tasks with only minimal supervision were functionally expressions of planters’ longing. They supported a nostalgic vision in which black subservience, a key element of the old social order, was ostensibly restored. Intended more as symbolic evocations than as records of individual estates, these post-Emancipation paintings assumed all white southerners as their primary audience.”⁸

Antebellum plantation landscapes depicted specific places, while Civil War plantation landscapes represented an idealized landscape. This idealized landscape bore more relationship to the peaceful Old South scene of subservient gang labor which the Lost Cause myth transferred to the Antebellum era than to the actual dispersed, small farms characteristic of the sharecropping of the post Civil War period. Early plantation scenes presented a realistic depiction of a landscape by excluding black slaves. Post Civil War plantation scenes presented an idealized depiction of a landscape by including black laborers, but in a subservient manner.

As noted earlier, historians C. Vann Woodward and David Blight have pointed out that the “faithful slaves and benevolent masters” of the Old South were a creation of the Lost Cause Myth of the New South. These elements appear clearly in Walker’s *A Cotton Plantation of the Mississippi*. This painting/print represents an interesting document of the evolution of the Lost Cause Myth. The persistence of the myth can be seen in the two analyses of this painting in the works cited above. Compare the descriptions of the work by Trovaioli and Vlach below.

Walker’s painting offers many opportunities for teaching about the cotton South in the decades following the Civil War and up to the current day. Students could write descriptions about the painting

and compare their observations with descriptions of the New South and the Lost Cause Myth in the works cited above. Many U.S. History textbooks have sections dealing with these two ideas, and the painting offers a document to teach about the “text” by incorporating a visual image from the period itself. Using the ideas from Charles Aiken’s *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War* and David C. Barrow’s 1881 essay, "A Georgia Plantation," students could use their descriptions of the painting and compare them to the actual landscape of dispersed farms explained in those works. (These ideas and works are discussed and cited in the accompanying essay “Landscape and Cotton Culture in the U.S. South, 1865-1965.”) The descriptions by Trovaioli and Vlach below could be used to discuss both the contrast between the ideal landscape of the cotton plantation following the Civil War and the actual landscape. These two descriptions could also lead to a discussion of the persistence of the Lost Cause Myth

Trovaioli, *Walker, Southern Genre Painter*

Walker found the forgotten man. He portrayed the black cottonfield worker, obviously the least popular subject at the time, with dignity and realism, as did no other American artist of the period. . . . He found in those newly freed slaves a group of incredibly poor people, not in the least sorry for themselves but proudly trying to adjust to a new ay of life. None of his subjects show hostility or bitterness. . . . Walker left behind a most meticulous record of rural life in the Southern United States as it existed in the 1860's to the early 1900's.

Walker was probably portraying a culture simply as he saw it, with no conscious intention to editorialize or philosophize about the political, cultural, or social conditions which gave rise to what he saw. Walker was neither portraying oppression by his attention to rural rustic Negroes at work, nor was he celebrating oppression through his subjects' apparent contentment in the rural setting.⁹

Vlach, *The Planter's Prospect*

These images of toil, which focused on the labor of black tenants or sharecroppers, recalled an earlier time, when enslaved blacks had performed these tasks. Postbellum paintings that presented large gangs completing their assigned tasks with only minimal supervision were functionally expressions of planters' longing. They supported a nostalgic vision in which black subservience, a key element of the old social order, was ostensibly restored. Intended more as symbolic evocations than as records of individual estates, there post-Emancipation paintings assumed all white southerners as their primary audience.

The paintings created after the war sanctioned ingrained racial hierarchies with reassuring portrayals that depicted the former era as one of certifiable white superiority. The aesthetic qualities of these paintings should not mask the social functions that they performed.¹

NOTES

¹ John Michael Vlach, *The Planter's Prospect: Privilege and Slavery in Plantation Paintings*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002, pp. 133-35; Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*, New York: Knopf, 1997, pp. 137-41; Samuel M. Green, *American Art: A Historical Survey*, New York: The Ronald Press, 1966, pp. 168, 248-50.

² Vlach, *Planter's Prospect*, pp. 1-3, 5, 11; John Michael Vlach, "Perpetuating the Past: Plantation Landscape Paintings Then and Now," in Angela D. Mack and Stephen G. Hoffius, Eds., *Landscapes of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2008, pp. 16-29.

³ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877-1913*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951, 1971, pp. 154-55; David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: the Civil War in American Memory*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001, p. 260)

For the Lost Cause see:

William C. Davis, *Cause Lost: Myths and Realities of the Confederacy*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996.

Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, Eds., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000.

David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: the Civil War in American Memory*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001, pp. 78-84, 258-72.

⁴ August P. Trovaioli and Roulhac B. Toledano, *William Aiken Walker: Southern Genre Painter*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972, pp. 3, 13-14, 16-20, 26, 63; Vlach, *The Planter's Prospect*, pp. 133-35, 139.

⁵ Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991, pp. 201-02.

⁶ Johns, pp. xi, 2.

⁷ Vlach, p. 135

The painting/print may be viewed at:

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/history/carltodl/276/hist276.htm>

⁸ Vlach, pp. 2-3.

⁹ Trocaioli, *William Aiken Walker*, pp. x, 4, 6.

¹⁰ Vlach, pp. 2-4.