Freedom on a Leash:

Hunting, Dogs, and the Social Boundaries of the Antebellum South

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Dogs provide an unusually perceptive lens through which to view the antebellum South because of their ubiquity. Every race and class owned, interacted, or was affected by the canines of the Cotton Kingdom, and each found dogs a useful means of interpreting and broadcasting their power—or lack of power—and their identity. Elite sportsman hunted over dogs as gentlemen, poor whites hunted behind dogs for food, and while the enslaved found hunting over hounds empowering, they could also be hunted by them. Dogs were tools used simultaneously to build the social order, enforce it, and challenge it.

These many relationships were complicated, and deserve investigation. Two men in the *Southern Cultivator* summarize the intricate relationship antebellum white males had with their dogs. “I would not give one good sheep,” one stated, “for forty sorry dogs.” The other could not have more clearly disagreed. “I dare say there is not a farm in Georgia that has not its plantation dog,” he remarked of the popularity of canine companionship, “and scarce a farmer who would not almost as soon lose a horse as his watch dog.” While elite whites liked their own hunting dogs and used them to build reputations, they blamed the “sorry dogs” of poor whites and slaves for the destruction of livestock. Elites eventually legislated against dog ownership by their enslaved workers, though they often looked the other way at the extra—hunted, tracked, treed—food dogs put on the tables of the enslaved. Laws, after all, were not as intimidating as the teeth and bay of a bloodhound. For the enslaved, the threat of such beasts defined their enslavement, and freedmen exacted a revenge on these animals that revealed how they interpreted emancipation.