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Religion, Segregation, and Voting Rights: Unforgetting the Legacies of Bishops George Foster Pierce and Lucius Henry Holsey in Hancock County, Georgia, USA

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Abstract: In this essay, I explore the history and public memory of two important bishops in the Methodist churches in Georgia. Through an examination of the lives of my ancestor, Bishop George Foster Pierce, and his Black contemporary, Bishop Lucius Holsey, I seek to illustrate how the forces of settler colonialism, White supremacy, and emergent American capitalism converged with religious paternalism to shape their material lives and moral perspectives. Through family documents, letters, sermons, memorials, newspaper articles, and in-depth interviews, I situate their histories in the ongoing struggle for racial justice in Hancock County.

Keywords: slavery; paternalism; racial justice; settler colonialism; critical genealogies; Reconstruction; Pierce; Holsey; Georgia; Methodist; Methodist Episcopal Church; Colored Methodist Church; Hancock; voter suppression

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> I learned it is possible to be a Christian and a White southerner simultaneously; to be a gentlewoman and an arrogant callous creature in the same moment; to pray at night and ride a Jim Crow car the next morning and to feel comfortable on doing both. I learned to believe in freedom, to glow when the word democracy was used, and to practice slavery from morning to night. I learned it the way all of my southern people learn it: by closing door after door until one's mind and heart and conscience are blocked off from each other and from reality.
>
> Lillian Smith, Killers of the Dream (Smith 1949)

1. Introduction

In November 1862, Bishop George Foster Pierce hosted a wedding at his cotton plantation, Sunshine, just outside of Sparta, Georgia. (In United States popular culture, the word "plantation" has historically evoked a nostalgic past of beautiful antebellum homes and an idyllic southern country charm. The term also obscures the brutal reality of chattel slavery that thrived in the U.S. South for centuries. Simultaneously, it can be useful in describing the kind of agricultural commodity-based economy that persevered because of enslaved labor in the antebellum U.S. South. In *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (Baptist 2016), Edward Baptist challenges historians to reconsider plantations as forced labor camps, in a direct reckoning of how enslavers forced Indigenous, African and African-descended people to labor in agriculture, domestic work and various business enterprises under dehumanizing conditions of bondage. Other scholars, such as Antoinette Jackson (2012), who have conducted ethnographic studies with the living communities connected to plantations, emphasize that they hold important memories beyond labor.) During those times in Hancock County, it was not the typical wedding that a prominent White southern planter might have presided over, or financed. In the heart of antebellum Middle Georgia cotton country, this ceremony was different. Two enslaved Black people, Harriet A. Turner and Lucius Holsey, were getting married. Turner was a fifteen-year-old house servant, formally enslaved by Pierce himself, who he had "given" to his eldest child, Ella Caroline Pierce, my great-great-great grandmother,

as a wedding present two years earlier (Eskew 1992, p. 642). At the time, Holsey was a twenty-year-old aspiring preacher who had begun to study Methodist theology with Bishop Pierce. He was enslaved on the adjacent plantation, Rockby (which included agricultural production and a school). In his 1899 autobiography, Holsey recalled the day:

> The Bishop's wife and daughters provided for the occasion a splendid repast of good things to eat. The table, richly spread, with turkey, ham, cake and many other things, extended nearly the whole length of the spacious dining hall. "The house girls" and the "house boys" and the most prominent persons of color were invited to the wedding of the colored "swells". The ladies composing the Bishop's family, dressed my bride in the gayest and most artistic style, with red flowers and scarlet sashes predominating in the brilliant trail. (Holsey 1899, pp. 11–12)

At the same moment, Confederate soldiers, including Pierce's son, accompanied by his enslaved "body servant" (so-called "body servants" were often enslaved Black boys and young men who accompanied their masters or masters' sons who enlisted in the Confederate Army), were deployed to the front lines in Virginia to preserve the institution of slavery. Growing up, I had never heard of Pierce or Holsey before. However, in the spring of 2018, I discovered the account of the wedding in a nineteenth century biography of Pierce that my mother, Nancy Braselton Gorman, had left out in her childhood living room in Braselton, Georgia. Pierce, I learned, was my maternal great-great-great-great-grandfather.

The Pierce family were not a well-known part of my family genealogy. My own experiences in Georgia centered on the town of Braselton, named after my maternal grandfather's relatives. During the 1980s and early 1990s, my mother took my two younger siblings, Michelle and Brian, and me on the "Crescent", Amtrack's overnight train, down from our home in Washington D.C. to visit her parents in this small rural town. Many of the places, street names and people bear the Braselton name, including me. The Braselton family public history, and well-recorded genealogy, felt ever-present, tending to overshadow my grandmother's lineage.

Nan Wilson Bell, affectionally known to her grandchildren as Nana, grew up in Sparta, Hancock County, Georgia during the 1910s and 1920s with her parents and older sister. Her mother, Florence Wilson Bell, known as "Mamie", was dearly beloved by both Nana and my mom. She was George Foster Pierce's great-granddaughter. Nana married my grandfather, Harrison "Brassie" Braselton, in Sparta in 1937 and moved to Braselton where she lived until her death in 1998; see Figure 1.

Figure 1. Leo Braselton Gorman's maternal grandmother, Nan Wilson Bell, and her husband, Harrison "Brassie" Braselton, in Sparta after their wedding in 1937. Photograph courtesy of Nancy Braselton Gorman.

In the book my mother had left out on that living room table, I discovered that Pierce and his family were not only slaveholders, but prominent public defenders of slavery in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MEC, South). (In this article "slaveholders" and "slaveholding" are terms that refer to people, usually racialized as White, who have legal ownership over Black or Indigenous people's bodies and their labor.) Wanting to learn more, I asked her to accompany me along with my (then) six-year-old son, Jasper, and (then) two-year-old daughter, Nitza, on a road trip to Hancock County. On the drive down, I asked my mother about Bishop Pierce and his memory within her maternal family. She described him as "a revered ancestor who was quite famous in his time for his work as a Methodist Bishop" who was "admired by his descendants" (Gorman 2018). No one had ever talked to her about our family enslaving people on a plantation; see Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2. My mother, Nancy Braselton Gorman, and author, Leo Braselton Gorman, with daughter, Nitza Thanos Gorman, at Pierce Memorial United Methodist Church in Greensboro, Greene County, Georgia in 2018. Photograph courtesy of Jasper Thanos Gorman.

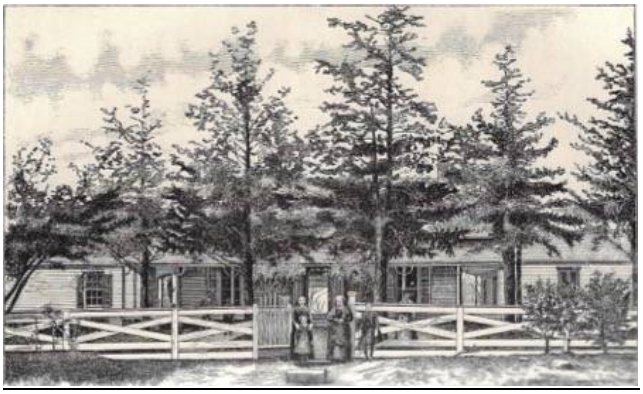

Figure 3. Bishop George Foster Pierce's home at his cotton plantation, Sunshine, just outside of Sparta in Hancock County, Georgia (Smith 1888, p. 270).

As I read more dusty biographies of Pierce and visited Middle Georgia monuments to his life and legacy, I could see that there was a lineage that connected his White peers, descendants, and contemporary admirers through a story that minimized his defense of slavery through the story of his relationship with Lucius Holsey. In Sparta, the story is

told in a prominently located mural, located on Sparta's central avenue, Broad Street, that shows the two men side by side, yet separate; see Figure 4.

Figure 4. Mural of Bishops Lucious Holsey and George Foster Pierce in downtown Sparta. Photograph by Leo B. Gorman.

The public art project was commissioned by the then-mayor of Sparta, William Evans, in 1996—the same year of the Summer Olympics in Atlanta. Williams, an African American Spartan native, who was mayor for twenty-three years (1992 to 2015), reached out to a local artist who painted the mural on the side of the historic brick building where the police station was located at the time. The mural's expansive blue sky and blooming spring flowers infer a sense of optimism, while the portraits of Holsey and Pierce on either side of the Sparta courthouse positioned next to their respective memorial churches, suggest the men shared in equal standing and perhaps collaborated. In the bottom left-hand corner, almost hidden in the color scheme, there is an image of a Native American man and his horse with adjacent earthen mounds. The mural has kept the history of the two men and their churches in the popular imagination of the town.

2. Re-Enactment

In 2019, the Fall Line Festival in Sparta, which celebrates the arts, culture and history of Hancock County, included a re-enactment of Holsey's Sunshine wedding with members of both Holsey Memorial and Pierce Memorial congregations. The performance was the brainchild of Jeanette Waddell, a local African American professional storyteller; see Figure 5.

Figure 5. Portrait of Hancock county resident, storyteller and community organizer Jeanette Waddell in Sparta, Georgia. Waddell was instrumental in the restoration the downtown Sparta mural of Bishops Holsey and Pierce and co-organized the wedding re-enactment at Sunshine as part of the Fall Line Festival in Sparta, Georgia in late 2019. Photograph courtesy of Jeanette Waddell.

A Hancock County booster, she was not a member of either church, but organized the event after working with nearby college students to restore the neglected mural of Pierce and Holsey in downtown Sparta. She explained that the mural, "is one of the most visible things you see when you come into town but very few people knew anything about who the people were". Curious, she started researching both men's lives and observed that, even within the racism of ante- and post-bellum rural Georgia, they had a "complicated religious, spiritual and physical relationship".

During our interview, Waddell said she was troubled by Holsey's decision in his later years to abandon his hope for an equal, multi-racial, integrated society and instead embrace a voluntary segregationist one. She explained: "I can't imagine his devastation. You've lived your entire life. You've given everything you are to overcoming [racism] and finally you come to a place where you feel like there's just no hope."

She was moved by Holsey's journey and wanted to share it with both Blacks and Whites in Sparta:

> I envisioned that we can continue his story—that is where his life ended, but it doesn't have to be where the story ends. We can create a new ending—not by ignoring the old ending but by thinking of new possibilities. Where can we go from here? What might have happened? How might we imagine something

> different? For me, it was wanting to give people a way of imagining the rest of our story in Hancock County. How might we add to the story we already have?

Waddell said it was harder than expected to organize the kind of event she envisioned. Weeks before, she had reached out to the two pastors of the historically connected, yet segregated, faith communities, to see if they would be interested in participating. They agreed, but Waddell was busy organizing other events for the festival and did not have as much time as she would have liked to be more directly involved with the writing of the script, and the hands-on production of the re-enactment itself.

A member of Pierce Memorial offered to write the first draft of the re-enactment's script. Upon reading it, Waddell said she was troubled because she felt it understated the larger context of slavery in which Holsey and Turner were being wed. She was disappointed that the end of Holsey's life story was not included. She asked the author to change some of the language and include more historical context. Although she still felt that it could be better, she concluded:

> It was more important for the symbolism of the moment to go forward than to nitpick . . . That was what was most important to me—that we begin to visualize a beloved community. I believe that's what Bishop Holsey wanted . . . My hope is that relationships between those two churches will build. I feel like we as a community can commit to reconciliation even though we have no idea how that would come about but we can commit to it. And that was the perspective also of the two pastors. (see Figure 6)

(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 6. (**a**): Choir members of Holsey Memorial CME Church and Pierce Memorial United Methodist Church singing together at the Sunshine wedding re-enactment. (**b**): Reverend Gwendolyn Smith is pastor at Holsey Memorial CME Church in Sparta. Darrell McGinnis is pastor at Pierce Memorial United Methodist Church in Sparta. They are pictured together holding placards celebrating the wedding re-enactment event. Photographs courtesy of Reverend Gwendolyn Smith.

Both church members attended, and both choirs sang. Reverend Gwendolyn Smith, pastor of Holsey Memorial CME Church and originally from Augusta reflected:

> I was very much interested in the wedding re-enactment because since I've been in Sparta I wanted to have a community unity and by bringing the [two churches] together, I thought that was a great occasion to do so. I thought it was a great tribute to both churches that they would come together like that.

Pastor McGinnis of Pierce Memorial, who played the role of Pierce in the play, saw the re-enactment as a "show of unity in the past and for the future". When I asked him about the history of segregation in Hancock County, he said:

> There's no doubt that Sparta has some history back in far ago that had racial tensions in it. But this community, even with all that's going on, has remained quiet on both sides of the issue because there doesn't seem to be—and I've been

> here seven years—racial tension here. I think people—just as we are striving to communicate when we did the reenactment of the wedding—got along. All they were wanting to do was live their lives and get along. And I think that's pretty much the way our community works today.

I have known Darrell McGinnis for many years because he was the pastor of Nana's church in Braselton before relocating to Sparta. Here, I was just getting to know the town my grandmother grew up in. She was not there to tell me about her experiences. I wanted to understand my ancestor's point of view, and his legacy in Sparta. Did he really just want to "get along?" Or was there more going on? What were the previous attempts at reconciliation in Hancock County, and what happened to Holsey's relationship with Pierce, and the broader Methodist Episcopal Church that made him turn away from hopes of integration? Part of this question was answered through a compelling article by historian Glenn Eskew, "Black Elitism and the Failure of Paternalism in Postbellum Georgia: The Case of Bishop Lucius Holsey", whose research on Holsey illuminated the ways in which a legacy of White paternalism reinforced racist structures before and after slavery (Eskew 1992).

In thinking about how I could make a contribution to the ongoing dialogue about racial justice in Sparta, I drew on my work as a farmer and educator at Grow Dat Youth Farm, a nonprofit dedicated to youth leadership on occupied land in New Orleans, Louisiana. Once home to six active plantations that became part of what is now New Orleans' City Park, the land on which the farm is located was once a home and hunting grounds for various Indigenous peoples. In 2011, I cofounded the organization, which hires a racially and class-diverse group of young people each year into a leadership advancement program in which they are paid to help grow sustainably produced food and participate in workshops about food justice, capitalism, and history. Together, youth and staff wrestle with the history of dislocation, farming, and slavery in the southern United States through a pedagogy that explores the cultural and environmental history of the land that our farm now occupies. Our History of the Land lesson, for instance, "theorizes oppressive structures within foodscapes and then imagines how such structures may be transformed" (Brown et al. 2020). The curriculum encourages us to explore our personal and collective pasts. As the farm manager, part of that process for me has been exploring how my ancestors'—as well as my own—race, class and gender privileges have contributed to our current material realities.

In his book, *Unforgetting: A Memoir of Family, Migration, Gangs and Revolution in the Americas,* journalist and educator, Roberto Lovato, explores his family's past in the U.S. and El Salvador by seeking to "unforget" the sidelined and outright silenced histories that shaped it (Lovato 2020).

In an interview in *Jacobian Magazine*, he said:

> I discovered this idea of *aletheia*, which comes from the Greek word for the Lethe river, the river of forgetting: The dead would inevitably have to go into the underworld, cross the river, but on their way, they would have to forget who they were in life. So, the idea of "unforgetting" comes from all the forgetting and the amnesia that I've seen and lived, politically but also in my own personal life. So, the journey of unforgetting is an act of personal and political archeology, the process of excavating the parts of history and resurrecting the memory of *los de abajo*—those below: the forgotten. (Goodfriend 2020)

For Lovato, "unforgetting" has meant placing his and his family's bi-national story in a better historical context. He traces how U.S. military support for Central American right-wing governments during the late twentieth century and mass deportations of Salvadorans from the U.S. have fueled political instability, gang violence and contributed to inherited trauma in his family and community: "Remembering is simply the act of bringing something up; unforgetting is a process that rescues, redeems the history that the powerful would rather forget", Lavato suggests (Goodfriend 2020).

In the spirit of History of the Land and Lavato's understanding of *aletheia*, I hope to contribute genealogical and historical research of George Foster Pierce and Lucius Holsey to illuminate the complex, unsettling and more-than-often overlooked historical contexts that shaped their lives. As I pursued this research project, I also began to register the genealogical privilege that I, and most White descendants, have in terms of access to historical records. I believe there is a moral responsibility to redistribute research into communities of color that are often cut off from these written records. Through family documents, letters, sermons, memorials, interviews, and secondary literature, particularly Eskew's thoughtful article, I trace the journeys of these two bishops in the context of ante- and post-bellum Georgia where they lived and preached.

3. George Foster Pierce's Ancestry and the Rise of Cotton in Georgia

George Foster Pierce's European ancestors likely arrived in British colonial Virginia and North Carolina sometime in the early to mid-1700s—a time when settlers were occupying Indigenous land that was controlled by diverse nations. Disease and the forced displacement of Native communities by militias emboldened settlers to stake claims on more and more land, and those settlers were supported by religious leaders who supported the growth of both settler colonialism and slavery; see Figure 7.

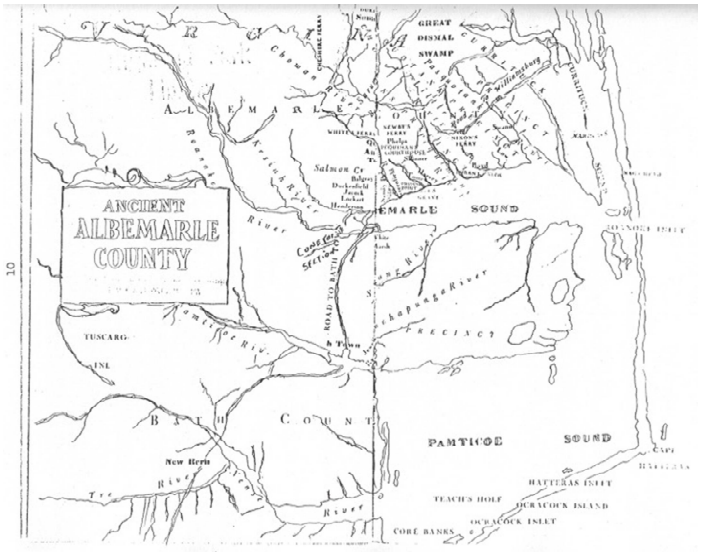

Figure 7. Map of colonial coastal northeastern Carolina where George Foster Pierce's European ancestors settled. Map from (Pierce et al. 1980, p. 10).

In written records, the name Martha Andrews Pierse (Pierce) first surfaces in the 1772 will of Warren Andrews, who had obtained land in the Contoe Creek area of what is today Martin County, North Carolina. Near the Virginia border, Martha married Phillip Pierce, a first-generation immigrant, likely from England. In his will, Warren Andrews bequeathed his plantation to his daughter and then, upon her death, to her son/his grandson, Lovick Pierse I. The same will also states:

> I also lend unto my daughter Pearse the use of one negro named Toney, one feather bed and furniture, two pewter dishes, one basin, and some spoons . . .

To his other five children, Andrews bequeathed an assortment of items and five other enslaved people, one per child. On 16 October 1786, Martha and Phillip Pierce sold Toney for 50 pounds. Their son, Lovick Pierce I, was the witness. Lovick Pierce I married Lydia Culpepper and they had ten children, the second oldest being Lovick Pierce II, born in 1785 in North Carolina. The family later sold their land, moved to South Carolina, and eventually to nearby Baldwin County, Georgia in 1804 (Pierce and Maxwell 1981, pp. 3–10).

At the time, Georgia had permitted slavery for less than 60 years, and still shared borders with many Indigenous nations, including the Cherokee in the north, and the Muskogee (Lower Creek) nation in the middle part of the state. Established as a colony in 1733 for free European laborers, the Province of Georgia, under the leadership of James Oglethorpe, outlawed slavery two years later. White settlers slowly trickled into areas where Muskogee peoples had lived, hunted, fished and trapped for generations. Facing mounting pressure from White planters who wanted enslaved African workers, the government of Georgia legalized slavery again in 1751. After the American Revolutionary War ended in 1783, American landless war veterans, many from Virginia and the Carolinas, were awarded government land grants for their service and flooded into the area (Pierce and Maxwell 1981, pp. 23–25).

Pierce II, who was a veteran, appears to have submitted a claim in this land lottery. The lands around the Oconee and Ogeechee Rivers, where he and George Foster Pierce's future father-in-law eventually settled in Greene and Hancock counties, were contested by the Muskogee, but White settlers gained further ground through a series of illegitimate treaties signed between colonists and a select group of Muskogee chiefs who were not authorized to negotiate for the Confederacy as a whole. The treaties of Augusta (1782), Shoulderbone Creek (1786) and Colerain (1796) buttressed White settler claims to land. By the early 1800s, Muskogee bands had lost most of their hunting grounds in middle Georgia and were being forced westward which is likely how Pierce II acquired his land in the federal government's lottery (Shivers 1990, pp. 3–4).

Despite descending from a slaveholding family with commercial agricultural holdings in North Carolina, the Pierces in Georgia were subsistence farmers who devoted much of their time and resources toward religion. Lovick Pierce II, along with his brother, Reddick, joined the Methodist Church in 1802. At the age of nineteen, Pierce II began preaching in 1804. A chaplain for federal troops during the War of 1812, his commitment to the church fundamentally shaped the family he created (Pierce and Maxwell 1981, pp. 24–25). In a similar manner to tens of thousands of others at the time, Pierce II's draw to Methodism was very much shaped by the movement known as the Second Great Awakening. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Protestant evangelicalism spread throughout the South among White and Black, enslaved and free people. Revival meetings were large, often-outside gatherings in which charismatic Black and White ministers evangelized to attendees with stirring emotional preaching. The MEC sent "circuit riders" such as Lovick Pierce II to organize revival meetings and preach to more isolated rural communities. Revivals played an important role in converting White and Black Southerners alike to the Methodist and Baptist churches, albeit under very different structural conditions (Eskew 1992, pp. 637–42).

In 1809, Pierce II family's socio-economic status shifted when he married Ann Martin Foster, the daughter of George W. Foster, a wealthy colonel and cotton planter originally from Virginia who owned a plantation in Greensboro, Greene County, Georgia. In a biographical sketch of his father, George Foster Pierce describes the status gap between his parents:

> The distance in social position between them was great. He was a Methodist preacher, only twenty-one years old, without education or property, and in the second year of his ministry, and she, the gay daughter of a wealthy planter. (Smith 1888, pp. 13–14)

Lovick Pierce II and Ann raised their children in an economically privileged, slaveholding household. While Pierce II travelled regularly on the Methodist preaching circuit as a "circuit rider", the changing political economy of the region influenced George Foster Pierce's developing worldview; see Figure 8.

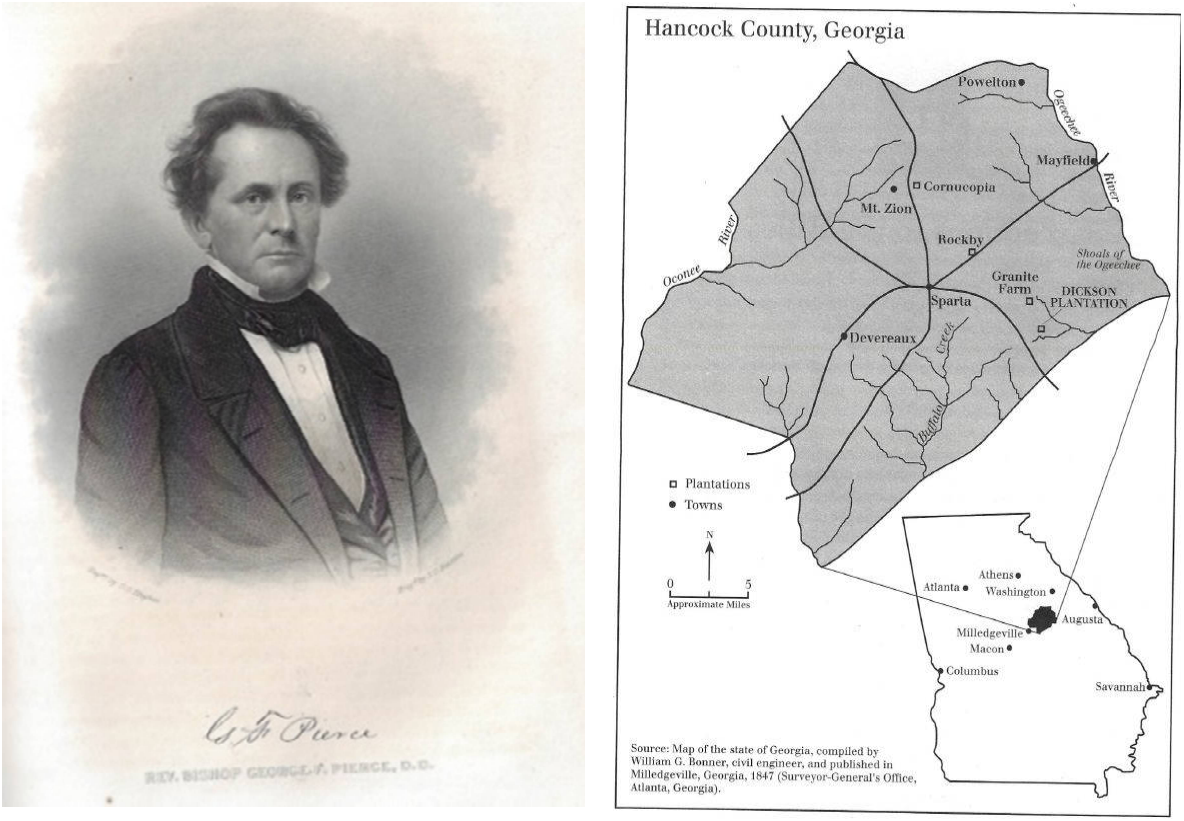

Figure 8. (**a**): Photograph of George Foster Pierce from *The Life and Times of George Foster Pierce*, published in 1888. (**b**): Map of Nineteenth Century Middle Georgia including Greene and Hancock Counties where George Foster Pierce lived most of his life. Image courtesy of Pierce, McClurkin, and Pierce, publication year unknown. Public Domain.

Born on 3 February 1811 in Greensboro, George Foster Pierce came of age while the cotton plantation economy was growing. On the world market, it was a high demand crop as the soft fabric could be woven into clothing and other products, but it was difficult to mass produce. The seeds were cumbersome and time consuming to remove by hand. In the 1790s, Eli Whitney patented the cotton gin, which allowed for cotton boll seeds to be removed much more quickly, which enabled planters to pursue its production. (Though Eli Whitney has historically been credited for inventing the cotton gin, it is likely that enslaved people also contributed to its innovation.) Much of the Muskogee's hickory and oak forest hunting grounds had already been cut down and converted to monocrop fields of corn and tobacco, and after the rise of the cotton gin, more and more planters turned to cotton.

The shifting demographics and economies in Middle Georgia can be seen in census records from the 1800s. In 1802, there were 4823 enslaved people owned by 819 slaveholders in Hancock County. On the eve of the Civil War in 1860, the enslaved population had nearly doubled to 8137 while the slaveholder class was halved to 419 individuals. Fifty-six planter families—about five percent of slave-owning families in the county—owned half the land, and forty percent of the population was enslaved (Rozier 1982, p. 197). The same pattern repeated itself in other lower South frontier states, and slave owners in Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina took advantage of the growing demand for enslaved labor by selling off tens of thousands of enslaved people, separating families and further traumatizing Black communities. Slave trading middlemen, notoriously known as "Georgia men", trafficked African and African American captives hundreds of miles southward on foot to the increasing cotton labor camps where they would be forced to work and live (Deyle 2005).

In Hancock County, planters such as Dr. William Terrell, David Dickson and Judge James Thomas took advantage of the stolen land, agricultural innovations and exploitation of enslaved labor to make enormous profits from cotton. In 1838, Terrell, one of the largest slave owners in the county, founded the Hancock Planters Club, a group of mostly large landholders that sought to address declining soil fertility from decades of intensive cotton production. The organization's members experimented and shared successful farming strategies, such as crop rotation, cover cropping, erosion prevention, the use of animal manures, livestock management and various other soil conservation techniques. They sponsored agricultural fairs and competitions and published their research (Shivers 1990, p. 77). Management of enslaved labor was another topic that planters investigated.

Hancock County planters became known amongst themselves, print media of the era, and some twentieth-century historians for their agricultural prowess and effective, yet humane, management of enslaved labor. For instance, one member of the Planters Club, James Thomas, was simultaneously seen by his peers as an innovative farmer and "benevolent" master in the management of his enslaved field laborers. He kept detailed records of worker performance and used the data to organize his labor force accordingly. He asserted that workers would increase their efficiency by fifteen percent when granted five-minute rest periods after each thirty minutes of active labor (Bonner 1943, p. 490).

David Dickson, locally known as the "Prince of Southern Farmers", for his success as a grower, was not a member of the club but still became one of the richest and most well-known cotton planters in the Middle Georgia cotton belt. He also maintained an open partnership with an enslaved Black woman he owned, Julia (See Leslie 1995 for more on the lives of free women of color in Hancock County). In 1860, he owned 13,000 acres of land and 144 enslaved people (Shivers 1990, p. 82). Dickson developed his own successful farming techniques, assembled data about worker efficiency and maximized his enslaved workers' production through what author Forrest Shivers, a white Hancock County native writing in the 1990s, described as his "ability to get the most out of his labor" (Shivers 1990, p. 79).

In 1855, the Savannah *Journal and Courier* wrote, "no county in Georgia can produce more intelligence and refinement than Hancock, and its agricultural skill and energy are preeminent". (Bonner 1943, p. 479). The *Southern Cultivator*, an antebellum agricultural journal based in Augusta, Georgia, read mostly by planters, wrote in 1860, "The truth is, [David Dickson's enslaved] hands see that they beat their neighbors, and people are constantly coming to see their fine crop, and they feel a pride in their success, and indeed that plantation shall not be beat" (Southern Cultivator 1860, p. 300). Mid-twentieth-century White agricultural historians lauded David Dickson and other Hancock planters for their ability to turn a profit while treating their slaves humanely (Leslie 1995, p. 49). In 1943, James Bonner, for example, asserted:

> These planters recognized, as many employers of free labor do, that a law of diminishing returns necessitated liberal restrictions upon hours and conditions of work. There was also a tendency to respect the personality of the Negro and to deal with him as an individual instead of resorting to inflexible codes of conduct. (Bonner 1943, p. 490)

Bonner felt that Dickson's "most significant contribution perhaps was his demonstration that slaves could be taught to become expert operatives and to do work efficiently without supervision" (Bonner 1943, p. 482). He suggested that the master–slave relationship, illustrated by Dickson and other Hancock County planters, was in "the spirit of *noblesse oblige*", a care-taking form of bondage or, in other words, a "softening of the edges of plantation slavery" (Bonner 1943, p. 490). Similarly, Forrest Shivers, in his 1990 book, *The Land Between, A History of Hancock County, Georgia to 1940*, wrote that "Hancock planters had a reputation for generous and humane treatment of those they held in bondage" (Shivers 1990, p. 83). These accounts of the plantation economy contrast with written testimonies of people enslaved on the plantations (see also Jackson 2017, 2018; Skipper 2016).

The Dickson plantation provides one example of counter histories. In 1886, during Dickson's will proceedings, former slaves were interviewed. When asked if Dickson whipped his slaves, Matthew Dickson replied, "Yes sir, most of them down there." Joe Brooken, another enslaved worker, added that "[the slaves] had to obey [David Dickson]" (Leslie 1995, p. 50). Historian Kent Anderson Leslie also interviewed several descendants of Dickson's enslaved workers. Peaches Armstrong, granddaughter of two of Dickson's slaves, Raibun and Julianna Youngblood, described the conditions in which enslaved people lived and worked as "terrible", and said that, "they treated people like pigs, fed people out of a trough, and would not let anybody have sugar" (Leslie 1995, p. 50). Eula Youngblood, the wife of Tommy Youngblood and a descendent of Raibun and Juliana Youngblood, explained that David Dickson created a class system among his slaves with drivers whose status put them above the other slaves. There was a whipping post on that plantation. When I think of those times I smile to keep from crying (Leslie 1995, p. 50).

Chester Destler, another mid-twentieth-century White agricultural historian, notes that, during the cotton harvest in the late 1850s, Dickson indeed deployed enslaved drivers to ramp up field-worker productivity and demanded each worker to harvest from 300 to 700 pounds of cotton per day (Destler 1954, p. 32). Historian Edward Baptist argues that, in the years leading up to the Civil War in the Deep South, high harvest quotas such as that which Dickson required were routinely enforced through torture (Baptist 2016, pp. 120–30). Though agricultural tinkering and specialized training of slaves may have contributed to increased cotton outputs for Hancock County planters such as David Dickson and James Thomas, the threat and enactment of physical violence against enslaved laborers was central to production.

4. Slavery and the Methodist Church

George Foster Pierce grew up on his maternal grandfather's property in Greensboro, Greene County (adjacent to Hancock County) with its extensive lands and well-appointed home for family separated from the cabins where the people they enslaved lived. Pierce remembered his childhood as filled with "culture, refinement, plenty and for that time, simple elegance" (Smith 1888, pp. 38–39). He grew up with his mother, younger siblings, grandparents and an undisclosed number of enslaved workers owned by his grandfather. "There was a large family of happy, contented slaves, who were well cared for", wrote George Smith, a colleague and friend of George Foster Pierce (Smith 1888, pp. 36–37). Writing his memorial of Pierce in 1888, Smith, a fellow southern Methodist minister and confidante of the bishop, continues Hancock County's myth of benevolent treatment and "caring for" the enslaved (Smith 1888, pp. 36–37). It is this ideology—a racialized paternalism toward enslaved people which never questioned slavery's moral underpinnings—that grounded George Foster Pierce's upbringing and future ministerial work. As he became more involved in the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), the future bishop developed his own version of racial paternalism. The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines paternalism as "a system under which an authority undertakes to supply needs or regulate conduct of those under its control in matters affecting them as individuals as well as in their relations to authority and to each other" (Merriam Webster Dictionary 2021). As such, a slaveholder's paternalism toward his or her enslaved workers functioned as an ideology and part of a system rather than as an expression of a slaveholder's personal characteristics; see Figure 9.

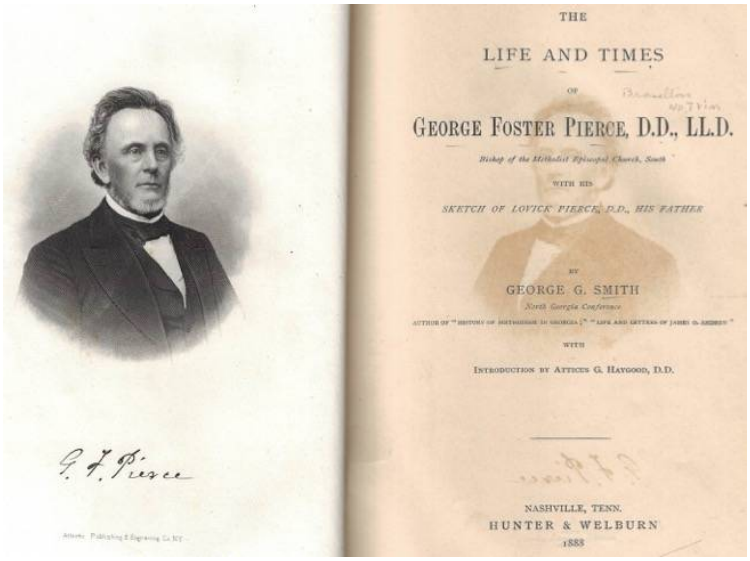

Figure 9. George Foster Pierce and cover page of George Smith's 1888 memorial to Pierce. Published after the end of Reconstruction and an important source of the life of Pierce, the book contains many of Pierce's original writings, including letters and sermons, as well as the author's own memorializing commentary.

In 1827, Pierce was studying law at Franklin College (which eventually became University of Georgia) in Athens. Located thirty miles north of Greensboro, Athens was a growing town that was an important center of commerce, education and financing for the cotton and domestic slave trade economy of the region. Only sixteen years old, Pierce attended one of the first revivals held in town and was inspired to commit more of his time and energy to Methodism. By the time he graduated with a law degree, he was contemplating a life in ministry. After speaking with his father, he sought the council of the respected Methodist preacher, Rev. James O. Andrew, in Greensboro who encouraged him to pursue this path. In 1830, he became licensed to preach. In 1834, he married Ann Maria Waldron in Savannah, Georgia. One year later, the newlywed couple had their first child, Ella Caroline Pierce—my great-great-great-grandmother. (Pierce and Maxwell 1981, pp. 53–54). Fourteen years later, George Foster Pierce and his mentor, James O. Andrew, would become central characters in their denominational church's schism over the question of slavery (Smith 1888, pp. 57–60).

During the first decade of the nineteenth century, not all early Methodist settlers in Hancock County were supportive of slavery (Shivers 1990, p. 99). However, as the cotton plantation economy and enslaved labor population grew, pro-slavery attitudes also grew. From the 1820s to the 1860s, southern Methodists promoted plantation missions as an effective way to dually convert enslaved people to Methodism and instill their subservience to the White ruling class. In many southern Protestant churches before the Civil War, White parishioners sat sit in pews in front on the first floor, while Black—enslaved and free people of color—worshiped in back or in the balcony (Alexander 1991, p. 53). Adele Logan Alexander observes:

> Many ministers denounced drinking, smoking, gambling and fornication and occasionally even admonished members of their congregations for brutal treatment of slaves. (1991, p. 53)

Though some of the enslaved attended brick and mortar churches with their masters on Sundays, most enslaved people did not. Methodists, who became leaders in the South for establishing plantation missions, persuaded planters to receive "circuit riders," like George Foster Pierce's father, Lovick Pierce II, to preach to their slaves. As Glenn Eskew notes:

> southern Methodists promoted a plantation mission ideology of paternalism with its mutual obligations and reciprocal duties that reinforced black subservience. By Christianizing and civilizing their slaves, southerners attempted to pacify the growing northern abolitionist movement while stabilizing their work force. (Eskew 1992, p. 641)

Between 1829 and 1864, Southern Methodist churches spent USD 1.8 million on plantation missions and claimed 207,766 Black members by the outbreak of the Civil War (Eskew 1992, p. 641; Caper 1852).

White paternalism was central to the plantation mission ideology. Historian Eugene Genovese argued that, under slavery, paternalism became entrenched in the master–slave relationship, which, "necessarily involves harshness and may even involve cruelty so long as it is in the context of a strong sense of duty and responsibility toward those in dependent status" (Genovese 1971, p. 282). Genovese contended that:

> The slaveholders established their hegemony over the slaves primarily through the development of an elaborate web of paternalistic relationships, but the slaves' place in that hegemonic system reflected deep contradictions, manifested in the dialectic of accommodation and resistance. (Genovese 1976, p. 658)

Genovese's thesis of paternalism is a complex reality that could, on the one hand, oppress, and on the other, materially and spiritually benefit those in bondage, has been critiqued by subsequent generations of scholars whose research demonstrated the wide variety of ways enslaved people rejected paternalism (Hahn 2012; Harris 2014). What is under less fire is the fact that paternalism, rooted in ideologies of White supremacy and Black and Indigenous inferiority, allowed slaveholders and defenders of slavery to justify the institution to one another. Similarly, religious paternalism practiced by White Protestants such as George Foster Pierce and his ministerial peers provided a moral grounding on which plantation missions and slavery could stand together (See also Kendi 2017).

As with members of the Hancock Planters Club, White faith leaders in the county undergirded the perception of a benevolent planter–slave relationship. Important religious figures such as Baptist minister Jesse Mercer, Presbyterian minister Carlisle P. Beman, and Methodist Bishop George Foster Pierce were all slaveowners and preached to congregations that included planters and their allies (Shivers 1990, p. 83). R.M. Johnston, Pierce's friend and owner of Lucius Holsey, reflected that Pierce's paternalism toward enslaved people rang out in his sermons. He commented that if a slaveholding congregant was mistreating a person they owned, news of the act would spread and that the owner "stepping into the Methodist church at Sparta might hear words from Pierce on the treatment of slaves, that would make him feel like hastening to undo or repair the wrong he may have done" (Smith 1888, p. 146).

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, Methodist communities around the country were becoming more and more divided over the morality of slavery. As the federal government expedited the displacement of Indigenous nations in the South and West during the 1830s and 1840s and the cotton economy exploded, debates intensified over whether newly occupied territories in the Southwestern and Midwestern parts of the United States would become free or slave states. Meanwhile, in 1831, Nat Turner, an enslaved literate preacher, led an uprising of enslaved and free people of color in Virginia. Southern governments responded with a clampdown on enslaved and free people of color's abilities to gather, communicate, worship and do business. Realizing that literacy and religion could be used as weapons of resistance, the southern planter classes further restricted or criminalized enslaved people learning to read, write and preach. The Georgia legislature passed a law that required the endorsement of three licensed and ordained ministers (understood to be White) before any person of color could legally preach. In response to the slave rebellion in Virginia, local governments in Hancock, Greene, and Baldwin counties also took a variety of steps to criminalize efforts by both free and enslaved Black people to educate themselves, operate businesses, preach and simply gather in the company of each other (Alexander 1991, p. 49).

5. Southern Succession in the Methodist Church

In 1840, George Foster Pierce and his father, Lovick Pierce II, were elected as delegates to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) held in Baltimore, Maryland, a border state where slavery was legal. At the meeting, many northern Methodist leaders, though not all vocal abolitionists, saw slaveholding as sinful in the eyes of God and could not envision a church in which slaveholding had a place. That same year, Jesse Mercer, a prominent Baptist minister from Hancock County, articulated a growing belief within Protestant Southern churches that, because slavery was sanctioned under U.S. constitutional law and slaveholders were merely inheritors of slavery (and not its creators), the institution was both legally and morally legitimate. Mercer wrote:

> [The abolitionists] ought to consider that the institution of slavery is a *civil* and not an *ecclesiastical* one; and that it is not one of our making; that we, as a slaveholding people, are mostly the inheritors of them from our forefathers—that they came into possession under the prejudice of early education. We have been taught from our cradles that they were *our money*, that we had a right or title to them. (Mallory 2009, p. 208)

Four years later, the growing regional division over the morality of slavery came to a head during the MEC General Conference held in New York City, where father and son were in attendance again. In 1844, at the MEC General Conference, abolitionist delegates from New England accused Pierce's old mentor and Chairman of the Conference, Bishop James O. Andrew, of owning slaves—"an act of sin"—and proposed that he should be stripped of his chairmanship (Smith 1888, pp. 123–24). Andrew responded with a series of written arguments, describing how he came to own several enslaved young people by happenstance and was not guilty of any proactive enslavement of others. Echoing Jesse Mercer's 1840 position on the matter, Andrew reasoned that Southern slaveholders had benignly inherited the institution and, therefore, were morally absolved from its shortcomings. In fact, he asserted that he was reluctant to own slaves, describing himself as a passive "legal slave-owner" who found himself in such a position because he had inherited enslaved young people rather than purchasing them directly himself:

> I have been made a slaveholder legally, but not morally nor with my consent. I have neither bought nor sold a slave, that in the circumstances in which I am a legal slave holder emancipation is impossible. (Pierce and Maxwell 1981, pp. 159–60)

In his own defense, Andrew highlighted the idea that his enslaved workers had free will and had been told by him that they could leave the state of Georgia for their freedom but, because they chose not to, he felt he was left without options (Pierce and Maxwell 1981, pp. 160–62). Furthermore, freeing his enslaved was unethical, in his mind, given the social and economic status quo for African Americans in the state, and in the nation. He felt that newly freed poor Blacks would not be able to care for themselves in the 1840s United States, but instead needed his patronage for their own survival and well-being.

The southern delegates joined together and threatened to resign as an entire caucus if their chairman was forced out. The thirty-three-year-old George Foster Pierce took the floor in his old counselor's defense to unleash what would become a memorable and fiery oratory. He described Andrew as one of the most respected and competent members of the Conference and that he was being singled out because of abolitionist whims from one small region of the country, asking "Are we to see this noble man sacrificed for the sake of New England? God forbid it!" He reasoned that any Methodist minister was sanctioned to own slaves because it was enshrined in the "law of the land". To Pierce, a trained lawyer, the northern delegation's attempt to "deprive Southern ministers of their rights and to disenfranchise the whole Southern Church" was illegitimate because slavery was sanctioned by constitutional law and, thereby, justified. Additionally, as with other southern elites in the lead up to the Civil War, Pierce saw abolitionist efforts to reform his institution as imposing and unjustified. He characterized anti-slavery advocates "in the

language of Paul, as intermeddlers in other men's matters" (Smith 1888, pp. 127–28). He continued:

> I speak soberly, advisedly, when I say I prefer that all New England should secede, or be set off. I infinitely prefer that they should go, rather than that this General Conference should proceed to make this ruthless invasion upon the connectional union and integrity of the Church. Let New England go, with all my heart. She has been, for the last twenty years, a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to buffet us; let her go, and joy go with her, and peace will stay behind. The Southern Church has nothing to fear and she has nothing to ask on this subject. There, sir, at the South, we dwell in peace, and the Good Shepard watches the flock and guards us from all harm. (Smith 1888, pp. 125–27)

In 1845, the MEC formally split into two branches, the MEC, North and MEC, South. Pierce's speech catapulted his career in the newly formed MEC, South. He was ordained bishop in 1854 and embarked on an active travelling preaching schedule. During a trip to the Oklahoma Territory for a Methodist Indian Mission Conference in 1855, he demonstrated his growing missionary zeal and racialized paternalism in relation to Indigenous peoples. The conference, organized to promote Methodist influence in the region, gave Pierce a chance to interact and preach to Cherokee and Muskogee Natives who had been displaced through the Trail of Tears, and from the very lands in middle and north Georgia where he grew up (Smith 1888, p. 225).

As a prolific writer, Pierce documented his own views of Christian settler-colonial efforts to civilize, tame, and ultimately control Indigenous people through forced assimilation:

> It would be well for all who were skeptical about the possibility of evangelizing the Indians could attend a session of our Conference among them. But a generation gone they were heathens; now they have flourishing academies, houses of worship, the apparel and the manners of civilization, districts, stations, and circuits and the white man's book, his gospel, and his preacher. Is this magic? Yes, but not of Aladdin's Lamp. Christian benevolence has wrought the change. The gospel and the schools, Christianity and education, have greatly reformed, improved and elevated these tribes.

Pierce goes on to justify the tribes' forced dislocation by federal government forces by falsely claiming that their population numbers were rapidly rising compared to other tribes who had not yet embraced the missions (Smith 1888, pp. 225–26). Southern Methodist missionary efforts in both Black and Native communities were not dissimilar. Pierce's involvement in both further established a career that led him into higher education in Georgia. He served as presidents of Wesleyan College for women in Macon, and Emory College in Oxford, both of which were founded by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1836.

In 1854, Bishop Pierce settled not far from his boyhood Greensboro home in Hancock County, where he purchased land nine years earlier, just outside the county seat, Sparta. On this site, he built his home and established Sunshine, his own cotton plantation, which he ran until his death. In the 1860 census, Pierce is listed as owning eighteen slaves and nine hundred acres of land (U.S. Census of 1860). He pastored at Methodist camp revivals and churches throughout the county, including Sparta Methodist Episcopal Church, now Pierce Memorial United Methodist Church, to a biracial, but segregated congregation (Smith 1888, p. 243). After the Civil War began in 1861, Pierce remained primarily in Hancock County, pastoring to his Sparta congregation and mentoring his most important pupil at the time, the enslaved Lucius Henry Holsey.

6. Lucius Holsey and His Struggle for Dignity

Lucious Holsey was born near Columbus, Georgia in 1842, the oldest of fourteen children. Though primary sources on Holsey are scarce, his first autobiography, published

in 1899, reveals important details about his life and perspectives on slavery, religion and society; see Figure 10.

Figure 10. Bishop Lucious Henry Holsey. Public Domain.

Holsey described his maternal grandfather, Alex, as "an African of the Africans". Though he does not provide any further details about Alex's life or whether or not he was enslaved in and transported from the African continent, he suggests here that his grandfather displayed physical and/or cultural characteristics that Holsey perceived as "African". He greatly admired his mother, Louisa, a beautiful woman "of pure African descent" who was "an intensely religious woman, a most exemplary Christian, and belonged to the M. E. Church, South" (Holsey 1899, p. 17). He identifies his biological father (and owner), the White cotton planter, James Holsey, in the first sentence of his writing. He described Holsey as "aristocratic" and "a gentleman of classical education, dignified in appearance and manner of life and represented that old antebellum class of Southern aristocracy" (Holsey 1899, pp. 18–19). Additionally, Holsey reminds readers that male slaveowners wielded tremendous power over women who were their property and that his and other enslaved children's births often came from the forced sexual violence of their mothers' masters. Writing of his father, Holsey commented, "like many others of his day and time he never married, but mingled, to some extent, with those females of the African race that were his slaves—his personal property" (Holsey 1899, pp. 18–19).

After his father and legal owner died in 1848, Holsey become the property of his father's White cousin, T.L. Wynn, who was from Sparta. The light-skinned six-year-old Holsey moved to Sparta where he grew up and worked as Wynn's personal servant. In 1857, when Wynn fell ill, he asked Holsey to choose his next master between two of Wynn's close friends. Holsey chose Richard Malcolm (R.M.) Johnston, a cotton planter, teacher and friend of George Foster Pierce. Holsey moved with Johnston from Sparta to Athens, where his new master had a teaching position at Franklin College (Eskew 1992, p. 639). In Athens, Holsey became enamored with the written word and clandestinely learned to read and write, pursuing his "insatiable craving for some knowledge of books". He purchased two Webster blue-back spellers, a copy of *Paradise Lost,* the Bible and a dictionary and learned how to read with the help of an old Black man and some White children (Holsey 1899, pp. 16–18).

Similar to Pierce, Holsey was inspired to commit to a life of faith in 1858 after attending a stirring week-long revival in Athens organized by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MEC, South) as part of its plantation mission project. The Reverend Henry McNeal Turner, a young free Methodist minister of color who would go on to have his own memorable career in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), preached to the

all-Black congregation. After hearing Turner's captivating message, Holsey recalled that the "Lord rolled my burden of sin from my heart and heaven's light came shining in. O what a happy boy I was" (Eskew 1992, p. 637). Soon after his conversion he was inspired to "preach the gospel" but "saw no opening for such a thing in the days of slavery". Nonetheless, Holsey believed he would one day find an "opportunity to proclaim God's truth" (Eskew 1992, p. 642).

When the Civil War began in 1861, Johnston's teaching position ended, and he moved with his family and slaves back to Hancock County where he established the plantation and private school, Rockby, just outside of Sparta on land next to Pierce's Sunshine plantation. Johnston, who would go on to become a well-known writer and author of *The Dukesboro Tales*, a collection of humor essays inspired by his life in Middle Georgia, educated White boys from upper-class families in the classics. His enslaved workers maintained the school, his house and farm operations. Holsey, who was a house servant, continued his study of the Bible while enslaved there. Johnston's friendship with and proximity to his neighbor Pierce facilitated an easy exchange of people and communication between the two plantation communities. Inevitably, Holsey met Bishop Pierce and his future wife, Harriet Turner (Holsey 1899, pp. 8–11).

In his autobiography, Holsey described Pierce as "a wonderful preacher, with wide influence, and august presence. Everybody loved, respected, and some adored him" (Holsey 1899, p. 11). Their relationship developed quickly and, in November 1862, while bloody battles raged between Union and Confederate forces elsewhere, Pierce hosted Holsey and his own family's enslaved house servant, Harriet Turner, for their wedding at Sunshine. The two men studied scripture together during the war and early post-war years. As Eskew observes, "The relationship between Holsey and Pierce reflected the interracial cooperation expressed through religion. By working together as evangelists, blacks and whites in biracial churches came closer to racial equality than in any other area of southern society" (Eskew 1992, p. 643).

During their time together, Pierce quietly supported Holsey's determination to learn how to read and interpret the Bible as a way to evangelize and foster loyalty to the White ruling class. In 1863 the bishop addressed the General Assembly of Georgia, criticizing a state law that forbade teaching Black people—enslaved and freed—to read. Arguing that the ability to read permitted slaves to better access scripture, he said:

> Our Heavenly Father certainly never intended any human mind to be kept in darkness and ignorance . . . Let them learn from the Scripture that their relation is ordained of God—that He prescribes their duties and makes fidelity to their earthly masters a part of their service due to Him. (Smith 1888, pp. 474–75)

The last sentence in this excerpt is revealing. Pierce viewed literacy as a vehicle for enslaved people to more deeply understand their relationship to God and, in doing so, deepen their faith in and service to their White "earthly masters". His perspective differed from the prevailing belief held by many slaveholders in the South that reading could instead encourage defiance rather than instill passivity. As such, Pierce saw in Holsey, a literate and aspiring student of Methodism who could receive, espouse and remain loyal to the plantation mission ideology.

Pierce and Holsey's relationship seemed to not only be grounded in a kind of racial–religious paternalism but also in personalism. In their work focusing on interracial relationships in antebellum Charleston, South Carolina, historians Michael Johnson and James L. Roark describe personalism as "the bonds of familiarity" that existed between White paternalists and members of the mulatto Black elite (Johnson and Roark 1984, pp. 10–15). In his revealing book, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow*, historian Mark Schultz illustrates the ways in which the "bonds of familiarity" between White elites and Blacks in Hancock County—during and after slavery—simultaneously undergirded interracial intimacies and a White supremacist status quo. For Schultz, personalism in Hancock County from the antebellum period to post-World War II has two intertwined meanings:

> In one sense, it refers to the personal nature of power in rural Hancock. In another, it points to the face-to-face nature of rural communities, which allowed greater flexibility than was found in areas where black and white people related to one another primarily as impersonal abstractions. (Schultz 2005, p. 7)

Personal local power could take "the form of wealth, political connections, or the capacity for violence" (Schultz 2005, p. 6). This was true for Bishop Pierce. Additionally, his power rested in his high-profile stature as a national religious leader and the moral currency it afforded him. Although Pierce adhered to an ideological plantation mission paternalism in his relationship with Holsey, he also engaged in personal and individualistic acts of goodwill. His hosting of Holsey and Turner's wedding at his home is the clearest example. As Schultz contends:

> "The security of the planters, localism, and the culture of personalism all help explain why powerful whites sometimes tolerated a surprising degree of interracial intimacy and black assertiveness. Although this varied widely across the county, many rural people participated socially in an interracial culture—a culture marked by intimacy as well as white supremacy". (Schultz 2005, p. 7)

Holsey's theological tutelage under Pierce and their intimate relationship as a whole, then, seems to have been shaped by both an ideology of paternalism as well as a culture of personalism that persisted in rural Hancock County.

7. Middle Georgia during the Civil War

In September 1862, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared free all enslaved people living in the Confederate States starting 1 January 1863. During the fall of 1862, Bishop Pierce wrote his son, Lovick, who was fighting in Virginia, "We had a county meeting on Monday. [Linton] Stephens and I addressed the crowd, and if you had heard the applause and seen the tears, you would have thought that every man was panting to enlist [in the Confederate Army]; but lo, when we made the effort only fifty men signed the roll" (Smith 1888, p. 451). By the beginning of the new year, Union military victories were mounting, and Confederate morale was waning. As the tide of the war shifted in the Union's favor and the Confederate war effort marshalled more and more state and county resources, southern planters feared that enslaved workers would feel more emboldened to rebel and/or escape. In September 1863, Linton Stephens, a Hancock County planter, Georgia Supreme Court Justice, and brother of the Vice President of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens, wrote that, "Our negro population is going to give us great trouble. They are becoming extensively corrupted. The necessary pains to keep them on our side, and in order, have been unwisely and sadly neglected" (Shivers 1990, p. 160).

In war-time Hancock County, enslaved people attempted to escape and revolt. In early 1863, an enslaved woman named "Savannah" was recorded to have been one of the first slaves in the area "to go over to the Yankees" (Leslie 1995, p. 53). Based on testimonies from court proceedings that followed their arrest, we know that, in the spring of 1863—four months after Holsey's wedding—a group of enslaved men from different plantations began meeting during "corn planting time" to form a military unit. Dick Shaw, John Cain, Spencer Beasley, and Mack Simmons, who knew each other from trading wine and tobacco, were skilled laborers. During that summer, they secretly met to socialize, strategize and train for a potential armed fight for freedom.

Around the same time, George Foster Pierce gave a pro-succession sermon in March at the state capital Milledgeville in nearby Baldwin County. From the pulpit, Bishop Pierce sought to boost morale for the then-uncertain Confederate cause by unequivocally defending the South's motivations to secede. At a moment when the tide of the war was shifting toward the Union's favor, he proclaimed:

> We are but defending ourselves against a proud, rapacious, malignant foe who without right or reason, against law and humanity comes down full of hate and rage to enslave or exterminate us. (Smith 1888, p. 466)

His accusation of the North attempting to "enslave" him and his fellow White southerners is truly incredible, though not an uncommon secessionist argument. Claiming a patriarchal care-taker role over people, free and enslaved alike, Pierce said, "We are fighting for liberty and home and family; for our herds and flocks, for our men-servants and maid-servants" (Smith 1888, p. 466). Echoing the White supremacist and paternalistic position that he took during his time on Methodist missions with Native American converts in Oklahoma in the mid-1850s, Pierce preached:

> The negro among us is an object of respect, affection, and kindness, in every stage and condition of his being. His religious culture is generally provided for; and find the negro where you will in the wilds of Africa, in the cities where he is nominally free, in that constitutes a rational, respectable manhood, the Southern slave is the highest type of his race. Whatever abuses may have crept in, and whatever neglect may be chargeable upon us, if we compare results, slavery has shown itself to be a great missionary institution. (Smith 1888, p. 469)

On 13 September 1863, Dick Shaw, John Cain, Spencer Beasley, and Mack Simmons were arrested outside of Sparta after a skirmish with a White farmer and jailed along with thirty other Black suspects (Hancock County Superior Court Minutes 1858–1870). The other thirty individuals were whipped and released (Southern Recorder 1863). Shortly after the arrests, Hancock County Judge Thomas W. Thomas wrote Judge James Thomas that it was fortunate for the country that, if they were to have an attempted negro insurrection, it should first develop in Hancock County where it would be met and managed by a sensible, firm and discreet people (Thomas 1863).

In November 1863, Shaw, Cain, Beasley and Simmons were tried in the Superior Court of Hancock County, convicted and sentenced to hang for attempting to incite an insurrection. John Cain escaped from jail but was apprehended and executed by county officials in January 1864 (*Augusta Chronicle* 1863). Mack Simmons' capital sentence was also carried out. Georgia governor, Joseph Brown, commuted the sentence of Spencer Beasley to four hundred whip lashes. His owner, Charles Beasley of nearby Taliaferro County, was a wealthy planter and friends with Bishop George Foster Pierce and the politically powerful Linton and Alexander Stephens brothers. Together, they successfully leveraged the support of 120 of the "best citizens of Hancock County" in Beasley's favor. Dick Shaw, whose owner was also politically connected, was granted clemency and released but not before being beaten by authorities (Hancock County. Inferior Court Minutes 1850–1871).

8. Reconstruction: Violence and Voter Suppression in Hancock County

After the Civil War ended in April 1865, Black citizens and their allies were hopeful that federal policies during the Reconstruction era (1865–1877) would guarantee and protect the freedom and opportunities denied to them under slavery. Lucius Holsey was among them. He was newly emancipated from R.M. Johnston, and his wife Harriet was newly emancipated from George Foster Pierce's daughter Ella Caroline Pierce, my great-great-great-grandmother. Similar to most formerly enslaved people in the rural South, the Holseys were landless, without formal education, and obliged to earn income however they could. Recently freed families in Hancock County often stayed on their former enslaver's properties as cotton sharecroppers or rented out their labor to nearby planters who, more than often, exploited them under similar or worse conditions than slavery.

The Holseys remained at Rockby until 1868. Harriet washed the laundry of the students taught by Johnston at his school, and Lucius grew cotton as a tenant farmer on rented land from Johnston. He continued to study scripture and Methodist theology with Bishop Pierce. What did Lucius Holsey think of Pierce's support of the Confederacy, and the broader worldview of racial inferiority grounded in it? In his autobiography, written in 1899 during the rise of Jim Crow, he seems to excuse it:

> However unrighteous or repugnant to a Christian civilization the institution seems to have been, and whatever changes have come over the public mind since abolition, one thing is clear, and that is, the Negro race has lost nothing by it, but has gained a thousand pounds sterling where it has lost a penny. (Holsey 1899, p. 253)

In a later paragraph, he opines:

> I have no complaint against American slavery. It was a blessing in disguise to me and to many. It has made the Negro race what it could not have been in its native land. Slavery was but a circumstance or a link in the transitions of humanity and must have its greatest bearing upon the future. (Holsey 1899, p. 253)

His comments here echo Pierce's suggestion that Blacks in the Unites States were in notable ways better off, materially and culturally better served than their counterparts in Africa. Additionally, as Eskew notes, Holsey believed that the Christian evangelism of enslaved people superseded slavery's crimes and that African Americans, in fact, benefited from exposure to a higher, more "civilized" White political and religious culture (Eskew 1992, p. 646). Despite believing that a recently freed person "had nothing but his religion, poverty and ignorance", Holsey was hopeful that Reconstruction was a time "when negro civilization . . . Yet in its infancy and crude evolutions, [should] lay the foundations upon which future generations are to build those institutions that are to make him and his progeny solid citizens and valued citizens" (Holsey 1899, p. 22).

Reconstruction ushered in important changes for Hancock County's Black citizens. The federal Reconstruction Act of 1867 placed, under provisional federal military oversight, all former Confederate states who had not yet ratified the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which recognized African Americans as U.S. citizens and guaranteed their equal treatment under the law. It also paved the way for Black male enfranchisement. Though the Fifteenth Amendment—which guaranteed African American men the right to vote—was not ratified into federal law until 1870, the 1867 Reconstruction Act provided for the registration of White and Black male voters to decide whether to hold a convention to rewrite former Confederate state constitutions. Elected delegates to the conventions would then vote whether to include a provision for Black suffrage (Shivers, p. 174).

In November 1867, Hancock County's majority African American Republican electorate overwhelmingly voted to hold the convention and elected the formerly enslaved William H. Harrison as their delegate (*Federal Union* 1867). Harrison, the "body servant" of the planter Judge James Thomas, and another former enslaved man, Eli Barnes, were elected by Hancock voters to the state legislature in 1868 (*Federal Union* 1868a). Later that year, however, pointing to the new Georgia Constitution's failure to explicitly grant African Americans the right to hold elected office, Democrats and enough White Republicans successfully organized to unseat Harrison and Barnes and their eighteen Black colleagues, who had been democratically elected to the Legislature. They were replaced by the White opponents they had defeated (*Federal Union* 1868b). Though they were reinstated to their seats temporarily in 1870, the two legislators' illegal removal from office in 1867 was an indicator of the White supremacist backlash that had commenced in post-bellum Georgia and in Hancock County. In response to the openings that Reconstruction offered to Hancock County's African American residents to advance their political power and economic livelihoods, the county's White ruling class utilized economic pressure and racial terrorism to undermine Black civic participation.

During the first four months of 1866, three African Americans were murdered by White perpetrators, who subsequently enjoyed full impunity from prosecution (Johnson 1868). By the late 1860s, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) had established itself in many parts of Georgia (Duncan 1994, pp. 43–44). In Hancock County, voter suppression of Black suffragists also played an important role in consolidating White political control. In the November 1868 presidential election, White Democratic election managers selectively barred Black Republican voters from casting their ballot by enforcing a state law that required voters pay all of their taxes for the previous year (U.S. Congress 1870). The "poll

tax", along with other unconstitutional voter suppression tools, such as grandfather clauses, literacy tests, and old-fashioned ballot destruction, disenfranchised African Americans in middle Georgia and throughout the South for a century.

In August 1869, Eli Barnes wrote a letter to his legislative colleague William Harrison, who was in Atlanta, stating that White vigilantes had murdered three Black men and that thirteen more had been jailed in response to the shooting of a local White man (Barnes 1869). Barnes and members of the local Republican-affiliated Union League, also wrote Georgia Republican Governor R.B. Bullock, appealing for him to "send us some pertecttion [sic] in this county. The white people are killing us like brouts [sic]. Thar [sic] has been three colored men killed in the lenth [sic] of a week" (Union League 1869). As a result of Barnes' advocacy and political leadership, he became a target of White supremacist terrorism in early November of that year when fifteen "disguised" men visited his Sparta home at night with the intention of "dispatching" him (American Union 1869).

In December 1870, federal intervention in the Georgia State Legislature elections addressed some of the structural racism and paved the way for three local Republicans, including two formerly enslaved men, to become Hancock County election managers. With these changes, Republican candidates, Eli Barnes and William Harrison, were hopeful they could defeat Democratic candidates F.A. Butts and George Foster Pierce Jr., the son of Bishop George Foster Pierce.

On the day of the election, hundreds of Black voters were able to successfully cast their votes because the election managers refused to tie voter eligibility with the paying of poll taxes. However, later that day, the powerful planter and Bishop Pierce's friend, Linton Stephens, intervened with the help of the county sheriff and arrested and jailed the three election managers. Black residents led by William Harrison gathered in a large crowd in front of Sparta's courthouse demanding that the managers be set free but retreated when an armed White civilian militia approached. Stephens replaced the jailed managers with White Democratic loyalists who in turn reinstalled poll taxes and effectively denied eligible Black men from voting. As a result, Democratic candidates, Butts and Pierce Jr., were elected to the Georgia State Legislature (Shivers 1990, pp. 185–86).

During the 1870s and 1980s, White attacks—whether by organized groups like the Klan or by individuals—continued against local Black people (*Hancock Weekly Journal* 1869). In April 1870, a Black man named Frank Watkins wrote Reps. Harrison and Barnes that a White employee of a planter they both worked for had brutally beaten his daughter, Ida (Watkins 1870). Later that year, in August, two White men, Robert Dudley and Israel Johnson, were indicted for the murder of a local Black man named Terry Long. Dudley escaped, and Johnson was found innocent by an all-White jury and released (*Hancock Weekly Journal* 1870). On 23 March 1881, Felix Barnes was lynched by White vigilantes who accused him of attempted criminal assault of a seventeen-year-old White girl. His body was hanged and riddled with bullets (Helfman 2021). Aleck Etheridge, accused of burglary, was lynched on 25 December 1885 (Helfman 2021). Within this context of political upheaval, economic disruption and racial violence, African Americans, including southern Black churchgoers, were assessing the best strategies for survival, civil rights, and spiritual autonomy.

9. The Colored Southern Methodist Church

During Reconstruction, African American churches in the South represented a spectrum of political stances and strategies to advance Black equality and well-being. Formerly enslaved people flocked to independent Black churches previously established in the North such as African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AME-Zion), while others joined new independent churches, including various Baptist denominations. During and after Reconstruction, Black clergymen were well aware of the risks they faced criticizing White supremacy from the pulpit or vis-àvis political organizing. Such actions were often met with White intimidation and violence (Hine et al. 2006, pp. 302–3). While many Black preachers, and the churches they represented, chose not

to directly address U.S. racism and politics, others, such as AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, persistently spoke out on the topics. In 1883, Turner, who Lucius Holsey had been so inspired by at the 1858 Methodist revival in Athens, called the U.S. Constitution "a dirty rag, a cheat, a libel and ought to be spit upon by every Negro in the land" when the U.S. Supreme Court declared the 1875 Civil Rights Act was unconstitutional (Turner 1883).

During the years after the Civil War, the majority of African American MEC, South members left to join previously established and new independent Black churches. By 1866, only 78,742 of 207,766 1860 Black membership remained in the church. By 1869, Black membership had fallen to 19,686 (Dvorak 1991, p. 121). Black congregants who stayed organized for greater access to church leadership positions but were thwarted by White leaders. As a result, they began to advocate for their own church (Dvorak 1991, p. 121). Meanwhile, Pierce and other White southern Protestant leaders feared that recently emancipated people might be radicalized to organize for better access to land, fairer working conditions and greater political participation within the more progressive new independent Black southern churches. They saw it in their interest, then, to incubate a Black church that still yielded to the direction of White MEC, South leadership (Eskew 1992, p. 645). Southern Methodist leadership believed that a Black church still under the influence of the MEC, South could guard against "that complication with political parties and demagogues that has been so damaging to the spiritual interests of the colored people of the South" (Methodist Episcopal Church 1874). One of Pierce's White mentees, Atticus Haygood, a MEC, South preacher remarked, "no Christian leaders among [the Colored Methodist Church (CME)] had ever been accused of agitation" (Haygood 1881, p. 240). Lucius Holsey and Isaac Lane, another important early organizer of the CME, were praised for their "respectful attitude" and "manifest desire to improve [their] people in knowledge and religion" (Lane 1916). In Holsey and Lane, Pierce and White MEC, South leaders saw Black preachers with conservative, accommodationist politics who they could trust to not rock the boat.

In 1868, Pierce examined Holsey and granted him his ministerial license. The following year, the Colored Methodist Church (CME) was established at its founding conference in Jackson, Tennessee (The Colored Methodist Church (CME) changed its name in 1954 to Christian Methodist Church (CME), which it is called today). The African American delegates, many of whom were mixed race and had lighter skin, similar to Holsey, deliberately chose "Colored" instead of "African" to differentiate themselves from the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) and AME Zion Church. The choice suggests the leadership's hesitancy to abandon the class and skin color privileges their membership still experienced and a reluctance to risk personal ties to White patron elites (Alexander 1991, p. 159). At the conference, the CME delegates also committed to not use their churches for political ends. In exchange, Pierce, along with other White church leaders gave land, property, and political support to the fledging church denomination.

With Pierce's backing, Holsey helped build the CME into a popular church in Georgia and other southern states. In Sparta, he founded and pastored at one of the country's first CME churches, Ebenezer (now Holsey Memorial) CME Church, less than a mile from Rockby and Sunshine. See Figure 11. In 1873, Pierce ordained Holsey and two other Black ministers as CME bishops at Holsey's assigned church, Trinity CME Church, in Augusta, Georgia. During the 1880s, Holsey's higher status as a bishop helped him establish his family as part of Augusta's light-skinned, Black middle-class elite (Eskew 1992). Trinity CME, however, was criticized by some African Americans for its ties to the "old slavery church" and its White planter class benefactors like Pierce. In his autobiography, Holsey recalled that he "was very much slandered, persecuted, and rejected by my own race and people" during this time (Holsey 1899, p. 240). CME Bishop Isaac Lane also remembered that AME missionaries "constantly referred to us as a Southern Church, a rebel Church, and the like, and those names were very distasteful to our people" (Lane 1916).

Figure 11. Holsey Memorial CME Church, formerly Ebenezer CME Church, in Sparta, Georgia where Lucious Holsey pastored after the Civil War. Photograph by Leo Braselton Gorman.

Similar to Booker T. Washington, CME leaders were both idealistic in believing that accommodation could lead to racial justice, and pragmatic in understanding that post-bellum White paternalism could materially benefit the fledging MEC. Holsey was keenly aware that Southern Methodist trustees held the titles to church land and property, and that gaining access to such assets would support the CME's growth. Reflecting in 1899, Holsey wrote that he remained loyal to the CME during its disorganized early years:

> not because I thought it the best church in itself, not because I thought it purer and better than other such organizations, but because I thought it to be the most fitted religious power to meet the peculiar conditions that exist in the Southern States. (Holsey 1899, p. 243)

Furthermore, he believed that CME pastors could benefit from White ministerial mentorship just as he did under Bishop Pierce. He wrote that "the white ministry was the only standard of excellence by which the colored ministers could be inspired to reach a higher plane of fitness" (Holsey 1899, p. 243).

In 1881, MEC, South minister Atticus Haygood, a White mentee of Bishop Pierce, called for the "mother church" to "establish a great 'training-school' for [its] colored daughter", the CME (Haygood 1881). Holsey proposed that southern White teachers be hired to train the Black students, and in 1882 he co-led an effort with Haygood to establish the Paine Institute (later renamed Paine College in 1903), a Black college of higher learning in Augusta. Pierce, now a senior bishop in the MEC, South, chaired the meeting that chartered the college and appointed Holsey to the board of trustees. His daughter, Katie Holsey, was in the first graduating class in 1886. Support for the school varied. Many local African Americans opposed it because they felt it was another White paternalistic attempt to control the Black population. Though the White-owned *Augusta Chronicle* supported the school on paternalistic grounds, many White elites in Augusta flat out opposed the education of African Americans (Eskew 1992, pp. 650–51; Mann 1965).

While his mentees, Haywood and Holsey, continued to work together, "Pierce did not see [Black] education leading to [cultural] assimilation" (Eskew 1992, p. 649). Haygood himself seems to have been shocked that despite years of working closely with Black churches, his mentor refused the notion of equality. In publications, Haygood accused Pierce of throwing "cold water on the negro [sic] education business", ultimately withdrawing his support of the Paine Institute. Haygood, who stressed the need for racial tolerance, described his mentor's attitudes toward Black people's efforts for equality as carrying out "violence (contrary to) the ordination of nature" (Ruben 1959).

George Foster Pierce lived out his last years at Sunshine. On 3 September 1884, two years after the founding of the Paine Institute, George Foster Pierce died at Sunshine,

surrounded by his immediate family, including my great-great-great-grandmother, Ella Caroline Pierce. Due to the large crowd of both Black and White mourners, his funeral was held at the Sparta courthouse instead of his home church of Sparta (Smith 1888, pp. 685–86).

Sunshine's buildings have long since crumbled and the former cotton fields in the region have become overgrown forests of mostly pioneer species of pine. On my first trip to Sparta in 2018 with my mother and kids, I wanted to set foot on the ground where Sunshine once was. When I asked people in Sparta to help me locate Pierce's plantation, they gave me directions to woods not far from downtown near the historical marker for Rockby, where Lucius Holsey was enslaved.

10. The Failure of Post-Bellum Paternalism

Holsey's hopes for gains in civil rights came started to wane after the Congress's Compromise of 1877. The dismantling of Reconstruction polices, and the retreat of federal troops, signaled an end to the federal government's post-Civil War attempt to ensure Black human rights in Georgia and elsewhere in the South. The post-Reconstruction racial apartheid system that emerged eroded or erased whatever benefits the middle-class Black leadership of the CME church had benefited from during the decade after the Civil War (Eskew 1992, pp. 653–57). Throughout the South, the rise of Black codes, land dispossession, segregation, disenfranchisement (through grandfather clauses, poll taxes and literacy tests), lynching and other kinds of racist violence ravaged Black citizens' ability to travel, work, farm, vote, and simply to live.

By the late 1890s, Holsey's worldview had begun to shift. Despite his long-held loyalty to White paternalists and their moderate brand of Christianity, the changing Jim Crow environment forced him to question his accommodationist politics. In 1896, he founded a new CME newspaper, the *Gospel Trumpet*. For the first time, he publicly criticized the status quo, specifically targeting Black convict labor, exploitative wages, segregation, and White supremacist politicians. In his home of Augusta, the White-controlled school district's closing of the all-Black Ware High School, the city's attempted segregation of streetcars, the removal of African Americans from local politics, and White supremacist violence all contributed to Holsey's reconsideration of the mission plantation ideology he espoused for so many years. In 1896, Holsey moved to the Sweet Auburn Avenue neighborhood in downtown Atlanta, the same area where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other Black civil right activists would later reside. The horrific public lynching of Sam Hose in April 1899 in Newnan, Georgia, one of twenty-seven African Americans lynched in Georgia during that year, further prompted Holsey to radically rethink how Blacks and Whites in the United States could even co-exist together. (Eskew 1992, pp. 655–58) (See also Eskew's discussion of historian C. Vann Woodward's analysis of a societal "capitulation to racism" in his important book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955).).

By the turn of the century, Holsey had abandoned accommodation as a strategy for attaining Black social equality. In a similar manner to other African American leaders at the time, he began to advocate for a form of Black nationalism in which a self-determined Black community lived separately in their own power and sovereignty. In a speech he made in August 1899, Holsey called for "separation and segregation" of the races and the establishment of a Black state within the country where an African American "could be a man among men". Exasperated, he reasoned that "each year the racial differences are rendering it more and more impossible for the whites and blacks to occupy the same territory, and there is nothing for the black man to do but to move or remain here as an oppressed and degraded race" (Holsey 1904, p. 116). His analysis had shifted so much that in 1904 he candidly remarked:

> We are now confronted by conditions where merit in the black man does not weigh one iota in human rights and very little in human life, if that life and character is under a black or brown skin. Learning, personal accomplishment, the achievement of wealth, the reign of morality and skilled handicraft amount to nothing whatever in the black man. Merit fitness for the high and holy functions

> of civil life cannot win for him the rights and safety that is that is the national and God-given inheritance of all. Black men and women, though cultured and refined, are treated as serfs and subjected to every imaginable insult and degradation that can be invented or discovered by an ill-plighted and perverse ingenuity. (Holsey 1904, p. 102)

By 1910, Holsey withdrew his support for Paine College. His calls for Black nationalism largely fell on deaf ears, as his power diminished within the CME. In 1919 and 1920, Holsey re-wrote his autobiography, originally published in 1899. Although never published, the twentieth-century Black scholar John Cane gained access to the unpublished manuscript from Holsey's daughter, Katie Holsey Dickinson, and included excerpts from it in his 1964 biography of Holsey (Eskew 1992, p. 664). Towards the end of his life, with a fundamentally changed worldview, Holsey revisited his earlier decisions to support the paternalism that traced its ideology to the plantation missions:

> I have always been impressed and so understood from boyhood, that no matter what might take place in the rise or fall of American civilization; and no matter what social or political changes or upheavals might appear, the white man of the South would be on top. I think I had a prophetic vision and rather an unclouded view of those things to come that would affect the religious and political condition of the people of color, and it was folly, if not madness, to ignore and set at nought such a conclusion". (Cade 1964, pp. 60–61)

On 3 August 1920, Holsey died in Atlanta at seventy-eight years old.

During the last decades of Lucius Holsey's life, the cotton economy was still the primary economic mainstay of Hancock County. Black and White sharecroppers replaced enslaved laborers. Although Whites continued to own most of the land in the county, African Americans were able to acquire land and started farming enterprises. In 1921 cotton farming in Hancock began a steep decline with the arrival of the boll weevil pest. Landowners began planting their old cotton fields with pine trees harvested for paper pulp. As the economy further declined during the Great Depression, many Black residents migrated to neighboring cities such as Augusta or Atlanta or to northern states as part of the Great Migration (Schultz 2005, p. 3)

11. Voter Suppression in Hancock County and the Re-Enactment of the Wedding at Sunshine

A shift in power began in Hancock County after the federal Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965. A year later, Black citizens registered in droves and elected Black candidates to office for the first time since 1867. In 1968, Hancock County became the first county in the country to come under African American political control since Reconstruction. John McCown, a Black civil rights activist and community organizer, was elected as Hancock County Commissioner. He fundraised millions from federal grants and private foundations and, through a community development corporation that he created, organized a variety of public economic development projects including a catfish farm, concrete plant, and theater. His ethos of grassroots democratic participation and economic development for all resonated with many Black constituents in the county. McCown's unapologetic politics of Black political and economic sovereignty sparked state-wide White opposition to his leadership. In the early 1970s, he was accused of embezzlement and faced likely federal indictments when he died in a 1976 plane accident (Rozier 1982). During the late twentieth century and 2000s, Hancock County, similar to other parts of the rural South, struggled to create economic growth and improve standards of living. Despite economic disinvestment, informal segregation and more recent attempts to disenfranchise Black residents, Hancock County's citizens still organized for their civil rights, electing William Evans in 1992, who brought the story of Pierce and Holsey back into public consciousness. Evans remained mayor until 2015, when voter suppression in Hancock County was contested again.

The year before, the county's voter roll of almost 1100 names was destroyed in a fire at the historic Hancock County Courthouse in downtown Sparta. In their process

of rebuilding the voter roll, White county officials challenged 187 of the names, mostly African Americans, who they claimed did not live in the precincts they said they did. As *The Christian Science Monitor* reported, "local deputies were deployed to hand out summonses in person to the 187 people whose registrations were being challenged. (Often, such inquiries are mailed)" (Johnson 2017). At a sparsely attended county election board meeting, Marion Warren, a local Black city election official and NAACP chapter president, recorded the all-White commissioners' removal of fifty-three nearly all-Black voters from the roll.

Warren's video footage prompted a federal lawsuit filed by the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights. In 2017, the case was settled. The county's voter expungement and use of law enforcement to issue voter re-registration summonses were found to be unconstitutional and forms of voter intimidation. As a result, Hancock County became the first jurisdiction to earn federal election oversight since the United States Supreme Court invalidated part of the Voting Rights Act in 2013. "If you look at what is happening now at the federal level, it is the exact same thing as what happened here in Hancock County", Warren said (Johnson 2017).

Hancock County has one of the largest percentages of African Americans of any county in Georgia. The voter purge had a chilling effect on Black voting in the upcoming November 2015 local elections. African American voter participation fell by 40 percent. With significantly lower Black voter turnout aiding his campaign, Allen Haywood defeated incumbent Mayor William Evans by 110 votes, to become Sparta's first White mayor in forty years (Johnson 2017).

When I talked to Jeanette Waddell about the Sunshine re-enactment in light of the rise in voter suppression in the county, she expressed a strong understanding of the ways that White supremacy has operated in Hancock. Even so, she thought Pierce's marriage of Harriet and Lucius Hosley symbolized something more:

> A marriage is a commitment, a covenant. And there's an element of mystery to a wedding. [Two people] are committing together until they die without knowing what happens to them within the context of their marriage relationship. When two people are committing to marry, they are committing to a hopeful future and yet it is an unknown. That spoke to the mystery of what Hancock County can become. It was the idea that as a community we really are wedded to each other. Like it or not. We're in this house together. Together we can do so much more than we could ever do alone. We can decide that we're going to find a way of bridging the void. We will find a way towards togetherness. Not by pretending that we have this big thing in front of us. We need to stop ignoring the elephant in the room.

In his influential article "The Case for Reparations", the writer Ta Ne-Hisi Coates comments on the legacy of slavery and racism in the United States. He says, "I believe that wrestling publicly with these questions matters as much as—if not more than—the specific answers that might be produced. An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane. An America that looks away is ignoring not just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future" (Coates 2014).

During the re-enactment, both pastors offered short sermons emphasizing the coming together of different communities. In her sermon, Rev. Gwendolyn Smith opened by comparing Sparta to Jerusalem, "where many people of many cultures and ethnicities with uncommon ideas and religions crossed common lands." She continued:

> Today, in this capital of Hancock County of Middle Georgia on the Fall Line, we are surrounded by people who can connect the rural and Urban, the old and the new and the now to the next. This is another place where some walls have been torn down, but Faith has set a stone for us to be called to remember our past and come in unity to establish what will come next. Prayerfully, generations will become united, and the racial and economic divide will be no more!

> This wedding re-enactment symbolizes friendships, relationships, religious freedom, faith in God, a community and leaders who will come together for the common good finding a common ground, a common purpose among uncommon principles.
>
> The wedding then built a bridge and began to slowly tear down some walls of uncommon sense and began to teach us that there is strength in unity. We can come to common agreements, such as through a common desire to make Middle Georgia a welcoming place that helps people connect the beauty of our land and heritages and be able to live by faith and to love our neighbors, to come to a common ground, accepting all and changing some philosophies and words that broke hearts, backs and crippled us. Let us take the past and present and strive for a unified future.
>
> The Bible teaches us that the lion and the lamb were at odds. The lion would eat the lamb and the lamb would constantly flee from the lion. Courage and meekness shall come together; "not by our will but by the will of God. The lion and the lamb represent peace. When mankind gets together, there is political, economic, and social, a prospering Broad Street, unified worship experiences all serving One God, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism. Nothing will be able to separate us from the Love of God for we are more together than what divides us! (Smith 2019)

Smith's sermon echoes a sentiment held by all three of the organizers: that despite racial and socio-economic differences and an enduring legacy of segregation within Sparta, it was still valuable for the two communities to come together. Waddell reflected that "hopefully what people walked away with was the words from the pastors, possibilities for hope and reconciliation. It was a place to start, definitely not an ending." The three organizers also saw the event as a catalyst for continued inter-racial gatherings. Smith commented that her congregation "enjoyed [the re-enactment] very much and we vowed to continue the connection" but the pandemic got in the way of planning more joint activities. She said that a few weeks after the re-enactment members of her congregation attended a Nativity scene at Pierce Memorial church and that "it is my desire for the two churches to become more closely connected and be more uplifting in the history of the two bishops, Holsey and Pierce." If the re-enactment is a "starting place" to remember and begin a process of reconciling slavery and its legacy of White supremacy in Middle Georgia, then unforgetting the structural forms of oppression that shaped Pierce and Holsey's complex relationship becomes central to such a process.

In November 2020, two-and-a- half years after my first walk on the land where Sunshine stood, I travelled from New Orleans to north Georgia and Hancock County to assist in "get out the vote" efforts for the January 2021 U.S. Senate runoff races. I returned to the overgrown pine woodland. I walked alone on the pine straw and leaves and came across some stone structures I had not seen before. I did not know what era they were from or if they were remnants of either Rockby or Sunshine.

I stopped to explore the old stones and the woody vines that had taken root. I recalled my Nana's living room, the Sparta mural, the picture of Sunshine and conversations with my mom, my son, Jasper, and the Hancock County residents I had met. I started to register more than ever that remembering is the first step. The act of unforgetting—privately and now publicly—has become the next.

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