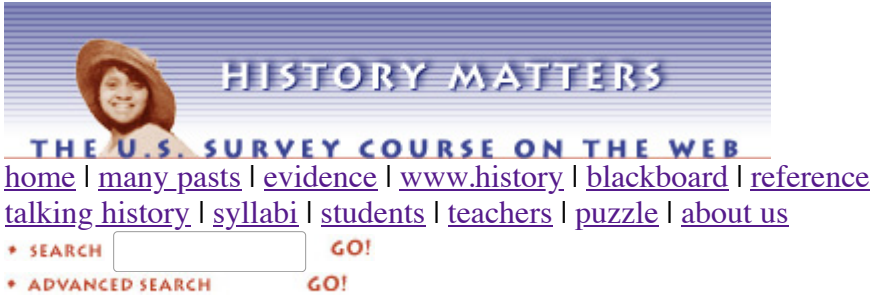


# localhost



## “So Cheapened the White Man’s Labor”: White Artisans Contest the Labor of Black Workers, 1838

While the numbers of free blacks remained small in the South through the mid-nineteenth century, their presence aroused great anxiety among whites. Legislatures passed laws limiting African-American political and social rights. Non-slaveholding whites often viewed free black labor as competition, especially in urban areas where tensions between the two groups sometimes ran high. In 1838, J. J. Flournoy, a white Georgian artisan, wrote this letter to the Athens *Southern Banner* complaining about the competition posed by black workers. While he noted in passing that the white majority of the poor should band together to elect representatives to ensure laws that would privilege white labor over black, he more forcefully appealed to a common “whiteness” among contractors and carpenters, proprietors and workers.

---

TO THE CONTRACTORS FOR MASON’S AND CARPENTER’S WORK

ATHENS

Gentlemen: I desire your candid consideration of the views I shall here express. I ask no reply to them except at your own volition. I am aware that most of you have too strong antipathy to encourage the masonry and carpentry trades of your poor white brothers, that your predilections for giving employment in your line of business to ebony workers have either so cheapened the white man’s labor, or expatriated hence with but a few solitary exceptions, all the white masons and carpenters of this town.

The white man is the only real, legal, moral and civil proprietor of this country and state. The right of his proprietorship reaches from the date of the studies of those white men, Copernicus and Gallileo, who indicated from the seclusion of their closets the sphericity of the earth: which sphericity hinted to another white man, Columbus, the possibility by a westerly course of sailing, of finding land. Hence by white man alone was this continent discovered; by the prowess of white men alone (though not always properly or humanely exercised), were the fierce and active Indians driven occidentally: and if swarms and hordes of infuriated red men pour down now from the Northwest, like the wintry blast thereof, the white men alone, aye, those to whom you decline to give money for bread and clothes, for their famishing families, in the logic matter of withholding work from them, or employing negroes, in the sequel, to cheapen their wages to a rate that amounts to a moral and physical impossibility for them either to live here and support their families-would bare their breasts to the keen and whizzing shafts of the savage crusaders-defending negroes too in the bargain, for if left to themselves without our aid, the Indians would or can sweep the negroes hence, “as dew drops are shaken from the lion’s mane.”

The right, then, gentlemen, you will no doubt candidly admit, of the white man to employment in preference to negroes, who *must* defer to us since they live well enough on plantations, cannot be considered impeachable by

contractors. It is a right more virtual and indisputable than that of agrarianism. As masters of the polls in a majority, carrying all before them, I am surprised the poor do not elect faithful members to the Legislature, who will make it penal to prefer negro mechanic labor to white men's. But of the premises as I have now laid them down, you will candidly judge for yourselves, and draw a conclusion with me, that white bricklayers and house joiners must henceforward have ample work and remuneration; and yourselves and other contractors will set the example, and pursue it for the future without deviation. Your respectfully

Source: *Southern Banner*(Athens, Ga.), January 13, 1838, reprinted in U.B. Phillips, *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society: Plantation and Frontier* (Cleveland: A.H. Clark, 1910), 2: 360–61