

Between Professionalism and Polemics: Historian Frank L. Owsley Writes his South

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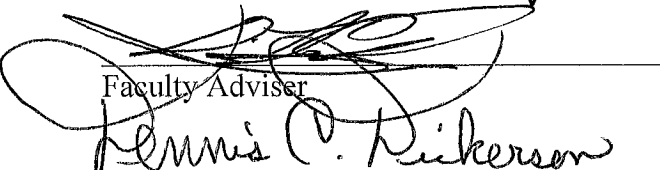
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On the basis of this thesis defended by the candidate on 4/27/12
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This thesis is dedicated to Vanderbilt University, for seeing my potential and investing in my education, and to my parents, Sara and Masoud Masghati, for their unconditional love and support.

Introduction

“Facts are supposed to be facts, but they have a queer way of arranging themselves so that one historian may see them one way, another historian another way. Some facts which seem obscure and dim to one may shine clear and bright to another. No one sees them all in their true, clear light.” With this introduction, historian Frank Lawrence Owsley began his address “A Southerner’s View of Abraham Lincoln” at the May 1946 meeting of the Illinois Historical Association. “I am looking at a portrait of Lincoln in a room with a Southern exposure,” he continued. “The Northerner has the light coming from a Northern window. Neither of us sees Lincoln as he really was.” Using this colorful metaphor, Owsley illustrated a problem that every historian must face, the “emotional reaction to every human situation.” When “too much in the ascendancy,” these reactions invariably lead to accusations of bias, “sometimes more elegantly spoken of as ‘point of view.’”

As Owsley saw it, the northern view of Lincoln was a “Lincoln cult bordering on pagan deification,” which would eventually elicit a reaction against him in the North. “The Southern historians as a rule occupy a middle ground from which they will not have to retreat.”¹ This overt confrontation of personal bias, including the recognition of his point of view in the very title of the address, was probably Owsley’s response to his critics. Owsley implied in his introduction the advantage that a moderate, almost detached, “southern exposure” gave to his point of view of Lincoln. Throughout his career, Owsley’s critics frequently called his level of objectivity into question for his perceived lack of this quality of detachment. To explore this idea further, the significance of “objectivity” to Frank Lawrence Owsley and to all American historians working in the early twentieth century warrants some discussion.

¹ Frank L. Owsley, *The South: Old and New Frontiers, Selected Essays of Frank Lawrence Owsley*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1969), 223.

From its inception, the American historical profession has centered around and, in many ways, depended upon the notion of “objectivity.” Borrowed and misinterpreted from the German phrase *Wissenschaftliche Objektivität*, the notion of objectivity as construed by American historians, many of whom studied in Germany, was initially that a “scientific” approach needed to be taken to history, one which was as rigidly empirical and purely neutral as an approach to the natural sciences.² Historian Peter Novick explains in his extensive study of objectivity and the American historical profession, “‘objective science,’ the ‘scientific fact,’” “was never more of a cult” in the United States than around the turn of the twentieth century, and “no group was more prone to scientific imagery, and the assumption of the mantle of science, than the historians.”³ Employing this approach, early historians saw themselves as “brick-makers,” carefully crafting historical bricks from the facts they uncovered, which they could then combine into an unchallengeable edifice of historical knowledge. In the eyes of the early professional historians, obtaining this level of “objectivity” meant also distancing the new profession from “the crimes and vices of amateur history.” These founding notions remained central criteria for professional historians until the 1960s, though the implementation of such criteria was challenged, revised, and interpreted in a variety of ways well before the 1960s.⁴

In his substantial work *That Noble Dream*, Novick divides the evolution of the American historical profession and the objectivity question into four main parts. Part one covers from the founding of the profession in the 1880s to World War I, and it establishes objectivity as the “central norm” of professionalized history. The second and third parts deal with the interwar

² *Die Wissenschaft* can be defined as “the collective activity of scholars in gathering and interpreting information. Also, “‘scholarship,’ ‘learning’ and rarely ‘science.’” Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 24.

³ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 31, 33.

⁴ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 45.

years through the mid-1960s. They cover the initial introduction of ‘historical relativism’ to the profession and the establishment of an “objectivist synthesis, trivializing the relativist critique by partially incorporating it.” The final part deals with the historical profession since the 1960s, outlining the problematic nature of historical objectivity in the present and the unresolved friction that it continues to cause.⁵

Novick’s research involved an extensive survey of hundreds of American historians and succeeds in sketching the contours of professional attitudes in relation to the objectivity question, but Novick admits himself that this method, though a useful way to establish generalizations, prevented him from providing “rounded and nuanced treatments” of the historians he surveyed. This thesis aims to explore the evolution of the American historical profession using the opposite approach- with the careful investigation of one historian of interest, Frank Lawrence Owsley.

As a historian, Frank Lawrence Owsley is an exceptional candidate for this kind of investigation. He was a successful scholar and prolific educator of the next generation of historians. He produced three major works that contributed to revisionist scholarship on the Confederacy and antebellum South, *State Rights and the Confederacy*, *King Cotton Diplomacy*, and *Plain Folk of the Old South*, all of which were mostly well-received for their revolutionary conclusions and, in the case of *Plain Folk*, for its innovative methodology. While writing his major works, Owsley was a tenured professor at Vanderbilt University, where he taught for almost 30 years. He instructed many undergraduate courses, helped establish and coordinate the graduate program, and directed over 40 doctoral theses. As noted by a former student, Owsley

⁵ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 16.

was invaluable for “his nurture of many younger historians now holding chairs throughout the nation and in turn perpetuating their master’s discipline in their own students.”⁶

Aside from these professional credentials, Owsley is a worthwhile subject for investigation as a result of the unapologetically white supremacist, anti-Yankee views he defended with his research. Owsley is probably best known for his enthusiastic participation in the Southern Agrarian movement, for which he wrote and published many nonacademic essays that he received much criticism for as a historian. Owsley wrote as a member of this movement during a time of intense debate within the profession: should historians insulate themselves from current events completely to maintain their most invaluable “objectivity,” or do historians have an obligation to make their research and findings relevant to the world they live in? Not only did Owsley allow his opinions to be public knowledge, he was also a founding member and staunch proponent of the Southern Agrarians. Even within his purely academic works, however, Owsley tended to include conclusions or chapters that heavily asserted his personal views that, to historians with conflicting views, read more like unsubstantiated, brash accusations than academic findings.

Owsley therefore serves as a particularly useful case study because his life and works illustrate well the tensions between the various elements influencing him and his respective goals as a historian, Agrarian, and professor. There was tension between his activities as a professional historian, as a man with national ambition to contribute to the movement of history away from amateurism and towards professionalism, and his Agrarian identity, a man bound by his sectionalist loyalties and belief in traditionalism.⁷ His goals for his teaching and the

⁶ M. E. Bradford, “What We Can Know for Certain: Frank Owsley and the Recovery of Southern History,” *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 78, no. 4 (Autumn, 1970), 664-669.

⁷ For more on the professionalization of history in American see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*. For more on southern historians and

scholarship he produced conflicted directly with the views and goals of the institution from which he was conducting his research, Vanderbilt University. While Owsley set his sights on promoting local history and what he believed to be the southern cause, an expanding Vanderbilt University sought to become a nationally respected institution on a par with elite northern schools. Meanwhile, Owsley practiced history during a time in which the profession was developing rapidly but failing to recreate the consensus of its members upon which a universally defined “objectivity” depended.

Even a cursory glance at this outspoken southerner’s activities within the American historical profession raises several significant questions: in what ways did Owsley meet, exceed, and fall short of the vision and goals of the American historical profession? What role did the question of objectivity play in influencing white southern historians such as Owsley, and how did it compare to the role of sectional loyalties? Finally, how did Owsley reconcile his professionalism and his Agrarianism both during and after the movement? Owsley’s professional life offers a window into these and other issues concerning the evolution of the profession. This thesis explores the development of Owsley’s career and the apparent conflicts in his different works, namely those he produced for his career as a professional historian and those he produced for the Agrarian cause, to shed light on questions surrounding objectivity in the American historical profession, specifically in relation to the field of southern history.⁸

southern identity see Michael O’Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941* and *Rethinking the South: Essays in Intellectual History*, Michael O’Brien, “Intellectual History and the Search for Southern Identity,” 212-214. For more on the emergence of professional southern history and southern identity see Bethany Leigh Johnson, “Regionalism, Race, and the Meaning of the Southern Past: Professional History in the American South, 1896-1961” (PhD diss., Rice University, 2001).

⁸ See Carl Becker, “What is Historiography?” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Oct., 1938), 20-28. He explains on page 25 that historians should “regard historiography more simple, more resolutely, as a phase of intellectual history; to forget entirely about the contributions of historians to present knowledge and to concentrate wholly upon their role in the cultural pattern of their own time.”

The thesis contains a chapter tracing the development of southern history as an academic discipline during the professionalization movement of history in America, followed by three chronological chapters that each deal with a period of Owsley's life. Chapter Two establishes Owsley in the emerging discipline, and it explores his first two major works, *State Rights in the Confederacy* and the product of his Guggenheim research *King Cotton Diplomacy*, to investigate Owsley's devotion to writing southern history as an avowed professional historian. Chapter Three deals with Owsley and his association with the Agrarian movement, and this chapter develops fully the conflicts apparent in Owsley's career as a historian and an Agrarian. Though these tensions are rooted at the beginning of Owsley's career, they fully developed once Owsley dedicates himself to the Agrarian cause. Chapter Four further explores the tension in Owsley's work by examining how he attempts to maintain legitimacy as a "scientific" historian in the legacy of his Agrarian activities. At this point in his career Owsley completely immerses himself in a project which affirmed his dedication to professional history, and he published several essays as *Plain Folk of the Old South* based on the research project in 1949, the same year Owsley finally left Vanderbilt. Along with an analysis of this research project, this chapter also explores Owsley's relationship with the newly formed Southern Historical Association.

Chapter I

“In what could they boast?”: Southern History after the Civil War

Before the movement to professionalize the discipline, the only people who practiced history full-time were ‘gentleman amateurs,’ who could do so because of their high income and high status. These historians wrote for a general reading public, and their goal was to convey a message to this broad audience that they believed to be vitally important. The success and critical reviews these histories received were determined by the free market, and few amateur historians actually made a living from practicing history. Because there was no real effort on the part of these amateurs to hide their authorial voice in their works and because there was no standard methodology in their research, professional historians agreed to distance themselves from amateur history completely. With the institutionalization of historical work, history became a full-time occupation, and the “consensual judgement” of this institutionalized profession determined the success of an academic historian’s career and works.

As Novick argues, the professionalization of history changed the historian from a “privileged, avocational, or entrepreneurial” independent to “that of a salaried employee of bureaucratic organization.” In this way, a Ph.D. in history itself did not “authorize” the practice of history. In order to have the facilities, resources, and time to write history, a historian had to gain employment at a college or university. For this reason, the professionalization of historical writing is intimately tied to the professionalization of the teaching of history. Furthermore, the spread of professional history to southern scholars and the development of southern history as a legitimate branch of the profession depended on the existence of institutions to train students in both writing and teaching.⁹

⁹ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 50, 54, 64.

The advancement of historical study was slow to spread to the South, largely due to the lack of needed infrastructure for secondary institutions after the Civil War. The existence of intellectual centers in the North in which southern scholars were trained in “objective” historical writing before returning home to teach, such as Herbert Baxter Adams’s seminar at Johns Hopkins University and William Dunning’s seminar at Columbia University, greatly facilitated the trickle of this discipline into the South. A branch of southern history developed, which aimed to take the scientific approach championed by the American historical profession and apply it to southern historical subjects, allowing southern historians writing about the South the perceived level of objectivity needed to have their work accepted and incorporated into national narratives. These developments directly impacted the study of southern history at Vanderbilt University and shaped the department in which Owsley would conduct his life work.

Northern Trained Southern Historians

“If the South seemed slow in initiating movements of progress after the Civil War, it was because of the great depth to which she had sunk because of that war.” As J. H. Kirkland, Chancellor of Vanderbilt University, argued in a 1914 speech at the University of Pennsylvania, “The condition of colleges and universities at the close of the Civil War was one of absolute desolation.” Colleges, when they existed, usually had to provide the equivalent of high school level work.¹⁰ For the most part, even the South’s oldest colleges such as William and Mary did not have the necessary resources to recover in the postwar period. In 1896, fifteen Southern states and Washington, D. C. together could only claim about 100 institutions of higher

¹⁰ *Southern Education and Southern Thought* manuscript, James H. Kirkland Papers, Box 14, Folder 30, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

education, many of which were nearly bankrupt.¹¹ When Vanderbilt University initiated the organization of the Southern College Association in 1895, the Association proposed a very low standard for southern institutions to adopt, which only six institutions were able to meet.¹² With a lack of endowments, destroyed infrastructure, and an absence of academic equipment, higher education in the South lagged far behind northern institutions in their standards for 25 years. Kirkland noted, "It is from this standpoint of utter collapse in material resources and in educational standards that southern institutions began the struggle upward."¹³

With a critical need for financial assistance, many southerners recognized the necessity of northern aid. The Conference for Education in the South, which was established in 1898 under Robert Ogden of New York, supported southern public schools by establishing cooperation in educational activities between the North and South. Kirkland speculated that from 1900 to 1914, as a direct result of the Conference, the value of public school property in the South probably increased four fold. Similar cooperation emerged for secondary education. By May 1912, the General Education Board of New York gave a total of \$2,777,500 to thirty-four southern institutions. The Carnegie Foundation worked to improve the standards of institutions in the South and gained tangible results.¹⁴ However, even with aid from the North, the rebuilding of colleges and universities in the South was a slow process, and the lack of adequate institutions for secondary education in the South immediately after the war was a major factor impeding the teaching of history of any kind in this region. As a rule, historical work in southern colleges and

¹¹ David D. Van Tassel, "The American Historical Association and the South, 1884-1913," *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 23, no 4 (Nov., 1957), 470.

¹² *Southern Education*, Kirkland Papers.

¹³ *A Brief Sketch of the Origin and Work of Vanderbilt University* manuscript, James H. Kirkland Papers, Box 13, Folder 9, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

¹⁴ *Southern Education*, Kirkland Papers, "Up to 1900 on and later many of the best known colleges in the South had been content with admission requirements amounting to six or eight units. All of these now require as many as fourteen units."

universities was joined with another sometimes unrelated subject, and secondary institutions usually had only one faculty member spread across these two subjects.

Due to the state of colleges and universities in the South, it is not surprising that the first major developments in the teaching and study of southern history after the Civil War took place at Johns Hopkins University, founded in 1876 with a generous endowment as “an academic haven for students from the impoverished South.”¹⁵ To fill this role, the University offered fellowships aimed at residents of Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, which allowed it to successfully attract high school graduates from the South for its programs of study. Johns Hopkins was also the site of a flourishing collection of source materials dealing with southern subjects and one of very few universities with faculty members dedicated solely to the teaching of history. In 1896, the University had one professor of American and institutional history, two associates in history, and various other history lecturers.¹⁶

The program of study there was led by Herbert Baxter Adams, a German-trained historian sympathetic to the problems of conducting research in the South. Over the course of his teaching career at Johns Hopkins, Adams directed a large number of southern students in their dissertations, and he was one of the first history instructors in America to practice the “seminar or laboratory method” of teaching. At the heart of his history program was the “Seminary of History and Politics,” and Adams expanded the program to incorporate a “southern history room.” Long before Johns Hopkins offered a formal course in southern history, students of Adams’s seminar investigated, published, and lectured on southern topics, and their interest in the study of southern history burgeoned. As Wendell Holmes Stephenson, the “original historian

¹⁵ Wendell Holmes Stephenson, *Southern History in the Making: Pioneer Historians of the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 54.

¹⁶ Stephen B. Weeks, “On the Promotion of Historical Studies in the South,” *Publications of the Southern History Association*, vol. 1 (Washington D. C., 1897), 22-27.

of historians,” records in his 1955 *The South Lives in History*, “By the beginning of the new century fifty-three Southerners trained at Hopkins had published more than three hundred books, monographs, and shorter pieces on the South.” A majority of these Adams-trained southerners returned to the South after earning their doctorates to practice the virtues they learned from Adams’s seminar: teaching courses focusing on local and regional history, gathering source materials for libraries and archives, writing about southern topics, and creating publication mediums for these types of studies.¹⁷

Adams died in 1901, and another passionate and influential scholar, William A. Dunning, was offered the position at Johns Hopkins as Adams’s successor. Dunning chose instead to begin his own seminar at Columbia University in New York City, which dominated the training of southern scholars in historical fields for the next twenty years. Dunning’s program at Columbia was soon known for its doctoral students’ research on and subsequent revising of Civil War and Reconstruction history. A majority of Dunning’s seminar students, too, returned to the South to promote southern history through the same activities as Adams’s students. As a result of these seminars, the study of southern history and of history in the South proliferated in the first few decades of the 20th century. By 1913, six southern institutions offered courses in southern history. By 1920, the number of institutions grew to between 30 and 40, and by 1940, about 100 higher learning institutions offered these courses.¹⁸

The American Historical Association and Southern History

¹⁷ Wendell Holmes Stephenson, *The South Lives in History: Southern Historians and Their Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1955), 1-2. Bethany Leigh Johnson, “Regionalism, Race, and the Meaning of the Southern Past: Professional History in the American South, 1896-1961” (PhD diss., Rice University, 2001), 6-7. Stephenson, *The South Lives*, 3. For a detailed list of influential writers and professors of southern history see Stephenson, *Southern History in the Making*, 65-68.

¹⁸ Stephenson, *The South Lives*, 6, 22.

Along with the relationship between these two training hubs in the North and the emerging history programs in South, there also existed an important relationship between the teaching of southern history and the American Historical Association. The AHA was founded in 1884 with the goal of promoting the “scientific” study of history by academically trained historians, although during the first few decades of the organization many of its members were not academically trained. Adams was a driving force in the founding of this organization and served as its secretary until 1900, when he became vice president. As a prominent figure in the AHA, Adams was able to influence the goals, policies, and character of the organization, and often did so to promote the study of southern history. In 1889 Adams rearranged the program for the sixth annual meeting of the AHA by grouping the topics of the papers by subject: European history, national history, northern history, southern history, western history, and historical science. This was the first time southern history was recognized as a field in the emerging discipline.

Though southerners made up a small percentage of this organization’s membership- 11% in 1886 and only 6% in 1913- southern historical subjects and concern for history in the South were topics that the organization’s publications, the *Annual Reports* and the *American Historical Review*, covered relatively well. The *Review* was founded in 1895, and J. Franklin Jameson served as its editor until he accepted a position at the University of Chicago in 1901. A product of Adams’s Johns Hopkins seminar, Jameson had a strong interest in southern history, which certainly influenced his selections for the *Review*. Although each issues contained a maximum of six articles, there was rarely an issue without at least one article or set of documents relating to

the South. Additionally, the news section of the *Review* consistently reported on the activities of southern historians and historical societies in the South.¹⁹

At the December 1901 meeting of the AHA, a group of Southern historians suggested that a southern section of the AHA be formed, and although the idea was rejected, the group of southern historians were allowed to form a committee to formally investigate the teaching of history in the South with Frederick W. Moore of Vanderbilt University as its head. At the 1903 meeting held in New Orleans in celebration of the hundredth year anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase, Dunning organized a session to discuss “The Study and Teaching of History in the South,” at which Moore reported some of his findings.²⁰ Moore examined over sixty institutions for his study; his considerations for each included the requirements for admissions, the number of instructors and courses, the quality, pedagogical goals, and methods of instruction, the library facilities, the requirements in history for graduation, the graduate work offered, and the work done in the study of southern history. He concluded from this extensive survey that the value of history was “rapidly gaining recognition along with the other social sciences.”²¹

In his delivery, Moore outlined some considerations for the discrepancy in historical study between the North and the South. The Civil War had promoted history in the North, Moore claimed, by sparking patriotism. The North “was very proud of its achievements, and it gloried in the history of the government which its efforts and sacrifices had maintained.” In the South, however, Moore observed that the Civil War had “served in the South to dampen the patriotic ardor of the people. Devastation, poverty and humiliation was their lot. In what could

¹⁹ David D. Van Tassel, “The American Historical Association and the South, 1884-1913,” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Nov., 1957), 478, 471, 466-467, 472-473.

²⁰ Van Tassel, “The AHA,” 479.

²¹ Frederick W. Moore, Lyon G. Tyler, B. J. Ramage, J. C. Ballagh, J. S. Bassett, “Teaching of History in the South. A Report,” *The School Review*, vol. 11, no. 2 (Feb., 1903), 110.

they boast?”²² According to Moore, as the war veterans aged, the southern attitude toward history was turning. “Though defeated in war,” the Confederate war veterans were “determined not to suffer the common lot of the defeated who do not write their own history.”²³ Moore also emphasized the seminar at Johns Hopkins as a major contributing factor to the rapid increase in the scientific study of southern history, and he noted that Ph.D.’s in history were rarely, if ever, awarded at other southern institutions. According to Moore’s analysis, at the time of his study more than half the students enrolled in Johns Hopkins were southerners, about 1/3 of the teaching staff were from the South, and almost 200 former students were currently teaching in the South at more than 65 different institutions, with “nearly a score teaching history and political science.”²⁴ He concluded with the optimistic contention that by the many southerners “busily engaging in studying southern historical problems... for history’s sake and our common country’s...” “it seems to me, the study and teaching of history in the South [has] resumed its parallel and equal course again.”²⁵

Moore was not alone in believing that, until recently, southerners “kept, for the most part, wisely silent” on their history. This was largely the consensus of the members of the AHA, especially those who wished to replace completely the tradition of amateur history with the emerging profession. For those historians, the AHA appeared to offer a means by which to

²² *The Period Before 1860 - A Sketch manuscript*, Frederick Wightman Moore Papers, Box 2, Folder 21, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN. Also, Moore, “Teaching of History,” 117, “For years the South lay under the dark shadow of this bitter war, and felt the pressure of an administration less regardful of state rights and less considerate of local sentiment in dealing with local affairs than the administration against which the war had been originally undertaken.”

²³ Moore, “Teaching of History,” 118.

²⁴ Moore, “Teaching of History,” 120. Also, 118-119, “One-third of institutions under consideration have, within the last ten or twelve years, materially extended their departments of history and put them in charge of men who have had the best modern opportunities for preparation for their work. Indeed, with two or three exceptions, these new teachers are young southern men who have taken their doctor’s degree in philosophy by work in history and political science since 1890.” For an outline of the historical research being done in the South at the time, see Moore, “The Recent Revival of Interest in Historical Teaching and Investigation in the South,” 205-207.

²⁵ *The Period Before*, Moore Papers.

promote “scientific” history in the South and a medium in which to develop southern historiography. In 1913, William A. Dunning, whose career was based entirely on southern history, became the president, and the AHA held its annual meeting in Charleston, South Carolina.²⁶ Dunning’s presidency emphasized the extent to which this organization influenced the professionalization of both history in the South and southern history. The AHA prompted southerners to seek out and preserve primary source materials, provided the *Review* as a medium to publish works about southern history, and organized sessions dealing with southern history during the meetings, all of which helped spark interest in and legitimize this subfield. The “new Southern scholars,” as historian Van Tassel terms them, aimed to separate themselves from traditional history by practicing the impartial and scientific evaluation required by professionalization. By using the approach and techniques of “the new history,” southern historians like Dunning rendered their work eligible for the American history canon.²⁷

The Historical Tradition in the South

Though Moore and other historians of the AHA insisted that southerners neglected their history, lacked interest in historical subjects, and had a paucity of historical writing before the spread of professionalization, there did exist a rich historical tradition in the South.²⁸ Many southerners knew about their family tree and the genealogy of at least several old families in the South, and historical works such as Mason Locke Weems’s twenty-five cent biographies of American heroes were widely popular. After the war, organizations like the Southern Historical Society, founded in 1869 by Confederate veterans, were dedicated to commemorating the

²⁶ Stephenson, *The South Lives*, 9.

²⁷ Van Tassel, “The AHA,” 482, 481, 481-482.

²⁸ Weeks, “On the Promotion of Historical Studies,” “In no other respect, perhaps, has the South been more silent, more careless of her own duty to herself, than in the matter of history writing and book collecting,” 32.

Confederacy. “Local color artists” such as Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris and “historical novelists” such as George W. Cable and Mary Johnston were also deeply interested in historical subjects in the 1880s and 1890s.²⁹ As historian Van Tassel explains, “This history emphasized the uniqueness of place and people, and its truth was sought not in musty smelling manuscripts and dead documents, but in living tradition and vivid institution.” Though there existed in the South a deep-rooted interest in historical subjects, the academic historians in the emerging and later generations of the profession discounted the existence of such an interest because what these southerners produced could not be accepted as historically valuable by these scholars.³⁰ The Southern Historical Society and other similar groups provided a position that emerging organizations more oriented to the goals of academic history could compare themselves to.

The Southern History Association, founded in Washington D. C. in 1896 and lasting only until 1907, was one such product of the new wave of “scientific” history, but it differed from the AHA in several significant ways. The majority of the members of both organizations during this period were amateur historians, but unlike the AHA, the Southern History Association did not aspire to orient itself solely to the academic community; many of its members wanted the public to participate in its activities as both students and readers.³¹ As the Association’s constitution states, “All persons interested in its objects,” “the study of the history of the Southern States, the encouragement of original research, discussion and conference among members, the widening of personal acquaintance, the publication of work, and the collection of historical materials,” “shall

²⁹ Johnson, “Professional History in the American South,” 12.

³⁰ Van Tassel, “The AHA,” 470-471.

³¹ Johnson, “Professional History in the American South,” 13, 38-39.

be eligible to membership.”³² Although the membership of the organization probably represented a large proportion of professional southern historians, many of whom were members of the AHA, the majority of the association’s members were businessmen, teachers and educators, editors, ministers, amateur historians, and also a handful of women. As historian Bethany Johnson explains, “though the professionals were keen on gaining national reputations and readerships, most were not willing to cut themselves off from the region and its popular historical consciousness, for good or ill, in order to do so.”³³

Yet unlike other contemporary organizations such as the Southern Historical Society, the Southern History Association did not dedicate itself to a defense of the South. Instead, as Stephen B. Weeks explained in an address to the association in 1896, historians of the association were setting the groundwork for “a new generation of scholars who, free from many of the prejudices of their elders, will come to the subject of investigation with that passion for truth which characterizes the modern school.” He proclaimed that these new students of southern history will seek “to weigh all evidence, and to present their results in a calm and unprejudiced fashion, unwarped as far as possible by preconceived ideas or training,” and their resulting work “will form the basis of the great synthetic history, resting on which the South can be neither misrepresented, misunderstood nor ignored.”³⁴ For this purpose, the Association sought to collect and publish primary source materials and even created a lobby group to secure government funds for document acquisitions. The foundational belief of this association, then, was that the evaluation of the “truth” as revealed by the investigation of primary source materials, without passion or defensiveness but with the perspective of the South still in mind,

³² Southern History Association, “Historical Sketch of the Association,” *Publications of the Southern History Association* (Southern History Association, 1897), 1-12.

³³ Johnson on women, they “were interested in the intellectual and civic opportunities that membership in a historical organization could provide,” 38-39; quotation, 32-33.

³⁴ Week, “On the Promotion of Historical Studies in the South,” 33-34.

would be enough to vindicate the South from its current status in the American historical narrative. Significantly, this approach to objectivity denounced prejudice and saw the South's ultimate redemption in "scientific" history, but it did not discourage writing history from the South's point of view.³⁵

Further complicating the foundations and goals of the Southern History Association was the issue of race relations. The increased participation of African-Americans in intellectual life as exemplified by organizations like the American Negro Academy threatened to challenge the notion that "southern" history and culture meant "white southern" history and culture, a threat which the *Publications of the Southern History Association* dealt with in several ways. Some historians claimed that because the southern black past never contributed to the advancement of American civilization, southern history was "only relevant for the white South (and by extension, white America)." Those who did recognize that African-Americans had made advancements in the South attempted to illustrate that any racial progress African-Americans had made was the result of southern whites who were responsible for uplifting the race, and other scholars like Walter L. Fleming, future head of Vanderbilt University's history department, rejected all African-American scholarship as inherently unscientific. Historians of the association also explained away the existence of African-American intellectuals by arguing that these intellectuals were the few exceptions, unrepresentative of the masses, upon which racial progress should not be determined.³⁶

Though the Southern History Association ultimately dissolved in 1907 due to a lack of financial support and public interest, the ideas developed within the association continued to be influential in the professionalization of southern history long after 1907. As the Association

³⁵ Johnson, "Professional History in the American South," 42-43.

³⁶ Johnson, "Professional History in the American South," 66-68.

failed to sustain a working relationship between professional and amateur historians, the next generation of professional historians in the South chose to embrace the AHA's vision of an isolated professional organization. Meanwhile, because these southern historians, by choosing to practice "scientific" history, effectively turned their public readership away from their works, they were in this way disillusioned by this methodology, which prompted these historians to begin critically evaluating their own training in notions of objectivity. Furthermore, as Bethany Johnson emphasizes in her thesis, the "sense of region, defined by attached cultural and racial characteristics," developed by these historians was later accepted by future generations as "naturally apparent."³⁷

Southern History at Vanderbilt University

At Vanderbilt University, the study of history at the turn of the century was relatively consistent with the national trends. Paul H. Hardacre documented the beginnings of the Vanderbilt History Department in his article "History and Historians at Vanderbilt, 1875-1918," which was published in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* in 1966. The program began in 1876 when Thomas J. Dodd was appointed to the position of "Professor of History and English Literature." Only one course in history was offered, 'A general survey of the principal national, ancient and modern,' which required only two texts, Thalheimer's *Ancient History* and Taylor's *Manual of Modern History*. In this joint department, history was the less emphasized discipline. Dodd had major problems working under the Board of Trust and Bishop McTyeire, and he resigned in 1885. He was dissatisfied with the "tyrannical" leadership of the University, which, according to Dodd, 'reorganized' him out of his position without his knowledge into "Professor of Hebrew and Practical Theology" and then vacated him from this chair two years later. After

³⁷ Johnson, "Professional History in the American South," 77.

his resignation, he compiled his two volume work "Vanderbiltiana," an unforgiving criticism of Vanderbilt University's leadership during the nine years after the institution was founded. He opened the work, 'Never in the history of Christianity, it may be safely assumed, has a church institution been founded upon such a broad, liberal basis, or with outlook so promising,- never has a failure been more signal, or a disappointment more general.'³⁸

John J. Tigert, one of the first graduates of Vanderbilt, temporarily filled Dodd's old position after his resignation. In 1885, history was combined with Political Economy in lieu of English literature, and 106 students studied courses offered by this new department during the 1886-1887 school year. At this point, a Johns Hopkins Ph.D. and Adams disciple joined Tigert as an assistant. Edward W. Bemis contributed to the department by focusing on developing a graduate studies program in American and English constitutional history. Bemis's assistance in the department's development "lifted" history "out of its bondage as a handmaiden to theology and belles lettres and accorded [it] the status of a discipline, worthy of study for its own sake and for the sake of the contribution it could made to the development of citizenship." In 1892, Bemis left Vanderbilt to accept a position at the University of Chicago.³⁹

Frederick W. Moore took Bemis's position and served as chair of History and Economics until 1911. Moore's active participation in the AHA and in the national network of emerging professional historians helped determine his goals for the history department at Vanderbilt and significantly impacted the shaping of this department.⁴⁰ With Moore at its head, the department awarded its first Ph.D. in history to David Duncan Wallace in 1899 for his dissertation on the constitutional history of South Carolina, 1725-1775. It was one of only three history Ph.D.'s

³⁸ Paul H. Hardacre, "History and Historians at Vanderbilt, 1875-1918," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, vol. 25, (1966), 24, 23.

³⁹ Hardacre, "History and Historians," 25-27, 27.

⁴⁰ Hardacre, "History and Historians," 28, 29-30.

awarded in the South before 1900, and although the next Ph.D. in history was not awarded to another student at Vanderbilt until 1913, the program continued to expand and grant an increasing numbers of M.A.'s. Moore's research interests were in southern history, and in 1894 he founded the Vanderbilt Southern Historical Society, a short lived organization which aimed to acquire research materials for an archive at Vanderbilt. Before it dissolved, the society released four pamphlets to illustrate that Vanderbilt could play a pivotal role in the field of southern history, which marked the department's first real recognition of this subfield. The first article printed in the society's publication was the lecture "The Study of Southern History" delivered by historian W. P. Trent to the Vanderbilt Southern History Society December 13, 1895. He begins the lecture by congratulating "Vanderbilt University directly, and the Southern people indirectly" for establishing their historical society. "I have long held not only that Southern history ought to be more carefully studied and the materials for it gathered together, but that our universities are the proper places of all others for such study and for the gathering of such materials." He emphasized for his audience the value of the "scientific" approach in order for southern historians to have their work accepted by the rest of the nation and to overturn the "unjust aspersions" laid upon the South after the war. "The truth is mighty and will prevail... And this is why I lay such stress upon the attitude we should assume toward our history."⁴¹

Despite his efforts and the emerging sentiment in the South, Moore was never able to gather the needed support for an initiative to collect manuscripts at Vanderbilt, a task which Vanderbilt resisted until the establishment of its Special Collections Library in 1965.⁴² Moore

⁴¹ W. P. Trent, "The Study of Southern History," *Publications of the Vanderbilt Southern History Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Nashville, 1901), 1-24.

⁴² The lack of support is puzzling as Chancellor Kirkland makes on page 10 of his "Intellectual Tendencies of the South" a call for southern historians to collect primary source material, *Intellectual Tendencies of the South* manuscript, James H. Kirkland Papers, Box 16, Folder 13, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN

took ill in 1910, and in 1912 St. George Leakin Sioussat, another Johns Hopkins Ph.D., became his successor. The departments were reorganized, and history combined with political science. Sioussat led an effort to improve the academic standards of the department as well as revise the curriculum. While at Vanderbilt, he became the *Tennessee Historical Magazine's* first editor and in his last year was elected president of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association. In 1918, Sioussat accepted a position at Brown, and Walter Lynwood Fleming, a Columbia Ph.D. who studied under Dunning, succeeded him in the department.

Fleming was a prolific historian active in the group of southerners dedicated to professional history, and he made large contributions to southern historiography through his influential scholarship. His most important contributions to Vanderbilt's history department, however, were in the realm of administrative work: Fleming served as chair of the department, Dean of the College of Arts and Science, and the Chairmanship of the Social Sciences Division, and led a considerable expansion of the department during his time.⁴³ As his contemporary William C. Binkley wrote, "He sensed at once the serious shortcomings in the work in the social sciences at Vanderbilt and concentrated his attention first of all in strengthening the staff and the resources in that field." He developed a graduate program by securing funds from the Rockefeller Foundation and expanded the department's staff "from himself and two other men to a well-balanced group of twenty-one men in the Social Science Division."⁴⁴ Two years after he arrived at Vanderbilt, Fleming extended an offer to his friend and colleague from the Alabama Polytechnic Institute, Georgie Petrie's former student Frank Owsley.⁴⁵

⁴³ Hardacre, "History and Historians," 30.

⁴⁴ William C. Binkley, "The Contribution of Walter Lynwood Fleming to Southern Scholarship," *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 5, no. 2 (May, 1939), 152.

⁴⁵ A native of Alabama, Fleming earned his B.S. and M.S. degrees from Alabama Polytechnic Institute.

Chapter II

Strictly Life-Work: Frank L. Owsley Becomes a Historian of the South

Donald Davidson wrote in his 1933 "Sectionalism in the United States" that there was a distinct sectionalist tendency in early twentieth century America. The New England states and other regions of the country banded together to protect their political and commercial well-being; trade associations and professional organizations engaged in regional meetings and activities; the prominence of farm blocs, the consolidation of railroad systems, and the existence of the Federal Reserve System all marked sectional trends as "a function of the national life." Indeed this sectionalist fervor was also becoming more and more prominent in American intellectual culture. In historiography, Frederick Jackson Turner's milestone "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" argued that the frontier experience shaped the characteristics of American history and the American experience, and this thesis "passed naturally from a study of the frontier to a study of the sections."⁴⁶ Another important development in American historiography which Owsley and other historians would employ for the advancement of sectionalist history was Charles Beard's 1927 *The Rise of American Civilization*, in which Beard explained the Civil War as the result of conflicting economic interests between the largely agrarian South and the industrial, capitalist North.

The job market for new history Ph.D.'s was well in accord with the sectional trends of American historiography and culture. Most state universities functioned by recruiting from and furnishing local markets. Additionally, in 1907 midwestern and southern historians founded the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, a major organization expressing these historians'

⁴⁶ Donald Davidson, "Sectionalism in the United States," *The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal: Essays after I'll Take My Stand* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 60, 52.

resentment against the AHA and its monopoly on American historiography.⁴⁷ It was in this interwar climate that Owsley gained employment at Vanderbilt University and published two of his major works, *State Rights in the Confederacy* and *King Cotton Diplomacy*.

The Road to Chicago

Frank Lawrence Owsley was born on a portion of an Alabama plantation inherited by his mother, Annie Scott McGehee. As the story goes, she was a descendent of the MacGregor clan, whose members changed its name after James VI issued Letters of Fire and Sword against them in 1603.⁴⁸ The genealogy of Owsley's father, Lawrence Monroe Owsley, provides a similarly interesting story. Lawrence's father did not survive the Civil War, and his family regarded his service to the Confederacy as a sacrifice for the South. Owsley's great-grandfather was murdered in front of his wife and youngest son in Alabama by a gang of outlaws. His great-grandfather's son, Owsley's 'Uncle Dink,' made it his lifework to seek revenge on the criminals, "dividing his life between an ordinary family life in a remote Alabama valley and errands of vengeance." After Uncle Dink's death there were still two or three of these criminals left alive. As the family mythology goes, when Owsley's father moved to Pike County, Alabama, to teach, he heard news that a strange old man, later said to have "fired the shot that killed Uncle Dink's father," upon hearing that an Owsley had moved to the town, immediately suffered a heart attack and died. Owsley frequently heard "such yarns" growing up on various pieces of Alabama

⁴⁷ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 180-182.

⁴⁸ Michael O'Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 162. O'Brien explains, "For sins against the crown of Scotland, it was commanded that the clan be exterminated, its lands confiscate to any strong enough to seize them, its women to be branded and transported." Some members of the clan, "fled their native hills and went to the American colonies. One branch of the McGehees set itself up on a rich plantation in Montgomery County, Alabama," 162.

farmland, and his later interest in history was perhaps a product of the long established value of genealogical history found in his and many other southern homes.⁴⁹

Owsley's mother, father, and stepmother had all taught school, and his father taught his five children at home. In his memoir Owsley recalled, "Perhaps, indeed, I am sure, it was his interest in education, his habit of reading that stimulated his sons to desire an education." When his father was not teaching him at home, Owsley attended a one room schoolhouse for plantation children with his siblings. From 1906 to 1909, he attended the Fifth District Agricultural School at Wetumpka, Alabama. The Owsley children all managed to attend college, "by close cooperation. My father financed part, and we worked and helped on another." Owsley graduated from Alabama Polytechnic Institute, now Auburn University, in 1911. He returned as a graduate student in 1912 in hopes of becoming a farm demonstration agent, though in his memoir he confessed that he "always wanted to be a scholar."⁵⁰

When starting his graduate program, Owsley registered for courses in agriculture, but he soon caught the attention of Dr. George Petrie, a professor of history and chairman of the history department. Petrie was a product of Adam's seminar at Johns Hopkins and for fifty-five years was an influential promoter of southern history and graduate research at Alabama Polytechnic Institute. As Stephenson notes, "If he had done nothing more than incite an interest in history in men the caliber of Walter L. Fleming, Frank L. Owsley, Watson David, Albert B. Moore, Alfred W. Reynolds, Herman C. Nixon, and Charles S. Davis, his contribution would be worthy of

⁴⁹ O'Brien, *The Idea*, 162. Harriet Owsley, *Frank Lawrence Owsley: historian of the Old South: a memoir* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1990), 12-13. O'Brien, *The Idea*, 162. Allen Tate later published a fiction work "Uncle Dink" which portrayed Uncle Dink in an unfavorable light. This was a source of conflict between Owsley and Tate for a period in the 1930s.

⁵⁰ Personal memoir manuscript, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 9, Folder 1, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

recording.”⁵¹ Petrie took a special interest in Owsley and offered him a job teaching undergraduate history and grading papers, which Owsley took to earn extra money for his younger brothers’ education. He earned his M.S. in 1912 with a thesis on Andrew Johnson and returned to the Fifth District Agricultural School to teach history and Latin. Under Petrie’s influence, Owsley decided to obtain a Ph.D. and pursue teaching as his profession.⁵² Owsley seriously considered pursuing his Ph.D. at Columbia University under Dunning, who approved of Owsley’s Andrew Johnson thesis and offered to have Owsley continue the research as his doctoral thesis.⁵³ Owsley chose instead to enter the Ph.D. program at the University of Chicago with his life-long friend and fellow student under Petrie, Albert B. Moore.⁵⁴

State Rights in the Confederacy

Owsley began his work at the University of Chicago in September 1916 under William E. Dodd. Dodd, a native of Clayton, North Carolina, received his Ph.D. at the University of Leipzig in November 1899 with his dissertation, *Jefferson’s Rückkehr zur Politik, 1796*, under the direction of Karl Lamprecht.⁵⁵ Dodd came to embrace the idea of *Kulturgeschichte*, or cultural history, and believed that a balanced account of history needed to take more than just the aristocracy into account: it should instead be based on the story of the ‘common man’ in society

⁵¹ Wendell Holmes Stephenson, *Southern History in the Making: Pioneer Historians of the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 66.

⁵² Owsley, *Frank Lawrence Owsley*, 17.

⁵³ Frank L. Owsley to George Petrie, 19 Feb 1917, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

⁵⁴ Owsley, *Frank Lawrence Owsley*, 17.

⁵⁵ See Wendell Holmes Stephenson, *The South Lives in History: Southern Historians and Their Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1955), 31, “His [Lamprecht’s] *Deutsche Geschichte* depreciated political and church history, stressed economic and cultural segments, acclaimed collective society rather than the individual, and designated social psychology as the proper approach to the ‘science’ of history.”

or, in the case of the American South, the yeoman man.⁵⁶ The work of Lamprecht, along with that of Charles A. Beard, shaped Dodd's interest in economic causation, and Dodd was also heavily influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis."⁵⁷ He was also one of the only history professors in the country dedicated solely to the teaching and advancement of southern historical topics.⁵⁸ Dodd began teaching at the University of Chicago in 1908, and, at the time, his only competition for recruiting southern history scholars was Dunning at Columbia University.⁵⁹ Though Owsley would come to disagree with many of Dodd's central theses, Owsley was captivated by his dedication to challenging conventional views of southern history and his engaging teaching style. Owsley explained in a letter to his old instructor Petrie, "Dodd makes American History as thrilling as any novel with a well laid plot," and he described Dodd as effective in eliciting critical thinking in his students: "Imagine a man who has been tramping on a brick walk for years being suddenly told by a passerby, that the bricks are not bricks, but are gold which turns out to be true," Owsley explained. "Then you have the way Dodd usually makes a class feel."⁶⁰

Owsley left his studies briefly in 1917 for military service. He was honorably discharged for health reasons from an officer training camp, drafted in May 1918, and then discharged again for having flat feet.⁶¹ In 1919, instead of returning to Chicago, Owsley accepted a position teaching history at Birmingham-Southern College. He left this position in 1920 to accept an

⁵⁶ Fred Arthur Bailey, *William Edward Dodd: The South's Yeoman Scholar* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia), 18.

⁵⁷ See William E. Dodd, "The Significance of the Frontier Thesis."

⁵⁸ Bailey, *William Dodd*, 31-32, 40-41, 36. Also, 36, "Dodd was the first, and for a long time the only, historian in any college or university who devoted all of his time to courses in southern history."

⁵⁹ Baily, *William Dodd*, 66.

⁶⁰ Owsley to Petrie, 19 Feb 19 1917.

⁶¹ *World War I-Discharge from Draft* manuscript, Frank Lawrence Owsley Papers, Box 9, Folder 7, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

offer from Dr. Walter Lynwood Fleming and Chancellor Kirkland as assistant professor with permanent tenure at Vanderbilt University.⁶²

For Owsley, his work at Vanderbilt in the early 1920s was, “as near what I could want as anything I could get in the South,” and he resolved to focus on teaching as opposed to what he thought to be the scholarly norm for academics, publishing works to advance their careers while remaining indifferent to their students. As he wrote to his old mentor Petrie in 1921, “The great scholars are a bunch of selfish, conceited, narrow minded doctrinaires who care nothing for the students- the personal element is missing.” His impression of the scholars he met at Chicago was “that of a bunch of doctrinaires. Jealous and mean and bitter toward rivals.”⁶³ This dedication to inspiring an interest in southern history in a future generation of scholars would become a defining characteristic of Owsley’s time at Vanderbilt, and future scholars would later refer to the graduate studies directed by Owsley in antebellum history in the 1930s and 1940s as “the Owsley school.”

Meanwhile, Owsley was continuing his doctoral studies by taking summer classes in Chicago. At this point, he had already earned an M.A. and had begun working on his dissertation. Dodd provided the idea for Owsley’s dissertation, *State Rights in the Confederacy*, but the topic’s emphasis on the importance of sectional interests over state-oriented interests reflected Owsley’s personal views well.

The work contends that the South lost the Civil War because it was plagued by internal conflicts brought on by the doctrine of state rights and not because of an overpowering war effort by the North. He argues that, in fact, it would have been “almost impossible for South to suffer

⁶² Owsley, *Frank Lawrence Owsley*, 25-34.

⁶³ Frank L. Owsley to George Petrie, 25 Feb 1921, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

defeat” without these internal problems.⁶⁴ He holds that many Confederate leaders such as Georgia Governor Joseph Brown, North Carolina Governor Zebulon Vance, and Georgia Senator Robert Toombs, among others, essentially sabotaged southern war efforts by withholding arms and other essential war materials and by establishing state militias that interfered with the enlistment efforts and needs of the Confederate army. This was due largely to their distrust of President Jefferson Davis and Confederate authority and their outrage over actions by the central government that they saw as overstepping the limits of federal government, such as conscription efforts and the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus. Owsley summarized the state rights position well with a statement by Alabama Senator William Lowndes Yancy: ‘it is far better for a free people to be vanquished in open combat with the invader than voluntarily to yield liberties and their constitutional safeguards to the stealthy progress of... executive usurpation toward the establishment of a military dictatorship.’⁶⁵ This statement illustrated how many Confederate leaders were willing to do what ever they could to keep Jefferson Davis and the central government of the Confederacy from becoming too powerful, even at the expense of the war effort.

The dissertation was published as a book with the same title in 1925 by the University of Chicago Press. The work received mixed reviews and came under fire mostly for holes in its “scientific” evidence. As reviewer Charles W. Ramsdell observed in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Owsley “accepted isolated and casual statements as bases for sweeping declarations... read into some of his sources statements that are not there even by implication...

⁶⁴ Frank L. Owsley, *State Rights in the Confederacy* (Gloucester, Mass., 1961), 2. See O'Brien, *The Idea*, 163-164, “ This was a contentious assumption, proud in explaining failure by internal villains; it slighted the not inconsiderable role of the federal army in bringing about Appomattox. Nonetheless, *State Rights in the Confederacy* was an interesting documentation of various aspects of Confederate dissension and foreshadowed Owsley's own political theory, emphasizing sectionalism as a superior alternative to the traditional Southern doctrine of state rights.”

⁶⁵ Owsley, *State Rights*, 15.

[and] ignored evidence that tends to disprove or to qualify materially portions of his general thesis.” In the subsequent five pages of the review, Ramsdell introduced challenges to Owsley’s interpretations and new evidence that weakened many of Owsley’s conclusions. Ramsdell’s review highlighted an important shortcoming in Owsley’s work- that Owsley tended to fit his research to his conclusions, instead of the other way around. Although the work did receive such warranted critiques by Ramsdell and others, it was also widely praised for its innovative ideas. Even Ramsdell’s scathing review admitted that *State Rights in the Confederacy* was well-written and “a useful contribution to an interesting and perplexing problem.”⁶⁶

The work found its way into the hands of some notable figures such as former President William Howard Taft and critic H. L. Mencken.⁶⁷ H. L. Mencken took an interest in the work and wrote a favorable review:

The jackass newspapers of that great Christian State will now denounce him roundly, and demand that he be cashiered. But the facts that he has amassed will not be disposed of by such Ku Kluxry, and no intelligent man will be able to write about the Civil War hereafter without taking them into account. His book is but another symptom of the intellectual awakening that is going on in the South, despite the uproarious protests of professional patriots, an ignorant and bumptious clergy, and a press so degraded that it is shameless.⁶⁸

Mencken was a man who made no attempt to hide his contempt for southern intellectual culture, or, in his view, the lack thereof. His 1920 article “Sahara of the Bozart” criticized the South sharply for its extreme lack of intellectual and cultural life since the Civil War.⁶⁹ With this in

⁶⁶ Charles W. Ramsdell, Review of *State Rights in the Confederacy* by Frank Lawrence Owsley, *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Jun., 1927), 107-110.

⁶⁷ R. F. Holloway of the University of Chicago Press to Frank Lawrence Owsley, 21 Dec 1925, “This morning Mr. Horace D. Taft purchased three copies of your book for Christmas fits; one to go to former Present William H. Taft,” Frank Owsley Papers, Box 2, Folder 3, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

⁶⁸ *The Confederate Collapse* Book Review of *State Rights in the Confederacy* manuscript, H. L. Mencken, *American Mercury*, Jan 1926, Frank Lawrence Owsley Papers, Box 9, Folder 18, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

⁶⁹ H. L. Mencken, “The Sahara of the Bozart,” *The American Scene: A Reader* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 158, “There are single acres in Europe that house more first-rate men than all the states

mind, Mencken's approval of Owsley as "a man of both ability and courage" contributing to the South's intellectual awakening was a powerfully positive review of Owsley's debut book, which probably brought Owsley much positive attention from both northern and southern scholars.⁷⁰

King Cotton Diplomacy

With the completion of his dissertation, Owsley was promoted to associate professor and charged with "active supervision over most of the history [department]," since Fleming had been appointed as dean.⁷¹ Soon after this promotion, Owsley applied to the newly founded Guggenheim Foundation for a study abroad research grant. He describes his "ultimate object" as writing "an exhaustive study of the Confederacy," and stated he was already directing several graduate students in this field. For his own research, Owsley outlined his desire to tackle the issue of Confederate relations with Europe, necessitating a trip to England and France to review newspapers, speeches, diplomatic correspondences, official records, etc. "This work is not under the supervision of any University or institution, does not lead to any degree," he explains. "It is strictly a part of a life-work."⁷² Owsley's articulated goal for his "life-work" illustrates an important characteristic of his scholarship in general. Though he had already articulated his distaste for the competition and self-promotion that professionalized history advanced and was well aware of his non-neutral southern point of view, Owsley did see his goals in a way that was consistent with early notions of objectivity within the profession. Namely, Owsley saw himself as a "brick-maker," and he hoped the "bricks" that he would mold during his lifetime, together,

south of the Potomac; there are probably single square miles in America... The picture gives one the creeps. It is as if the Civil War stamped out every last bearer of the torch, and left only a mob of peasants on the field."

⁷⁰ Mencken, "Sahara of the Bozart," 158.

⁷¹ Owsley to Petrie, 5 May 1925.

⁷² *Plans for Study* manuscript, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

would create an “exhaustive” Confederate study, an indestructible portion of the edifice of American history. Ultimately, Owsley received the grant and researched abroad from 1927-1928.

The work resulting from his time in Europe was *King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign relations of the Confederate States of America*, which Owsley began in 1927 and published in 1931. The book outlines how the diplomatic strategy of the Confederacy relied on the theory that without southern cotton, the English economy would nearly collapse, sparking social unrest. The English would then have to intervene on behalf of the South to break the northern blockade on southern trade, thereby recognizing the Confederacy as an independent nation. With much confidence in this theory, the Confederacy staged a tight embargo on cotton and destroyed much of its cotton crop. England did not, however, intervene on behalf of the South, and the last chapter of the work, “Why Europe Did Not Intervene,” aims to provide an explanation of this phenomenon as an alternative to the two usual theories- that England was fundamentally opposed to slavery and would therefore not recognize the Confederacy on principle and that England relied too heavily on American wheat to allow relations with the North to deteriorate. Seeing England as a country with an undemocratic government and a politically apathetic people, Owsley branded the moralistic explanation as “too good to be true.” As for the economic explanation, Owsley claimed that England could have easily obtained wheat from other sources including Poland, Russia, and Prussia, which would have cost only slightly more than American wheat.⁷³

⁷³ Frank L. Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign Relations of the Confederate States of America* (Chicago, 1959), 565, 568.

Owsley settled on war profits as the primary motivation for the English decision not to intervene.⁷⁴ He cites English profits in the cotton industry from an increased demand for Indian cotton and in the munitions industry from blockade running-houses and the destruction of the American merchant fleet during the war.⁷⁵ Owsley believed, as did many others after World War I, that the United States was forced into The Great War by profit seekers. This view led many scholars, including Owsley, to reevaluate past war motives in terms of economic motivations and war profiteering. The concluding statement of Owsley's work illustrates his view well: "Those who recall the British practices of the World War will realize how valuable the precedent [of the Civil War] was."⁷⁶ He echos Beard's reliance on economic factors to explain human nature, which he would also use heavily in his writings for the Southern Agrarian movement. Owsley's views of British motives in this work also parallel his beliefs about the economic motives of the industrial North for denouncing slavery and other actions that he felt eventually instigated the South's secession. He spells this out clearly in his essay "The Irrepressible Conflict," published one year before *King Cotton* as his contribution to the Southern Agrarian manifesto, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

The final chapter of *King Cotton* proved to be the most problematic for Owsley's contemporary reviewers. The work was applauded for its "scholarly and detailed analysis based upon careful and painstaking research," as "not only the fullest history of foreign relations, the most scholarly and most comprehensive, but also the most challenging."⁷⁷ Even unfavorable

⁷⁴ Owsley, *King Cotton*, 569, "In order to counteract one economic impulse another stronger economic motive is necessary."

⁷⁵ Owsley, *King Cotton*, 569-574.

⁷⁶ O'Brien, *The Idea*, 166. Owsley, *King Cotton*, 578. Also, *Ibid*, 569, "Those who are at all familiar with the war profits in the last war ought not to have any great difficulty in grasping the role England played of war profiteer."

⁷⁷ James Miller Leake, *Review of King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign Relations of the Confederate States of America* by Frank Lawrence Owsley, *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 25, no. 4 (Oct.,

reviewers noted that it was “the most important contribution that has so far been made to the diplomatic history of the United States during this period,” and “the value of this book lies in its completeness, which goes far toward making it a definitive study.”⁷⁸ Despite these comments on the overall quality of the work, few reviews published in history journals commented positively on Owsley’s chapter, “Why Europe Did Not Intervene.” One of Owsley’s colleagues, pioneer of agricultural history Louis Bernard Schmidt, noted in the *Mississippi Valley History Review*, “In dismissing the idealistic interpretation of history, the author has underestimated, as earlier writers have over-rated, the importance of British anti-slavery sentiment.” Another common criticism was that although Owsley went to Europe to conduct his research, he clearly did not understand the political and social life in Europe, especially in England. In his memoir, Owsley reflected on the unfriendliness he encountered while in England, comparing the “lack of tactfulness” and “self-assurance- even arrogance” that he encountered there with that of American northerners.⁷⁹ As a result of his limited perception of European culture, as H. Donaldson Jordan commented in the *American Historical Review*, Owsley’s “Confederates are real people whom the author knows and judges intimately; but his Englishmen and Frenchmen are hardly ever more than names.”⁸⁰ So though the work employed extensive research and well-documented sources to create a professional historical work, its author ultimately concludes with an analysis of English and Northern intentions that was more interested in “interpretations” than in “facts.”⁸¹

1931), 805-806. E. M. Kayden, Review of *King Cotton Diplomacy* by Frank Lawrence Owsley, *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 40, no. 3 (July- Sept., 1932), 384.

⁷⁸ Louis Bernard Schmidt, Review of *King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign Relations of the Confederate States of America* by Frank Lawrence Owsley, *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Dec., 1932), 435-437. H. Donaldson Jordan, Review of *King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign Relations of the Confederate States of America* by Frank Lawrence Owsley, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 38., no. 1 (Oct., 1932), 135-137.

⁷⁹ Personal memoir manuscript, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 9, Folder 1, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

⁸⁰ Jordan, Review of *King Cotton*, 135.

⁸¹ Schmidt, Review of *King Cotton*, 435.

The majority of *King Cotton Diplomacy*, however, was intensely interested in facts. Most of the middle chapters of this lengthy work consist of an overwhelming barrage of facts, and there is no question about the thoroughness of Owsley's research. The work instead falls short in making explicit connections between the facts and the concluding chapter. As a "brick-maker," Owsley was of the opinion that the facts should speak for themselves. Perhaps this is why he felt, after 530 pages of fact telling, embolden to write "Why Europe Did Not Intervene." Owsley also reveals in his analyses his tendency to give thoughtful consideration to the Confederate point of view without making a real attempt to understand how the same facts and situations could potentially look from other points of view as well. In his treatment of English and French diplomats throughout the work, Owsley reveals a distinct lack of detachment from his desire to redeem and legitimize the southern point of view through his work. This same lack of detachment is characteristic of Owsley's Agrarian writings and, for the next two decades, a vexing force in Owsley's career as a historian.

Chapter III

Making the World Over: Frank L. Owsley and the South Against the Nation

The interwar period was one of intense demographic and social change in America and thus brought new tensions and new challenges to sectional reconciliation. Economic relations were certainly one source of revived tensions, as the South simultaneously faced an increase in industrialization and an agricultural depression in the 1920s. The issue further deepened during the Great Depression, in which President Roosevelt famously referred to the South as “the nation’s number one economic problem.” In addition to economic tensions, there also existed deepening cultural rifts between the South and the nation. In 1925 the “Scopes Monkey Trial” drew tremendous national attention, as John Scopes, a high school teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, was accused of violating the Butler Act, which forbade the teaching of evolution in public schools in Tennessee. The Scopes trial, along with other less publicized events garnering negative media attention about the South, was regarded by many Southerners as a direct attack on the “southern way of life.”

Racial issues created even deeper sectional tensions after World War I, when African-American migration from the South peaked. With the formation and growth of organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the emergence of the “Harlem Renaissance,” increasing national attention was given to the significant political and cultural gains of African-Americans. The Scottsboro Trial, in which nine African-American boys were accused of raping two white women, illustrated the volatile tension between many southerners and non-southerners over the issue of race. To many non-southerners, the trial represented the deliberate denial of basic justice to African-Americans in the South, and, to many

white southerners, it exemplified a typical, calculated defamation of the South by subversive groups, such as the Communist Party, for their own benefit.

These developments and others in the interwar years contributed to a tendency in the South to reevaluate the relationship between the South and the nation as a whole. Under these circumstances there developed in some southerners, including Frank Owsley, the inclination to frame southern problems in terms of the South against the nation and to produce works vehemently defensive in nature and critical of non-southerners. From this atmosphere of reexamination and defensive sectionalism emerged the Southern Agrarian movement, which is the primary focus of this chapter.⁸²

I'll Take My Stand

The Agrarian movement began in 1930 when a group of twelve Southerners based at Vanderbilt University published the movement's manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. The Agrarians rose to prominence over the next decade, as the members of the Agrarian circle became leading southern critics of industrialism during the period of the Great Depression. The Agrarians, however, were far from unified as a group, and the movement evolved considerably over the 1930s from its original form. Most of the members were vehemently individualistic, and they rarely agreed on any specific programs. Generally speaking, this group was tied together by several basic principles, including a denunciation of industrialism and progress and a nostalgic admiration for rural life, fundamental religion, and sectionalism.

The disjointed nature of *I'll Take My Stand* keeps this work from clearly illustrating Agrarianism even when it is analyzed in its complete form. In order to outline their principles

⁸² Thomas J. Pressly, *Americans Interpret Their Civil War* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 273-280.

more concretely, Ransom wrote the “Articles of an Agrarian Form,” which he eventually discarded and recast into the introduction of the book. A main theme of the articles is that the American definition of ‘progress’ actually refers to industrial progress, which the Agrarians thought to be an unsustainable economic philosophy that would eventually end in communism or fascism and, either way, in the destruction of democracy. Many of the articles are notably defensive in nature, such as Article 3, which states that the southern ideal was “being threatened by the new American ideal, under cover of a peaceful industrial invasion.” Ransom made it clear how the Agrarians felt about their relationship to pro-industrialists in the South: “We would defend the Southern ideal even against a generation of Southerners.” Another notable feature of the articles was that they explicitly positioned the Agrarians politically. Article 17 stated, “We are obliged to record our opposition to the Republican Party, as one that seems too far committed to Industrial Progress.” The article also asserted, but with less conviction, the Agrarian support for the Democratic Party because, “it is historically identified with the defense of the Southern way of life, with an instinctive suspicion of big business, with a bias in favor of localism in government, and,” he continued, “with a conviction about the right of the individual to his pursuit of happiness.” Ransom qualified this statement by claiming that the movement would always hold Agrarian interests above party affiliation, and if the Democratic Party could not be used as a vehicle of the Agrarian campaign, the Agrarians would “abandon the Democratic Party to its fate.”⁸³

In the words of Donald Davidson, the self-proclaimed historian and treasurer of the movement, *I'll Take my Stand* was “the only enterprise in which the Agrarian group functioned definitely as a group,” but he admits that even in this work, the Agrarians disagreed on many of

⁸³ *Articles of an Agrarian Form* manuscript, Donald Davidson Papers, Box 24, Folder 22, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

the applications of their principles.⁸⁴ The initial goals of the manifesto were identified in the correspondence between two of the work's main coordinators, Allen Tate and Donald Davidson. Tate wanted a manifesto for a disciplined movement in which each contributor would endorse the fundamental anti-industrialist principles behind Agrarianism but would also be free to write about issues not directly addressed by the Agrarian platform. The result was a fragmented collection of twelve essays dealing with a wide variety of topics, with the opening introduction of Agrarian principles by Ransom the only unifying factor.⁸⁵ As Owsley speculated before the completion of the work, "The power of this book" will be in the reiteration of the basic Agrarian principles across many topics and disciplines, "which will have the cumulative effect of a ton of bricks dropped on one at a time, and the artistic effect of a refrain."⁸⁶

Owsley first encountered his future Agrarian brethren through Stanley Phillips Johnson, a neighbor of Owsley's in the Wesley Hall apartments and member of the Fugitive group of poets, to which many of the later Agrarians belonged. Owsley and his wife Harriet were soon regulars at Johnson's frequent parties, which he threw for his literary friends. At these parties, Owsley met Fugitive poets and future Agrarians, such as Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, Andrew Lytle, and John Crowe Ransom,⁸⁷ but just as the Agrarian movement at Vanderbilt was coming together in 1927-28, Owsley left for England on his Guggenheim research fellowship. The movement needed a historian, so despite his absence, Owsley was asked to contribute a history

⁸⁴ *The Southern Agrarians* manuscript, Donald Davidson Papers, Box 27, Folder 38, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN. See also Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001), 86, "few books of the early depression ear created quite as much controversy."

⁸⁵ Cited in Conkin, *Southern Agrarians*, 191-192. Tate to Davidson 1 March 1927, in *Correspondence of Davidson and Tate*.

⁸⁶ Frank L. Owsley to Andrew Lytle, 7 March 1930, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

⁸⁷ Personal memoir manuscript, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 9, Folder 1, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

essay to *I'll Take My Stand*. Owsley's essay was in fact an old essay that he recycled for the project, in which he developed themes he had already been exploring in his own scholarship.⁸⁸

The essay Owsley submitted, "The Irrepressible Conflict," subscribed to a view of history which he and his Agrarian co-authors generally agreed on. Owsley explained in a letter to Lytle that his essay was to be a "discussion of the causes of the Civil War and the Southern renaissance in the field of historical writing."⁸⁹ Because Owsley was the only active professional historian of the group, the other Agrarians deferred to his views on historical topics and relied heavily on his writings, both historical and not historical, for their own interpretations of southern history. "The Irrepressible Conflict" is the most well-known and widely read example of Owsley's non-academic historical writing, but in this work he echoes many of the themes which dominate his monographs.

Believing he was free in this essay from the rigid objectivity and restraint called for by academic writing, Owsley openly expressed the frustration of an angry white southerner through his bitter, visceral language. He lamented that after conquering the South militarily and economically, the North then set out on a mission to conquer that special characteristic of the southerner which made him different, "the realm of the spirit." "So there commenced a second war of conquest, the conquest of the Southern mind, calculated to remake every Southern opinion." Owsley was angry, and he made it clear that much of his anger and frustration was also directed at southern institutions which refused to recognize how they had been "conquered" for a second time.

He observed that northern histories "were almost universally taught in Southern high school and colleges," and that as a result, the South was "confused, ill informed because taught

⁸⁸ Conkin, *Southern Agrarians*, 64.

⁸⁹ Owsley to Lytle, 7 March 1930.

by an alien doctrine so long.”⁹⁰ Owsley dedicates the first two sections of the essay to outlining and explaining how the historiography of the Civil War and Reconstruction had horribly skewed and rewritten Southern history. He asserted, “There was for the Southern child... very little choice. They had to accept the Northern versions of history with all its condemnations and carping criticisms of Southern institutions and life.” He argues that for thirty years after the Civil War, Northern textbooks were used exclusively in Southern schools and that these textbooks “either completely ignored the South or insisted upon the unrighteousness of most of its history and its philosophy of life.” He contended that as a result, the South lacked direction in its thinking, which he aimed to provide in his essay.

The essay borrowed heavily from Beardian theory of economic causality as well as a larger body of “revisionist” scholarship in its interpretation of the Civil War. Owsley argued the lack of importance of slavery to the antebellum South and claimed that the Civil War was caused almost exclusively by Northern attempts to essentially colonize the South, which Northerners cleverly disguised under “a moral garb,” the issue of slavery. This was Owsley’s sectionalist spin on Beard’s basic philosophy; the coalescence of these two concepts, economics and sectionalism, was a historical interpretation that would provide the appropriate framework for the ephemeral Agrarian movement.

His essay also provided the movement with a historical framework for discussing racial issues. Not only did Owsley claim that slavery was not responsible for causing the conflict, he also contended that slavery was not the fault of the South at all, that it was in fact “forced” on this region by England. He argued that after the Revolutionary War, almost all Southerners were abolitionists staunchly opposed to slavery. When it became apparent to the South that it would

⁹⁰ Frank Lawrence Owsley, “The Irrepressible Conflict,” *I’ll Take My Stand* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), 65, 84, 63, and 67.

be logistically impossible to send the slaves back to Africa, Southerners accepted slavery as the only option in preserving peace and order, “For the negroes were cannibals and barbarians, and therefore dangerous.” Here, Owsley echoed Ulrich B. Phillips’s argument that plantation slavery was used by southerners as a means of racial regulation, but, unlike Phillips who saw race as the central theme in southern history, Owsley employed this argument in an attempt to de-emphasize race, essentially writing slavery out of the history of the South. This same goal would eventually influence his most innovative historical research, the findings of which were published as *Plain Folk of the Old South*.

The work was heavily read and perhaps just as heavily criticized. Owsley, like many of Agrarians, dealt with the criticisms of this work throughout his career. As Davidson later reflected in his essay “The Southern Agrarians,” “Whatever else may be said of *I’ll Take my Stand* it has this unique distinction: it has been refuted by more people who have never read it- or even seen a copy- than any other book in American history.”⁹¹ Owsley would later justify his caustic essay by explaining that the work was “a sharp, even bitter, protest, not just against industrialization as such, but especially against the brazen and contemptuous treatment of the rural South by the industrial North as a colony and as a conquered province.”⁹²

The Movement

Though *I’ll Take My Stand* is the work most commonly studied and associated with the movement, the principles set forth at the outset of the manifesto developed considerably during the 1930s. In 1932 the Agrarian group saw Franklin D. Roosevelt’s election as their best

⁹¹ “The Southern Agrarians” manuscript, Donald Davidson Papers, Box 27, Folder 38, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

⁹² Frank L. Owsley to Carter, 14 March 1952, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

opportunity to publicize the movement. Their desire to capitalize on the New Deal motivated six Agrarians- Donald Davidson, Andrew Nelson Lytle, Herman Clarence Nixon, Frank Lawrence Owsley, John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate- to join the national debate and publish articles “defining, refining, and defending a more concrete version of Agrarianism.”⁹³ Of the Agrarians hoping to influence public policy during the New Deal, Owsley was one of the most dedicated to the movement and staunchly supportive of its principles, and throughout the 1930s, Owsley did not lose any of the fervor with which he had written “The Irrepressible Conflict.”

Early in the decade, Owsley expressed approval of Roosevelt and his New Deal. “Roosevelt is a great leader,” he argued, “I feel sure... Roosevelt is conscious that a large part of the population, several millions... must be put back upon the soil.” He contends that this will be the president’s biggest challenge and that “coercion will be necessary.”⁹⁴ This optimism in Roosevelt must have contributed to Owsley’s efforts during the 1930s to influence New Deal policy through prolific writing on this topic. Even as early as 1933, however, Owsley hinted at his distrust of the economic policy of the Roosevelt administration due to its view of the South as backward and poor. Owsley revealed in a letter to his fellow Agrarian John Gould Fletcher his disapproval of Frances Perkins, appointed by Roosevelt as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor. “The South came so near victory so often,” Owsley lamented, “and had it won, what a great people, what a great civilization we might have had today instead of being the ‘poor barefoot South’ of Miss Perkin's industrialized mind.”⁹⁵

⁹³ Emily S Bingham and Thomas A. Underwood, introduction to *The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal*, ed. Emily S Bingham and Thomas A. Underwood (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 3.

⁹⁴ Frank L. Owsley to Donald Davidson, 5 August 1933, Donald Davidson Papers, Box 10, Folder 23, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

⁹⁵ Frank L. Owsley to Fletcher, 13 June 1933, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

Perkins and Roosevelt were not wrong to worry over the economic condition of the South, however, and even Owsley himself readily admitted that the farm population in the South “whether wage-hand or large planter is in a precarious and often miserable state.”⁹⁶ Why, then, was a non-southerner referring to the problems of the South an enemy of the region, while an Agrarian making the same observation a champion of the South and of democracy in general? To Owsley, it seems, viewpoint was everything. As his comments and writings support, Owsley employed this argument of viewpoint as denialism, particularly during the Great Depression when he was at the height of his public outspokenness, driving the Agrarian crusade. In the same letter to Fletcher, Owsley expressed his resentment of the North quite bluntly: “My only comment on all this internal chaos is that Stonewall Jackson or Bedford Forrest should have seized control and become a Napoleon or a Mussolini and thereby saved the South from the 70 years of peonage which it has suffered at the hands of the Goddamn Yankees.”⁹⁷

In 1935, in response to heavy criticisms, and especially the criticisms of H. L. Mencken, Owsley wrote “The Pillars of Agrarianism,” which was almost unanimously supported by the other Agrarians. It is considered the closest the Agrarians ever came to a specific policy endorsement to alleviate the agricultural maladies in the South.⁹⁸ The five pillars on which Owsley claimed an Agrarian society must rest were, first, the return of people to the land facilitated by the government purchasing lands from entities such as loan companies, insurance companies, banks, etc, and distributing that land to responsible landless tenants; second, the preservation and restoration of soil by government regulation; third, a greater emphasis on subsistence crops with money crops as secondary; fourth, a political economy that placed

⁹⁶ Frank L. Owsley, “The Pillars of Agrarianism,” *The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal*, ed. Emily S. Bingham and Thomas A. Underwood, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 203.

⁹⁷ Owsley to Fletcher, 13 June 1933.

⁹⁸ Conkin, *Southern Agrarians*, 113, “The Pillars of Agrarianism’... stands as the movement’s clearest political statement.” See also Bingham and Underwood, *New Deal*, 7.

agriculture on “an equal basis with industry, finance, and commerce”; and, finally, the establishment of regional governments with “more autonomy than the states,” in order to maintain regional balance and prevent “much sectional friction and sectional exploitation.” Owsley found ways of tying these pillars into his revisionist view of southern history and the Civil War. “The belief that industrialism, as soon as it got control of the federal government, would not only exploit agriculture but would destroy the South was behind the whole secession movement.” Owsley summarized the issue, which in his mind was the core of the Agrarian movement, the destitution of the southern condition, and his desire to influence public policy: “We are demanding a fair hearing for the fundamental cause of the South- now that slavery can no longer befog the real issue.”

Owsley outlines a proposal for land distribution on the grounds that, “The more widespread is the ownership of property, the more happy and secure will be the people and the nation.”⁹⁹ As reflected in a letter to Fletcher, Owsley was convinced that an “Agrarian restoration” was the only way for America to avoid communism or fascism. “Every one with whom I have conversed agrees that whether you like agrarianism for its own sake it will probably be our only way of caring for the technologically unemployed.”¹⁰⁰ To properly appreciate Owsley’s point of view, it is important to realize that during the Great Depression many intellectuals were uncertain whether capitalism would endure as a viable economic system. In a letter written much later in his life, Owsley explained that he “believed the entire system was in its death throes,”¹⁰¹ and his thesis for much of the 1930s was that “a restoration of property

⁹⁹ Owsley, “The Pillars of Agrarianism,” 199-211.

¹⁰⁰ Frank L. Owsley to Fletcher, 11 March 1934, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

¹⁰¹ Owsley to Carter, 14 March 1952.

would bring a restoration of democracy.”¹⁰² This was also the central argument of Owsley’s essay in the 1936 book *Who Owns America?*, written by the “evolved group” of the Agrarians, wanting “nothing more than to influence lawmakers.”¹⁰³ In this essay, Owsley argued that widely distributed private property “formed the basis of the early American State” but “has all but disappeared.” This control over property is what he calls “the keystone of the arch which supported the free state,” furthering his view that federal intervention for land distribution was a reasonable avenue to relieve rural plight and would save the country from capitalism’s inevitable collapse into totalitarianism.¹⁰⁴ As Owsley later reflected, *Who Owns America* was “a more considered statement of agrarian economics” than the early Agrarian writings, which were composed “during the desperate first years of the Great Depression.”¹⁰⁵

Agrarianism in Owsley’s Scholarship and Professional Activities

His central argument of the inevitable convergence of industrial capitalism and totalitarianism was not uncommon at the time, yet for a professional historian, such outspoken polemics certainly risked his reputation with other scholars. His 1933 essay “Scottsboro, the Third Crusade: The Sequel to Abolition and Reconstruction” illustrates well Owsley’s tendency to mix history and polemics and the effects wandering “outside the limits of history” would have on his career.¹⁰⁶ In the essay, which he delivered at the 1933 AHA meeting as a conference paper, Owsley argued that the Scottsboro trial was the third crusade against the South by northerners, after abolition and Reconstruction, and that Communist agitators and industrialists

¹⁰² Frank L. Owsley to Stone, 24 May 1938, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 1, File 2, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

¹⁰³ Bingham and Underwood, introduction to *New Deal*, 7.

¹⁰⁴ Frank L. Owsley “Foundations of Democracy,” *The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal*, ed. Emily S. Bingham and Thomas A. Underwood (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 212-225.

¹⁰⁵ Owsley to Carter, 14 March 1952.

¹⁰⁶ Owsley to Warren, 24 Feb. 1938, quoted in Michael O’Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 173.

where using southern blacks as pawns in order to “discredit the South in the eyes of the North so as to gain support for their Southern programs.”¹⁰⁷ The decision to read this paper in front of his academic peers was one which brought Owsley much criticism. He later wrote to his fellow Agrarian Agar that his delivery, “told the unvarnished truth in unvarnished language,” but he lamented that such “truthfulness” “may serve immediate ends and afford a great deal of personal satisfaction; but it undermines one’s authority as a historian.”¹⁰⁸

Though by 1938 Owsley and many of other active Agrarians had become completely disillusioned by Roosevelt and the New Deal, Owsley now had first-hand experience in understanding the consequences polemics could have for a historians career. It is not surprising, therefore, that when in 1938 the National Emergency Council released the *Report on Economic Conditions in the South*, one finds little evidence of Owsley’s reaction. Per President Roosevelt’s request, a group of southern liberals produced the *Report*, a pamphlet outlining the economic problems of the South. Accompanying this influential document was a letter from Roosevelt infamously declaring the South “the Nation’s No. 1 economic problem.”¹⁰⁹ Davidson, however, did not stay silent on the issue. His 1938 “An Agrarian Looks at the New Deal” sharply criticized Roosevelt, “the Lord of Misrule,” and his New Deal policies for having no philosophical basis, causing the nation to move “deeper and deeper into confusion as the New Deal became less and less new.” The whole situation was exacerbated, according to Davidson,

¹⁰⁷ Frank L. Owsley, “Scottsboro, the Third Crusade: The Sequel to Abolition and Reconstruction,” *The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal*, ed. Emily S. Bingham and Thomas A. Underwood (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 191-192.

¹⁰⁸ Owsley to Agar, 1 Oct 1935, Tate Papers, Princeton University, quoted in *Southern Agrarians and the New Deal*, 175-176.

¹⁰⁹ *Report on Economic Conditions of the South, Confronting Southern Poverty in the Great Depression*, ed. David L. Carlton and Peter A. Coclanis (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996), 42.

by the fact that Roosevelt “came into office sponsored by a party that had let its old principles fall into desuetude and had no sharply defined new ones.”¹¹⁰

By the release of the *Report*, the remaining Agrarians were making their splintered retreat. In addition to prevailing disagreements over the movement, many of the Agrarians became absorbed in their own careers, which were moving rapidly in diverging directions.¹¹¹ In 1941, Davidson sent out a letter to all of the original Agrarians with information regarding the status of funds earned from the sale of *I'll Take My Stand*. Though he retained a matter-of-fact tone for most of letter, he took a moment in his closing paragraph to express his despondency at the Agrarians' obvious abandonment of their cause. “When I look at the confusion of our times, I can scarcely believe my eyes.” He continued, “I don't know whether to be more astonished at the confusion or at the relative non-participation of those who ten years, and even five years ago, spoke out boldly, and were looked to by many interested persons, and are still, I think, looked to.”¹¹² Despite this appeal, the movement was decidedly over, though in Owsley's personal beliefs and scholarship, he remained steadfast to the cause until his death in 1956.

Owsley echoed in other areas of his professional career the theme of sectional resistance to outside influence and the promotion of what he considered to be distinctly southern values. His goal was to restore a South that he felt had been abandoned by other southerners, while aligning his idea of the South to regional patriotism and any other South to pro-northern traitors. In 1934, he co-founded a secret student organization at Vanderbilt known as the Phalanx, “to fight the cause of the South.” Though the organization was secret, Owsley stated that it would still hold public forums, “to discuss issues which fail to obtain hearings in our scalawag and

¹¹⁰ *An Agrarian Looks at the New Deal* manuscript, Donald Davidson Papers, Box 24, Folder 15, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

¹¹¹ Bingham and Underwood, introduction to *New Deal*, 20.

¹¹² Donald Davidson to the authors of *I'll Take My Stand*, 3 January 1941, Donald Davidson Papers, Box 24, Folder 18, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

carpet bagger press.” Another aim of the organization according to Owsley was to establish chapters in “every college and university in the South” in order to “organize and direct public opinion,” a lofty goal which the organization never realized, as it dissolved several years after it was founded. Nevertheless, Owsley saw the organization as an opportunity to encourage students across the South to resist both northern, industrialist influences and the southern leaders who sold-out their region by embracing these influences. He noted, “The rank and file are already on our side; but they have been betrayed by the leaders.”¹¹³ To Owsley, the existence of this club was an emotional matter, as he revealed in a letter. “The angels must weep at the arrogance, complacency, conceit and success of the Northern Industrialists.” The topic even elicited the self-aware confession, “I am bitter to the marrow, clear through the marrow. So bitter that I feel that I am losing my poise as a historian.”¹¹⁴ Owsley strived his whole career for the “cause of the South,” and as evidenced by the fervent words he oftentimes expressed in his letters, bitterness was a significant driving force behind Owsley’s professional activities, but, well aware of the importance of “poise” and detachment for a historian, Owsley recognized that his bitterness was also hindering his career.

The formation of this organization was only one of many means pursued by Owsley to disseminate his views. The scale on which Owsley hoped to exercise influence was always at least as large as his vision for the Phalanx. His main strategy was to influence younger generations through writing and teaching to embrace his point of view. Owsley knew that though his books were not popular with the public or with large audiences, ‘the historians will read them, but it is the historians who teach history classes and write text books and they will

¹¹³ Owsley to Fletcher, 11 March 1934.

¹¹⁴ Frank L. Owsley to unknown, n. d., Frank Owsley Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

gradually and without their own knowledge be forced into our position.’¹¹⁵ In this theory, Owsley took solace. Even when he could see the immediate effects of forces that were changing the South in directions he did not like, such as continued industrialization and the emerging pressures to break down the Jim Crow institution, Owsley felt confident that he could still win the battle for his South in the long-run, through the dissemination of his views.

Vanderbilt University, Agrarianism, and Owsley

Much of the time that Owsley worked at Vanderbilt University was under James. H. Kirkland, the longest serving chancellor in Vanderbilt University’s history, serving from 1893 to 1937. One of the many things Kirkland occupied himself with during this forty-four year period was researching and writing a history of the University, which he eventually published in a three volume series. Kirkland’s history of Vanderbilt was particularly revealing of this chancellor’s views and goals, and it illustrated the environment in which Owsley worked for seventeen years and the Agrarian movement formed.

Kirkland begins the story of Vanderbilt’s founding in his 1934 “Brief sketch of the Origin and Work of Vanderbilt University,” “Vanderbilt University is a child of the North and South. It was planned and developed by southern educational leaders. It was endowed by a business man of New York.” Kirkland explained that in 1872 at a convention in Memphis, those in attendance planned to establish an institution for higher education, the “Central University of the Methodist Episcopal Church South,” and projected that \$1,000,000, preferably furnished from the South, would be needed to accomplish this. It soon became apparent that this goal could not be met due to the lack of capital in the impoverished South. Bishop Holland N. McTyeire then

¹¹⁵ Bethany Leigh Johnson, “Regionalism, Race, and the Meaning of the Southern Past: Professional History in the American South, 1896-1961” (PhD diss., Rice University, 2001), 186.

personally influenced the wealthy entrepreneur from New York, Cornelius Vanderbilt, to take interest in the project and donate the \$1,000,000:

The dream of an institution, built and endowed out of collections from the South, found a substitute in an institution made possible by a great benefaction from the North, from which direction no one had dared hope for either encouragement or assistance. In a day of strong prejudice, Vanderbilt University was dedicated to the healing of sectional strife, and as Commodore Vanderbilt himself wrote “to strengthening the ties that should exist between all sections of our common county.” This is the story of the origin of Vanderbilt University.¹¹⁶

This image of Vanderbilt projected by Kirkland as an institution built to bridge barriers between sections and overcome prejudice certainly contrasts with the sectionalist activities of the Agrarians in the early 1930s. Given these intensely diverging views, it is not surprising that the Agrarian movement had no official ties to Vanderbilt and that the university did not make any claims to the movement until years after it had ended.¹¹⁷

Kirkland dug in his heels even deeper in his “The Intellectual Tendencies of the South.” He stated outright, “The Old South had ideas and ideals of its own; the present South shares the thought and life of the modern world.” This was Kirkland’s distinction between an “Old South” and a “New South,” but contrary to Owsley, he fully embraced this “New South” as progressive. “The South is no longer a problem, it is not even the home of a peculiar people. It shares the intellectual movements of the world and responds to the currents of universal history.” He continued to state that intellectual currents in the South were moving toward freedom of thought

¹¹⁶ *A Brief Sketch of the Origin and Work of Vanderbilt University* manuscript, James H. Kirkland Papers, Box 13, Folder 9, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

¹¹⁷ See Conkin, *Southern Agrarians*, 2, “The Agrarians largely created an unwanted notoriety or embarrassed the University by the ensuing political and economic controversies.”

and that the views of a typical southerner could not be expected to be monolithic as they once were, because the South was no longer bound to its “artificial unity of thought and speech.” He cites “a change of attitude in the north” as a primary facilitator of this change. “As the north grows less critical, less fanatical, less severe, the south grows more open-minded, more just, more free.” While Kirkland was writing this article, the Agrarian movement, which called for unity in southern thought against northern industrialism and outside influence on the southern way of life, was well underway. This statement and others by Kirkland appeared to contradict many of the Agrarians’ views directly, and could be considered Vanderbilt’s “official” stance, rejecting views of the Agrarians as unrepresentative of the University.¹¹⁸

The opinions expressed by this essay would no doubt be those of the “New South” sell-out, in the eyes of Owsley. In a later section of the same essay, however, Kirkland claimed that one of the most “distinct intellectual achievements of the new south” was the work of southern students and historians in the rewriting of southern history. Kirkland was himself present at the founding meeting of the Southern History Association in April 1896. He believed in the value of scientific history grounded in local and regional documents, and singled out the Southern Historical Society and “the establishment of dozens of similar societies in every state” for their contributions in publishing “a mass” of source materials. The spread of scientific history, Kirkland asserted, “is one of the most distinct intellectual achievements of the new south.”¹¹⁹ Though his ideology was clearly different from Owsley’s, Kirkland was supportive, even proud, of the history Owsley was producing at Vanderbilt. This contributes greatly to understanding Owsley’s conflicted views of this institution during the early to mid 1930s.

¹¹⁸ *Intellectual Tendencies of the South* manuscript, James H. Kirkland Papers, Box 16, Folder 13, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN. See also *Southern Education and Southern Thought* and *Some Problems of Southern Colleges* manuscripts, James H. Kirkland Papers, Box 14, Folders 30 and 38, *Ibid*.

¹¹⁹ Kirkland, *Intellectual Tendencies*.

On one hand, after the publication of *I'll Take My Stand* and the subsequent scattering of the Agrarians away from Vanderbilt and Nashville, Owsley felt ever more isolated and resentful of the University. He admitted in a letter that once Warren and Tate had left Tennessee, Vanderbilt was a lonely place, “depressing after so many pleasant days of making the world over in the warmth of friendship and cocktails.”¹²⁰ In a letter to Tate after he left Vanderbilt, Owsley expressed his hatred for the administration by imploring Tate to make ‘the workings of the maggots’ public.¹²¹ Owsley’s clearly articulated isolation and resentment may have been due to his frustrations over the lack of support and recognition from the University for the Agrarian cause, the delay with which Vanderbilt began collecting manuscripts and other equipment to further graduate studies, or the problems Owsley had with his salary.¹²² It is hard to imagine, however, that the progression of Vanderbilt University towards becoming a nationally respected institution by way of embracing and emulating northern universities did not anger Owsley in a deeply fundamental way. It is likely that Owsley’s words convey his alienation caused by his once comfortable academic home and research environment now embodying his much abhorred ideas of the new southerner more and more with each new administrative decision. The specifics of Owsley’s problems with Vanderbilt, however, are hard to pin down. Paul Conkin and Michael O’Brien cite numerous letters from Owsley’s papers at Vanderbilt, which express his discontent, but since those works were published and before her death in 1999, Owsley’s wife and research partner Harriet removed over twenty letters from his collection, many of which

¹²⁰ Frank L. Owsley to Andrew Lytle, 7 October 1934, Andrew Lytle Papers, Box 4, Folder 11, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

¹²¹ Conkin, *Southern Agrarians*, 144, letter from Owsley to Tate, 12 November 1932. The letters from Owsley to Tate have since been removed by Harriet Owsley from the Frank Lawrence Owsley Papers.

¹²² Harriet Owsley, *Frank Lawrence Owsley: Historian of the Old South: a memoir* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1990), 122, 129, 133.

expressed his negative views of Vanderbilt, as well as the portion of his memoir describing his time at Vanderbilt.¹²³

Despite the removal of these letters, there still exists some evidence in Vanderbilt Special Collections of the Agrarian sentiment that Vanderbilt was selling out to the North. In a short essay written by Donald Davidson, Davidson implored the administration to consider the possibility that Vanderbilt was spiritually and culturally out of step with its region. He urged, “I believe rather our relation is distant, artificial, far from intimate... We have drifted into a position of isolation.” The number one foundational cause of this phenomenon, in the eyes of Davidson, was Vanderbilt’s administrative policies, which he felt alienated the alumni, distanced the university from the church, and were based on no real foundation. He feared that as a result of these, Vanderbilt would become “a haven for drifters from the metropolitan East and elsewhere-outcasts from their own regions.”¹²⁴

Despite these contentions, Owsley must have felt substantial support from Vanderbilt and specifically Chancellor Kirkland for his research projects. Owsley expressed in a letter to Kirkland that upon hearing the news that the Chancellor would retire, he “felt like weeping.” He explained that Kirkland and W. L. Fleming, the late former head of the history department, “were Vanderbilt.” Owsley claimed that once Kirkland leaves, Vanderbilt will be as strange of a place as it was when he arrived there in 1920. He concluded his letter with the heartfelt statement, “May God bless you, sir, as you so richly deserve after so great a service to the

¹²³ See O'Brien, *The Idea*, 252-255, and Conkin, *Southern Agrarians*, 186-188.

¹²⁴ *Vanderbilt and the South* manuscript, Donald Davidson Papers, Box 28, Folder 20, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

country and to the South, so poor and broken and so in need of the great leader that you have been."¹²⁵

The conflict Owsley had between professional support and security, as he was already a tenured professor at Vanderbilt, and his alienation from his environment, an institution which was fully determined to distance itself from the southern views and ideas associated with backwardness, poverty, white supremacy, and distinctive sectionalism, is a significant aspect of Owsley's story. In this period of his life, Owsley was thinking, writing, and researching during a time of great change in the South and, equally significant, a time of great resistance to the changes taking place. Owsley himself was also actively feeding into the tension of the situation by promoting his views in his research, his published work, and his teaching. Owsley's conflicted relationship to Vanderbilt, the birthplace of this movement and the institution facilitating Owsley's professional work, was a symptom of intellectual climate in the South during this period of transformation.

¹²⁵ Frank L. Owsley to James H. Kirkland, 8 January 1935, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

Chapter IV

Surviving the Movement

Admittedly, Owsley endured much criticism for the essays he wrote as an Agrarian in the 1930s including “The Irrepressible Conflict,” “The Pillars of Agrarianism,” and, perhaps the best example, “Scottsboro, the Third Crusade: The Sequel to Abolition and Reconstruction,” which at times paint Owsley as both radical and reactionary, and they certainly detract from his claims to be an “objective” historian. By 1935, Owsley was feeling the effects of his polemical activities on his reputation as a historian. He confessed, “I am strictly an amateur in social criticism, and I feel that I am weakening myself professionally by taking too prominent a part in affairs in which I have no great knowledge.”¹²⁶ Several months later he wrote, “Until recently, I have got mighty far” uncovering the “abolition roots of American history and its writing” without “being distrusted or accused of bias or motive,” but, as a consequence of his Agrarian activities, “I detect a certain suspicion which has without a doubt arisen out of my partisan writings in the *American Review* and elsewhere.”¹²⁷ After his decision to put polemics aside, Owsley outlived the movement by over 15 years, giving him time to reflect on, defend, and attempt to intellectually legitimize his own writings.

In a 1952 letter, Owsley showed little apology for his actions, yet seemed critically reflective on the approach of the Agrarians in proliferating their views. “The Nashville Agrarians made a strategic error in giving themselves a tag and in making what appeared extreme statements to an unprepared world.” The issue, then, was not the content of Agrarian ideas per se, but how the world perceived them. “*I’ll Take My Stand* created in many circles

¹²⁶ Owsley to Agar, 26 September 1935, Andrew Lytle Papers, Box 4, Folder 21, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

¹²⁷ Quoted in Michael O’Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 179. Owsley to Agar, 1 October 1935, Allen Tate Papers, Box 33, Folder 36, Princeton University Manuscripts Division, Princeton, New Jersey.

about the same impression as that of a brickbat tossed through a glass window into a room where a group of elderly spinsters were playing Pollyanna.” Though “the tag ‘Agrarianism’ and some of the shockingly frank and blunt opinions and conclusions that we put forth doubtless caused the timid to scatter for shelter,” Owsley still claimed that people were widely influenced by Agrarianism, and this influence was much larger than it appeared “on the surface” due to the caution with which others adopted Agrarian ideas.¹²⁸

Owsley undeniably applied this conviction to his life and works from the end of the Agrarian movement around 1939 to his death in 1956. He carried it even in his activities in the Southern Historical Association, an institution for historical professionalism in the South. He certainly applied it to his main projects in the 1940s and early 1950s, *Plain Folk of the Old South* and a collaborative American history textbook project *A Short History of the American People*.

Owsley and the Southern Historical Association

A group of southern historians founded the Southern Historical Association (SHA) on November 2, 1934, for the “encouragement of the study of history in the South” and “with particular emphasis on the history of the South” through the promotion of “research, teaching, and the development of general interest in” southern history, which for the first time provided institutional expression to southern regional history.¹²⁹ Although its primary goal was to promote southern history, the organization did also seek “to promote historical scholarship in the South in the fields of Ancient, European, and English history.”¹³⁰ As Johnson illustrates, the

¹²⁸ Frank L. Owsley to Carter, 14 March 1952, Frank Lawrence Owsley Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

¹²⁹ *Minutes of the Organization Meeting of the Southern Historical Association, Atlanta, Georgia, November 2, 1934* manuscript, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 9, Folder 31, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

¹³⁰ *Proposal* manuscript by Wendell H. Stephenson, no date, Frank Lawrence Owsley Papers, Box 9, Folder 31, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

SHA was not a completely homogenous group of like-minded membership. An unrestricted membership policy extended membership, at least nominally, to anyone interested in the objectives of the SHA regardless of gender, race, regional identity or educational background, although white, male history professors composed the majority of SHA membership.¹³¹ The organization did, however, also include amateur historians and other non-professionals who simply had an interest in southern history.

Regardless, the founders of the SHA had always envisioned the organization to serve as a 'professional' institution. As Johnson explains, white southern historians "considered themselves to be full professionals, vested with interpretive authority by their training, and committed to their membership in the American historical profession." These professional southern historians therefore sought to break completely from traditional notions of southern history marked by romanticized regional heritage or vindication and used objectivity as a standard to distance themselves.¹³² To this end, the infant SHA established *The Journal of Southern History* at Louisiana State University as its official organ, "the editorial policy of which would be controlled by a board of editors chosen by the Association."¹³³ In 1949 historian David M. Potter read a paper at the annual SHA meeting discussing the significance of the *Journal* for southern history during the publication's first fifteen years. Explaining how the *Journal* "embodied southern historical activity for these fifteen years," by which Potter clearly means professional southern historical activity, he claimed, "For one thing, it is generally agreed that rigorously high editorial standards have been maintained." He added, "During these years...

¹³¹ Bethany Leigh Johnson, "Regionalism, Race, and the Meaning of the Southern Past: Professional History in the American South, 1896-1961" (PhD diss., Rice University, 2001) 181.

¹³² Johnson, "Professional History in the American South," 327, 329-330.

¹³³ *Minutes of the Organization Meeting*, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 9, Folder 31.

virtually all significant work on southern history has either appeared in, or been reflected in, the *Journal*.”¹³⁴

Owsley took a particular interest in the activities of the SHA and the *Journal* along with many of his close friends and colleagues, such as A. B. Moore, William C. Binkley, and Thomas Perkins Abernethy. The SHA even held a session on Agrarianism at the 1936 meeting where perspectives sympathetic to the Agrarians did surface.¹³⁵ As Potter pointed out in his 1949 evaluation of the *Journal*, out of the 169 different contributors during the *Journal*'s first fifteen years, Frank L. Owsley and J. Carlyle Sitterson both appeared five times, more often than any other contributors. Once LSU could no longer make the financial contributions necessary to keep the *Journal* on its campus, Owsley successfully campaigned to both the SHA and Chancellor Oliver C. Carmichael to bring the *Journal* to Vanderbilt in 1943. In a note he made for Carmichael's use, Owsley explained that adopting the *Journal* would be consistent with the goals of the university, “to serve the region in the study of its social, economic, and political problems,” but, well aware of the national ambitions of Carmichael for Vanderbilt University, Owsley framed his notes to point out that the *Journal*'s adoption would not have strictly provincial implications, as it “has already established a reputation as one of the two or three outstanding historical publications in the country.” He insisted, “if Vanderbilt can assume the sponsorship and maintain the present standard, we will be placed in a position to command the attention and respect of the historical profession, not only in the South but throughout the nation.” Owsley's argument worked, and the *Journal* came to Vanderbilt.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ David M. Potter, “An Appraisal of Fifteen Years of the Journal of Southern History, 1935-1949,” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Feb., 1950), 26.

¹³⁵ George Brown Tindall, introduction to *The Pursuit of Southern History*, ed. George Brown Tindall (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), xiv.

¹³⁶ “Notes for Chancellor Carmichael's Use” manuscript, no date, Frank Lawrence Owsley Papers, Box 9, Folder 41, Vanderbilt Special Collections, Nashville, TN. See also “Notes for use as basis for

Meanwhile, as conflicts escalated in Asia and Europe on the eve of World War II, the debate over the role of historians in making their work relevant to contemporary issues was in full swing. Despite receiving criticism for non-academic essays like “The Irrepressible Conflict,” Owsley still considered himself a true professional historian and maintained the respect of many of his peers. Though many southern historians attempted to isolate their work from the current affairs, Owsley was known for his willingness to speak out openly on contemporary political issues, and his insistence on the “fascism” of the historical North for its lack of understanding of the “integrity and position of the South.”¹³⁷ In 1940, as America prepared for involvement in World War II, Owsley was elected president of the SHA.

He delivered for his presidential address a speech with a zealously sectional message, “The Fundamental Cause of the Civil War: Egocentric Sectionalism,” and his was the first of several SHA presidential addresses that took on what historian Robert F. Durden describes as “the character of a reopened sectional conflict.”¹³⁸ Owsley argued that though sectionalism is unavoidable due to the nature of America, conflicts such as the Civil War are not inevitable and only become so when the nature of the sectionalism does not regard local differences and interests with respect and acknowledgement. He claims that in 1861 there were three key symptoms of egocentric sectionalism in the North which caused the Civil War: “the habit of the dominant section” considering itself the “sole possessor of nationalism” and “regarding the minority group as factional,” the “perennial” aim of one section to have “political ascendancy of the Federal government by destroying the sectional balance of power,” and the failure to adhere

consideration of the possibility of Vanderbilt University's assuming the sponsorship of the *Journal of Southern History*” manuscript, no date, Frank Lawrence Owsley Papers, Box 9, Folder 41.

¹³⁷ Johnson, “Professional History in the American South,” 347, 349.

¹³⁸ Robert F. Durden, “A Half Century of Change in Southern History,” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 51, no. 1 (Feb., 1985), 6.

to what Owsley terms “the comity of sections,” or the failure of one section “in their language and conduct to respect the dignity and self-respect of the people in the other section.”¹³⁹

As Johnson observes in her detailed dissertation on the SHA, though historians such as Owsley do represent the typical conception of conservative, defensive, white southern historians, his view was one of many views within the SHA. She argues that in fact there were many fissures within the SHA which illustrates that the organization “was not the source of total, consistent, and institutionalized defiance that it seemed to be to later historians.” She claims that instead, the view expressed by Owsley was only one view among many competing within this intellectual “arena” for the “prize” of “authority of the association’s institutions.”¹⁴⁰ Though the evidence supports her interpretation, Owsley’s presidential address was typical of the early years in its sectionalist fervor, which peaked in 1942 with Albert B. Moore’s address “One Hundred Years of Reconstruction of the South.”¹⁴¹ Though there were dissenting views represented in the organization, in the organization’s early years, they were not necessarily reflected in its leadership or policy.

The address was selected for a compilation of Owsley’s essays published after his death in *The Selected Essays of Frank Lawrence Owsley*. In the Foreword for the work Andrew Lytle, Owsley’s Agrarian peer and long time friend, commented, “It must be said that, when Mr. Owsley is writing history, he writes as a historian looking for fact and truth. When he writes as a man of ideas, his knowledge of history informs him. He does not confuse the two approaches.” It would certainly be fascinating to have questioned Lytle on which approach he believed Owsley took in this historical but bitterly polemical address. Lytle did acknowledge, however,

¹³⁹ Frank L. Owsley, “The Fundamental Cause of the Civil War: Egocentric Sectionalism,” *The Pursuit of Southern History*, ed. George Brown Tindall (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 80.

¹⁴⁰ Johnson, “Professional History in the American South,” 211.

¹⁴¹ Durden, “A Half Century of Change,” 9.

that Owsley was a man who, “can expound his belief in all kinds of matters, knowing full well that he is taking the risk of judgement.”¹⁴²

Owsley’s choice to unabashedly risk judgement in the face of his historian peers is telling of his stance as a historian. Owsley was a man deeply committed to the principles of historical objectivity and considered himself as much of a professional as any historian of the AHA. As a southern intellectual, however, this was not the only principle Owsley was deeply committed to. Owsley seemed to see his own “moral authority” as permission for his more aggressively polemical work such as “The Fundamental Cause of the Civil War.” His belief is illustrated well in a 1938 letter to Robert Penn Warren. After Owsley criticized another historian, Robert McElroy, for passing “ethical judgements,” Warren pointed to the obvious contradiction in Owsley’s own work, to which Owsley responded, “Mr. McElroy obviously does not have the proper ethical values, therefore he should not be permitted to express an opinion.” Realizing the harshness of his claim, Owsley qualified:

I still insist that the true historian has no right to say whether a thing is morally right or wrong- not as a historian, though he may do it as a moral or immoral being. On the other hand a historian must say, frequently, that a thing, judged from accepted economic and social standards, has had a good or bad effect- your “value judgements,” I think.¹⁴³

This somewhat candid defense demonstrates Owsley’s clear yet confused take on objectivity. On one hand, as a scholar, Owsley had the obligation to evaluate evidence “scientifically,” but, as a man of morals, Owsley also felt obligated to speak out against the “fascism” of northern sectional practices and ideology.

¹⁴² Andrew Lytle, Foreword to *The South: Old and New Frontiers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1969), xii.

¹⁴³ Frank Lawrence Owsley to Robert Penn Warren, 24 February 1938, *Southern Review Papers*, Owsley File. Also quoted in O’Brien, *The Idea*, 169-170.

Plain Folk of the Old South

Though he did manage an uneasy reconciliation between his divergent goals and writings, by 1940, Owsley was certainly well aware of the risk of judgement he faced by participating in polemics, and he was adjusting his career accordingly. As historian Michael O'Brien puts it, "It was a difficult game to play, and he did it badly."¹⁴⁴ In a 1936 letter, Owsley outlined his objectives for a research project that would absorb him in strictly professional history for most of the next ten years of his life. The project, which aimed to establish the importance of a non slaveholding class in the antebellum South, was still consistent with Owsley's Agrarian polemics, but unlike his Agrarian activities, this research project would carry the respect and authority of professional history. He removed himself from intersectional issues, where his outspoken passion threatened his "poise" as a historian and instead married himself to a massive project on the "interior" history of the South.¹⁴⁵ Owsley described in a letter explaining the project, "During the last two summers I have examined, hastily, of course, the records of about twenty counties in Georgia and Alabama, and here is where much of the information about the non slaveholder is to be found. This, in fact, furnishes a great field of research." He claimed that most non slaveholders were landowners, so their property records existed, and "Mortgages, wills, marriages, lawsuits, find them on record in other respects." By uncovering evidence of this yeoman class of farmers, Owsley attempted to debunk what he believed to be the myth resulting from northern historians' writings about the South, namely that the pre-war South was a slavocracy consisting of a small class of plantation slave owners, a large

¹⁴⁴ O'Brien, *The Idea*, 170.

¹⁴⁵ O'Brien, *The Idea*, 180.

class of poor, illiterate whites, and a slave class. Owsley also claimed another end to this research project, to look for “unworked fields and new material” for graduate research.¹⁴⁶

Owsley, along with a team of graduate students and his wife and research assistant Harriet C. Owsley, the “Owsley School,” undertook the innovative yet labor intensive task of meticulous, systematic data collection from wills, church records, census reports, probate records, tax records, deeds, private memoirs, and diaries. Unable to persuade Vanderbilt to purchase additional data-processing equipment, Owsley and his students had only a primitive calculator to aid in their arduous data analyses. Through painstaking labor, they compiled this data into what Paul Conkin describes as “the fullest profile ever assembled” of antebellum populations in representative counties in Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana.” They then used this data to reconstruct ante-bellum southern society as one with complete class harmony, which “gave an almost romantic, Jeffersonian patina to his story, and helped confirm his own pro-southern, anti-Yankee sentiments.”¹⁴⁷ In Owsley’s model, the largest and most significant class in the antebellum was a landowning yeomanry, which Owsley called the “plain folk.” Based on their thorough research samples and analyses, the Owsley school claimed to overturn at last the false model presented by scholars like Ulrich B. Phillips and Lewis C. Gray, which claimed that in antebellum society, all white southerners fell either into a small group of plantation owners or a large class of poor, landless peasants.¹⁴⁸

Owsley had many friends and former students who were trained in his “school” at Vanderbilt University, and, while working on research for *Plain Folk*, he also increased his influence by putting his efforts into writing *A Short History of the American People*, a

¹⁴⁶ Owsley to Leo M. Favrot, 17 March 1936, Frank Owsley Papers, Box 1, Folder 4, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

¹⁴⁷ Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians*, 143, 144.

¹⁴⁸ See Donald L. Winters, “‘Plain Folk’ of the Old South Reexamined: Economic Democracy in Tennessee,” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 53, no. 4 (Nov., 1987), 565-586.

collaborative two-volume American history textbook, with Oliver Perry Chitwood. In a 1941 letter, Chitwood wrote, “I realize that writing a book is not a very thrilling activity at a time when Hannibal is at the gates.” He continued, “Yet I feel that I cannot serve my country better than working faithfully at the task which circumstances have assigned me.”¹⁴⁹ Chitwood and Owsley clearly shared the same goals in their scholarship and both recognized the potential that teaching and teaching aids had in influencing future generations of thinkers. Not only did they recognize this potential, they also viewed this goal with the same dedicated urgency. This text was advertised as and widely considered the only American history textbook written from a “southern perspective” on the market, and, by 1950, eighty-eight different secondary schools had adopted Volume II of the text book, including New York University and Vanderbilt University. Each volume of the textbook and the 1950 condensed single volume, *The U. S. From Colony to World Power* has its own extensive adoption list from 1946 until the mid to late 1950s.¹⁵⁰

After completing the textbook project, Owsley delivered a series of lectures at Louisiana State University, the Walter Lynwood Fleming lectures in Southern history, which he based on findings from the twelve year research effort of the Owsley school. These lectures compose the majority of Owsley’s next published work, *Plain Folk of the Old South*. *Plain Folk* was relatively well received in both the North and the South, aside from a few important exceptions.¹⁵¹ “All too many books by Southerners about their native land are marked by a harshness intended to show the author’s ‘emancipation’ from provincialism,” explained a sympathetic reviewer, Dan M. Robinson, “or by a sentimentality born of natural desires to

¹⁴⁹ Chitwood to Owsley, 19 December 1941, Frank Lawrence Owsley Papers, Box 2, Folder 4, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

¹⁵⁰ Adoption Lists, Frank Lawrence Owsley Papers, Box 9, Folder 24, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

¹⁵¹ O'Brien, *The Idea*, 182.

defend a people who have come in for an uncommon amount of criticism during the last 125 years. Happily, Dr. Owsley avoids both.”¹⁵² Other reviews called the work “fresh,” “a fair and honest appraisal of a great mass of people,” and “a lively, authenticated, and charmingly outspoken study.”¹⁵³

Fabian Linden published in his 1946 essay “Economic Democracy in the Slave South: An Appraisal of Some Recent Views” a starkly contrasting review of Owsley’s work, critiquing the methods and conclusions of *Plain Folk of the Old South*. In this essay, Linden pointed out several important fallacies in Owsley’s work, which aimed to reveal the lack of sophistication in Owsley’s statistical analysis, thus undermining the credibility of the entire research project. According to Linden, Owsley incorporated in his research generalizations about entire states based on data collected from selected agricultural areas within the state, “but the criteria for choosing these regions do not suggest that these areas constitute adequate state samples.” He contended that the sample areas were selected based on their agricultural and geographic diversity instead of being selected for representativeness of trends within the state. Linden also argued that Owsley’s “proposition maintaining that property holdings in the antebellum South were ‘well distributed’ or ‘widely diffused’ has not been convincingly demonstrated.” He claimed that this is because Owsley used the distribution of land as the main indicator of economic stratification without giving any weight to the value of large farms compared to the value of small ones or any possible variation in land quality. He refuted Owsley’s claim that a family-sized farm and sufficient livestock necessarily meant that a non-slaveholding farmer could afford to support a family and live comfortably. He claimed that Owsley’s definition of a

¹⁵² Dan M. Robison, “Reviewed: Plain Folk of the Old South,” n. d., Frank Owsley Papers, Box 9, Folder 25, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

¹⁵³ “University Historian Writes Story of Ante-Bellum Farmers”; “Portraits of the South”; “Social, Economic Structure of Old South,” Frank Owsley Papers, Box 9, Folder 25, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

'farmer' was one which already eliminates one-fourth of the rural white population, and the standard which measured the assets of the farmer was not defined or examined clearly enough to make this claim.

Linden stated, "There was without question a large number of diverse economic classes." He continued, "It is the debunking of the 'two class' fallacy that has now become the tedious cliché. And the excessive zeal sometimes displayed in the refutation tends to lay the ground work for a new but no less spurious construction." After carefully analyzing the data which Owsley used as a basis for his work, Linden concluded that though the yeomen class was numerically substantial in the areas studied by Owsley, this class only owned a small proportion of productive lands. "Due to a lack of objective criteria to determine Owsley's main arguments, what he has therefore created is just as misleading as the myth that he has dedicated himself to disproving."¹⁵⁴

Despite this blistering critique, Owsley gained the respect of many of his peers in the southern historical profession for his innovative approach, and the data he collected with his wife and students remains useful for historians even today. Historian Donald L. Winters in particular employed a significant amount of the Owsley school data for his 1994 monograph, *Tennessee Farming, Tennessee Farmers: Antebellum Agriculture in the Upper South*. In 1987, Winters also published an article reexamining the data collected by Blanche Henry Clark, one of Owsley's graduate students, in collaboration with Harriet Owsley. He analyzed the data for improved acreage, farm value, and slaveownership using tables to break down the assets of each decile of the sample population and Gini indexes to show where each asset was concentrated. After this analysis, Winters found that the evidence gathered supported neither the Owsley model nor the

¹⁵⁴ Fabian Linden, "Economic Democracy in the Slave South: An Appraisal of Some Recent Views," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 31, no. 2 (April 1946), 154, 164, 185-187.

Phillips-Gray model. “This analysis, then, confirms the major criticisms of Owsley’s detractors.” It “reveals that farm wealth was markedly more concentrated than Owsley contended... planter economic dominance rather than economic democracy characterized the antebellum South.” He added, however, that the evidence did support that the free rural population was more varied and had better economic circumstances than the Phillips-Gray model suggested. As Winters concluded, “If Owsley exaggerated the degree of equality in the distribution of agricultural assets, his critics have ignored the absolute gains in yeoman wealth holding that were also a central component of his interpretation.”¹⁵⁵

Owsley Retires to Alabama

In 1949, upon the completion of the textbook project and shortly before the publication of *Plain Folk of the Old South*, Owsley left Vanderbilt to take a position as chair in American History at the University of Alabama. Reflecting on his move from Vanderbilt one year later, Owsley wrote, “We were very happy there for many years; but I look on the last ten years spent there as nothing short of a nightmare... the man at the head there now is incredible, and the faculty is so badly demoralized that some of them will shoot themselves sooner or later, if they can not get away.”¹⁵⁶ Owsley felt increasingly isolated at Vanderbilt as the Agrarians left Nashville one by one, was frustrated at the University’s refusal to fund a manuscript acquisition effort, and waged increasingly heated battles with administrative figures throughout the 1940s.

By 1941, Owsley was head to head with Chancellor Carmichael, Kirkland’s successor, and attempted to head an opposition group against his new policy for retirement. As Paul

¹⁵⁵ Winters, “‘Plain Folk’ Reexamined,” 585-586.

¹⁵⁶ Owsley to Lytle, 24 January 1950, Andrew Lytle Papers, Box 4, Folder 12, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

Conkin, described in his extensively detailed work on the history of Vanderbilt University, *Gone with the Ivy*, Carmichael and his administration “thought Agrarianism and hell-raising had a common identity and thus viewed the surviving Agrarians as enemies.” Owsley finally reached his breaking point in 1947 with a new chancellor, Harvie Branscomb. Branscomb had his sights set on making Vanderbilt a nationally competitive university. He decided to downgrade southern history within the history department and cut funding for the *Journal of Southern History*. In light of these “heretical” goals, Owsley finally accepted the offer from Alabama, which he had been considering on and off for years. A manuscript program had already been well established at Alabama, and the university was finally able to offer Owsley an appropriate salary.¹⁵⁷

At Alabama Owsley threw himself into building the graduate department while also continuing other professional activities through the SHA. He attempted in 1954 to find interest for two sessions at the SHA meeting in November. His idea was a presentation of papers on the topic, “Was the Old South Backward or Merely Different?” He sent a series of letters to his colleagues, but by the end of March only his long time friend H. C. Nixon had responded with a viable idea.¹⁵⁸ The lack of enthusiasm for the now tired battle that twenty years before fed the exciting controversy of Agrarianism reveals that, by the end of his career, Owsley was on the periphery of southern history, despite being a pioneer in research methodology.

Meanwhile, the Civil Rights Movement was gearing up in the South. This was the same year as the monumental Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, which decided that racially segregated schools were inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional. Owsley commented to Lytle in a letter, “I am convinced that integration at this level and of a mass

¹⁵⁷ Conkin, *The Souther Agrarians*, 145.

¹⁵⁸ Owsley to Nixon, 18 March 1954, Frank Lawrence Owsley Papers, Box 1, Folder 4, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN. See also Owsley to W. B. Hesseltine, 26 January 1954 and Owsley to T. Conn Bryan, 26 February 1954, Frank Lawrence Owsley Papers, Box 1, Folder 4.

proportion would be the last word in disaster to the white South and to the U.S... endless strife would follow.”¹⁵⁹ Yet in another letter to Davidson, in response to Davidson’s call for action, Owsley stated simply, ‘Well, I’m just going to brighten my own little corner.’¹⁶⁰ At this point, Owsley was done speaking out publicly on issues relating to intersectional relations, which he had spoke so authoritatively on fourteen years earlier. He instead chose to pour his efforts into another trip to Europe to conduct research for another volume on Confederate foreign relations. He died of a heart attack in England on 1956.

¹⁵⁹ Owsley to Lytle, 28 February 1956, Andrew Lytle Papers, Box 2, Folder 4, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, TN.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Harriet Owsley quoted in O’Brien, *The Idea*, 184.

Conclusion

Owsley's goal as a historian was to give a scientific basis to what he felt were the "correct" views of the South, which remained ungrounded, in his view, because there were so few southern historians. By adhering to a belief in "scientific" history, Owsley framed his task as a historian very narrowly, since this view assumed that there was history as it actually happened. Though he wanted to put history on more stable ground, his larger intent was more subjective than he was willing to recognize. As a result, Owsley lacked the necessary detachment from his research that would have enhanced the effectiveness and long-term relevance of his work. Instead, Owsley practiced the "brick-making" of the early historical profession, but he did so while inescapably locked into a pro-North versus pro-South framework.

Evident throughout his published works, Owsley had a difficult time being subtle. He believed in the value of presenting thorough, definitive research, but while explaining the results of his research, Owsley had a hard time actually connecting his research to his conclusions. This created a disconnect within his major three works between what read like his research sections and his polemics sections. To this end, Owsley never succeeded in establishing a synthesis between professionalism and his sectional allegiances, and this fundamental tension marks his entire professional career.

In his final major work, *Plain Folk of the Old South*, Owsley proved his professional credentials as a pioneer social historian, one of the earliest historians to start thinking about history from bottom up. Despite his efforts to be innovative, Owsley was still wedded to an old framework, and so he missed an important paradigm shift in his discipline. His emergence as a historian and ultimate decline to the trailing edge of southern history exemplify the deep tensions that existed between different understandings of the South and therefore of southern history.

Ultimately, Owsley was left behind by Vanderbilt and left behind by the discipline, displaced by a new generation of historians like C. Vann Woodward.

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