



THE ESSENTIAL DENIAL OF PELLAGRA IN THE NEW SOUTH THE DISEASE THAT SAID TOO MUCH

For a resident of the South in the early twentieth century, it was hard to know what to believe about pellagra: was it an infection, a bug carried in corn, or a punishment for too many processed dinners? Should you be ashamed of having it, or righteously indignant at the way Northern interests might use you in their arguments? James Wyatt Woodall, Columbia '18, masterfully sketches these confusions—and the self-interested moves engendering them—in this essay. Along the way, he explores “fantasies” of a New South and the obstacles to bringing such a dream to fruition. And a larger point about public health is both made and illustrated, in which rhetoric is a powerful obstacle to a disease and social change is necessary but hard to come by.

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On July 25, 1921, President Warren G. Harding wrote two letters concerning the prevalence of pellagra, a disease of malnutrition, in the South.¹ One of these letters was directed to Dr. Livingston Farrand, the Chairman of the American Red Cross, and the other to Surgeon-General Hugh S. Cumming of the Public Health Service, both urging immediate action regarding the disease. President Harding exclaimed that there is no reason that “any measures necessary to relieve the sufferers on the cotton plantations and in the textile villages should be delayed for a single day.”² The President stressed the importance of a report by Dr. Joseph Goldberger, a Public Health Officer studying pellagra, which revealed that there were over “100,000 new cases of pellagra among the little farmers, cotton tenants and cotton mill workers in the Southern States.”³ Harding emphasized sufferers in two iconic Southern economic institutions: cotton plantations and textile mill villages. The President, in his letters, described pellagra as a “menace,” a “plague,” and a “famine” connected to “economic dislocation,” and declared that “the problem of pellagra is in the main a problem of poverty” and the “depressed cotton market” and thus a problem of dependence on the staple economy in the South.⁴ Harding even compared the starvation conditions in the South to “underdeveloped countries” in the “Near and Far East.”⁵ These letters, published nationwide in *The New York Times*, declared pellagra as “one of the most serious situations that has developed in this country in years.”⁶ Following the publication of these letters, Dr. Joseph Goldberger continued to stress that this was not a matter of feeding those in “starvation conditions,” but rather a matter of improving the “economic conditions” of the South.⁷

These statements by President Harding and the sensationalism surrounding the issue turned Southern general indifference to and acceptance of pellagra into all-out denial of both the existence of the disease and the relevance of Southern socioeconomic predicates to its development. The outrage of Southern politicians, industrialists, investors, and wealthy doctors can be understood through the gospel of the “New South.” The New South ideology, as C. Vann Woodward claims, was a marriage of Lost Cause romanticism and regional pride of antebellum days with industrialization, capitalism, and an attempt to be “at last one in faith with the country” and “out yankee the yankee,” as Representative Henry Watterson, editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, stated in 1877.⁸ In accordance

1 Alan M. Kraut, *Goldberger's War: The Life and Work of a Public Health Crusader* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 101–102.

2 “Orders Relief for Pellagra Victims,” *New York Times*, July 26, 1921.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 “South Resents Federal Alarm Over Pellagra,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1921.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press,

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with this, the New South elite perceived pellagra as an indictment of the South by Dr. Goldberger, Surgeon-General Cumming, and President Harding. Thus, the disease, in so far as Harding and Goldberger perceived it, had to be denied. Pellagra was a symbol of poverty that represented an affront to the heavily advertised post-slavery labor alternatives of a cheap labor force in Southern textile mills—a hallmark of the New South—and tenant farming and sharecropping. And thus, it was an affront to the New South itself.⁹

Therefore, in typical Southern fashion, the New South elite triumvirate of politicians, businessmen, and even politically conservative doctors (like Seale Harris, respected president of the Southern Medical Association and owner-editor of the *Southern Medical Journal*) heralded the South as “the greatest country on the Earth,” looked to cast blame on “damyankees” and the poor, and sought to deny all accusations of the existence of pellagra, poverty, monoculture, insufficient labor standards, and low standards of living—even while pellagra, in actuality, revealed the failure of the New South promises and underlined the abuse of the average Southerner, both white and black, by the collusion of the new Southern business aristocracy and Northern speculators.¹⁰ Through this study, perhaps one can understand the ways in which pellagra, a public health issue, revealed underlying institutional problems. One can perhaps also see why the Southern elite denied available aid for it: not because they wanted to, but rather because they could not accept the problem; for if they did, they would be admitting both the inadequacy of the “New” socioeconomic structures on which their own power rode, as well as an “Old” cultural inferiority to the North, which the South had been fighting since its defense of its “peculiar institution.”

The first essential question to answer, as Dr. Joseph Goldberger did, is in what way the public health crisis of pellagra was essentially linked to the socioeconomics of the New South. Why was pellagra “in the main a problem of poverty”? Why could the “improvement in basic economic conditions alone...be expected to heal this festering ulcer in the body of our people,” as Dr. Goldberger stated?¹¹ In this way, one can reach a nuanced understanding of the relationship between socioeconomic institutions and public health at large and perceive, as Dr. Goldberger had—by understanding that the “economic condition of the entire cotton producing area is unfavorable”—that drastic socioeconomic change and the fundamental alteration of ways of life are often needed for such diseases

1971), 151.

9 Elizabeth W. Etheridge, *The Butterfly Caste: A Social History of Pellagra in The South* (Westport, Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), 152.

10 *Greensboro (N.C.) Daily News*, July 31, 1921.

11 Kraut, *Goldberger's War*, 101–102; Joseph Kirby and Edgar Sydenstricker, “Pellagra in the Mississippi Flood Area, PHR 42 (1927): 2711; Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920–1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1987), 187.

to subsidize or disappear. Public health work alone is often not sufficient.

One of the new economic developments of the New South was the arrival of textile factories, cotton mills, and paternalist mill villages. With the arrival of Northern investment in the South came the advertisement by wealthy Southerners of a cheap, white, contented, healthy, and “un-Bolshevized” labor force.¹² These industries did maintain a cheap labor force, but the level of their workers’ contentment and health, and the sustainability of these calamitous institutions, were questionable considering the high prevalence of poverty and thus of pellagra. *The American Federationist* suggested that the average man earned approximately \$12.77 a week in a mill, of which \$11.33 went towards food to properly feed a family of five. Thus, with \$11.33 of a worker’s salary going towards food, plus the price of rent, clothing, and other expenses, one can see that it was near impossible for the average worker to properly support his family under such adverse economic conditions.¹³ Additionally, the majority of factory and mine workers were paid in scrip and thus were tied to the inventory of the local company store, which often lacked a proper diversity of foods. As a result, workers depended on the “benevolence” of the paternalistic mill or mine owner.¹⁴ In addition, even if the company store did have an ample supply of meats, dairy, and vegetables, workers were often diverted from these choices by their high prices and attracted instead to the cheap and culturally favorable but unhealthy choices of “corn bread, molasses, syrup, fatback, and coffee.”¹⁵ Goldberger assessed—comparing two Spartanburg, South Carolina mill towns, one with a high rate of pellagra and one with a low rate of pellagra—that the mill towns that had the highest rates of pellagra were ones where the workers were paid the lowest wages, had no plots for gardens or market of fresh produce and were most dependent on the commissary store; meanwhile, towns with the lowest rates of pellagra had all of the opposite conditions.¹⁶

Another economic condition of the New South not advertised by its proponents was the enslaving crop lien system and the cotton monoculture it reinforced.¹⁷ If a farmer wished to obtain credit (for seed, tools, fertilizer, mules, etc.), as all farmers had to following the Civil War, he was often forced to grow cotton, as “the furnishing merchant[s] demanded that their debtors plant the one certain cash crop, cotton.”¹⁸ When a farmer

12 Etheridge, *The Butterfly Caste*, 151; Paul Blanshard, *Labor in the Southern Cotton Mills* (New York: New Republic Inc., 1927), 5.

13 “Southern Mill Villages, A Survey,” *The American Federationist* 38 (1931): 1091-1093; Etheridge, *The Butterfly Caste*, 194.

14 Kraut, *Goldberger’s War*, 98.

15 *Ibid.*, 98.

16 Daphne A. Roe, *A Plague of Corn: The Social History of Pellagra* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 105-106.

17 “Pellagra Probe to Go Forward,” *The Atlanta Constitution*.

18 Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*

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signed his first crop lien, he was in continual “bondage to his merchant as long as he failed to pay out”; and he often did fail to pay out, because farmers were overcharged with interest rates that frequently exceeded 100 percent.¹⁹ Thus, the one-time independent farmer fell into an endless chain of debt that occasioned tenancy or sharecropping on land, now owned by the furnishing merchant, that was once his own. As North Carolina farmer John Leard said in 1939, “Money’s the thing...and you can’t make any of it growin’ corn and ’taters.” The once independent yeoman farmer was forced to sacrifice his more diversified independent garden and the growing of “corn and ’taters” for the only thing that would earn him a loan: cotton.²⁰ Tenant farmers bound to this endless chain of credit in Macon, Georgia, to take one example, earned a wage that was 60 to 70 percent less than the U.S. average.²¹ Therefore, as Goldberger properly assessed, the reality of the New South did not match the imagined New South of the Southern elite triumvirate. The reality was that the average Southerner, in the mill or in the field, was impoverished, and pellagra was a physical manifestation of that Southern poverty.

Instead of accepting Goldberger and Harding’s indictment of the socioeconomic system of peonage and the unsustainable mill village paternalism of the New South, the Southern elite attempted to defend their business interests, unique institutions and pride by placing blame on other regions, economic classes and industries. Before the direct attack on Southern economic structures and poverty by Harding and Goldberger in 1921, many Southerners accepted the existence of pellagra, because it was believed that pellagra was not caused by malnourishment but rather by spoiled corn imported from the Midwest. The South grew insufficient amounts of corn (because of cotton monoculture) and relied on Midwestern imports in order to sustain itself.²² In these circumstances, it was expedient for New South business strategists to explicate the dangers of pellagra, as corn was “the principal crop of the country and big money was involved.”²³ Thus, Southern politicians in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Texas wished to stimulate their own economies and dominate the U.S. corn market by advocating for corn inspection laws and referring to pellagra, as one Georgia health official did in 1911, as “the murder of Georgia citizens and the slaughter of the state’s horses by sale of corn unfit for consumption,” or even by limiting the importation of Midwestern corn by instituting

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 24.

19 Ibid., 21–22.

20 “John Leard” by Frank Massimino and Quay Corn. North Carolina, 1939. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Retrieved from the Library of Congress.

21 Kraut, *Goldberger’s War*, 98.

22 Etheridge, *The Butterfly Caste*, 20.

23 Ibid., 20.

market controls, as South Carolina did.²⁴ The acceptance of pellagra was expedient for the elite of the “New South” at this time because it opened up the possibility of monopolizing corn production by harming another region, the Midwest. It was also expedient, in this case, to violate the New South principle of laissez-faire capitalism by instituting market controls.²⁵ Thus, the opportunistic acceptance of pellagra by Southern public health officials, politicians, and businessmen was contingent on the expediency of the acceptance. When pellagra indicted the Midwest rather than the South, it was only proper for the political, business and medical triumvirate to accept pellagra in order to further develop industry and agriculture in the New South. For the same reason, after 1921, this Southern elite triumvirate would deny the existence of pellagra and impoverished conditions when it was expedient for the New South to do so.

The Southern elite also often blamed the federal government and the North in a manner typical of that of the Old Order by claiming Southern superiority. Ironically, however, in order for the New South to defend itself from its “prevailing inferiority,” as Woodward states, “this idealizing of the past proceeded from the mouths of the most active propagandists for the New Order.”²⁶ Thus, this old Lost Cause-style argument – that the North was continuing to attack the South with indictments of its way of life by pointing to diseases like pellagra or hookworm – was expedient for those who wished to defend and bolster Southern industry and agriculture. Some Southerners thereby argued that pellagra was a conspiracy by Northerners to “inflict further injury on a besieged land,” while others thought the Harding administration, in 1921, “[had] it in for the South” because Harding was a “damyankee, who has probably spent the major portion of his active life devising ways and means of afflicting the South.”²⁷ These arguments are grounded in one of the fundamental components of the New South’s rhetoric: a “very righteous and holy anger” in defense of Southern ways of life combined with the promotion of Southern industrial and agricultural development.²⁸

Intertwined with a fundamental Southern pride – rejecting any criticism that painted the South as insufficient and impoverished because of pellagra – was a defense of business practices new and old against the “carpetbagger” federal government and Northern businesses. Senator S.B. Dial from South Carolina, for example, stated, “all would be well in Dixie were it not for the unjust cotton-futures contract law and the unjust railroad rates, a kind of thievery that has the protection of Congress.”²⁹ Senator Dial attributed

24 Ibid., 24.

25 Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 148.

26 Ibid., 157.

27 Etheridge, *The Butterfly Caste*, 13; *Greensboro Daily News*, July 31, 1921.

28 Blanshard, *Labor in Southern Cotton Mills* (New York, New Republic Inc., 1927), 6–7.

29 Etheridge, *The Butterfly Caste*, 153.

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“all” economic tribulations of the South to the “thievery” of the federal government and thus reframed pellagra not as an indictment of Southern economic practices, but rather as an indictment of the federal economic policy that continued a “thievery” reminiscent of that executed by “carpetbaggers.” Meanwhile, cotton growers and manufacturers blamed high cotton prices and, thus, pellagra on the Federal Reserve Board because of the lack of liberal credit.³⁰ Therefore, economic hardships in the South were blamed on federal protectionism and a failure to embrace true laissez-faire capitalism, which was supposedly a keystone of New South ideology. Notice, however, that protectionism was assailed only when it was supposedly against the interests of the Southern states after 1921, while it was embraced prior to 1921, when pellagra was supposed to be caused by rancid Midwestern corn.

Other Southern politicians and public health officers berated the federal government for its supposed commercial and material promotion of another region at the expense of the South. Governor Thomas Kilby of Alabama believed that the Washington pellagra and famine report was merely “slander” against the Southern states and that this “slander” was possibly part of “a campaign of propaganda *for some other section*.”³¹ Dr. S. Welch, an Alabama state health officer, also suggested that other sections of the country were “exploiting [the South] in flamboyant style” in order to “profit in a material way by circulating false reports against the best and most desirable section of the best country in the world.”³² Both Governor Kilby and Dr. Welch, recalling sectionalist affinities and defenses, ran campaigns on the assumption that there existed a conspiracy against the South which aimed to commercially benefit another region of the country. Dr. Welch’s claim that the South is “the most desirable section” reveals a combination of sentimental Southern jingoism and modern commercial interests used to defend Southern industry and advertise to investors.

The Southern elite, even when it did accept pellagra, blamed the disease not on the impoverishment of its own people due to insufficient mills and monoculture, but rather on the impoverished pellagrins themselves. Dr. Seale Harris, for example, admitted in the 1940s that Goldberger was correct in hypothesizing that pellagra was caused by a nutrient deficiency. However, Harris, a diehard New South proponent who idealized New South founding fathers Benjamin Hill and Henry W. Grady, refused to accept Goldberger’s assertion that pellagra was tied to “class distinctions” and socioeconomics.³³ Instead, Harris insinuated that pellagra was a result of the intransigence and ignorance

30 Ibid., 154.

31 Clark Howell, “Pellagra Probe to Go Forward,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 30, 1921.

32 Ibid.

33 Michael A. Flannery, “‘Frauds,’ ‘Filth Parties,’ ‘Yeast Fads,’ and ‘Black Boxes’: Pellagra and Southern Pride, 1906–2003,” *Southern Quarterly* 53 (Spring, 2016): 114–140, 236.

of the poor – their filthy living, bad habits, personal hygiene, and moral ineptitude – and suggested moral education programs rather than an economic revolution to prevent pellagra.³⁴ *The Spartanburg Journal* preached to its readers in 1930 that there is no reason to “reduce cotton acreage, that is futile.” Rather, the farmer “should be informed how to grow more cotton at reduced cost per pound.”³⁵ This line of logic shifted the blame for pellagra from the dominance of cotton monoculture, which Dr. Goldberger suggested should be reduced, to the individual farmer’s ignorance and lack of frugality. Dr. Hall, vital statistician of the Mississippi State Health Board, declared too that the contracting of the disease “is largely due to ignorance” and that even the “poorer classes” could afford to “vary the cheaper foodstuffs.”³⁶ Similarly, *The Atlanta Constitution*, while accepting Goldberger’s recommendation that everyone should have a “cow and garden,” noted – in contrast to Goldberger’s theory that economic restructuring was more essential than education – that the key to solving the pellagra epidemic was not economic restructuring but rather just education. *The Atlanta Constitution* claimed that

the remedy is education... every-day, *horse sense*, and knowledge as to how to live and what to eat!... no thought or attention is given (by these black and white “one-horse” cotton croppers) to raising a garden!... it should be a *stigma* on any housewife who does not feed her family... there is *no possible reason* why any family should not produce any ample variety of vegetables, and of milk... *The South is not suffering from poverty... the cause [of pellagra] is not poverty, but ignorance.*³⁷

This article showed the defense of Southern economic proceedings most clearly by blaming the “one-horse cotton croppers” for their own lack of “horse sense” (something so obvious that an animal should know – i.e., how to eat right). The article insinuated that pellagra was a “stigma” not on the New South, but on the individual. According to the article, there was “no possible reason” why every individual should not have a garden and a cow. Thus, it was assumed that pellagra or any nutritional paucity was due to the carelessness and stupidity of the individual, not the unsustainability of the new economic order. The article goes so far as to suggest that poverty in the South did not even exist. The denial of the relation between New South socioeconomics and pellagra, as well as the blame placed on the pellagrins for their own illness, reveals the sustained hope in the New South elite by shifting blame to the individual.

34 *Ibid.*, 114–140, 236.

35 *Spartanburg Journal*, July 8, 9, September 6, 1930.

36 “South Resents Federal Alarm Over Pellagra,” *The Atlanta Constitution*.

37 “Cow and Garden,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 28, 1921.

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While some Southerners began to accept Goldberger's suggestion that pellagra was the result of a nutrient deficiency, many others suggested that Goldberger's reports were exaggerated or continued to vehemently deny the existence of Southern realities. The continued denial of pellagra by many Southern elites was in response to the accusations by Goldberger and Surgeon-General Cumming that pellagra was due to "the failure to diversify crops" resulting from "the custom of one-crop farming."³⁸ Dr. Seale Harris, in *The Courier-Journal* of Louisville, Kentucky, offered a "vigorous denial" of all these accusations and said the "pellagra scare, which was not justified by facts, does the South a gross injustice" and "misrepresents" the realities of the South.³⁹ In 1921, Harris also accused Dr. Goldberger of lacking experience with the disease and stated that "the majority of physicians who have had experience with pellagra do not accept Goldberger's theory... most of us feel that the cause of pellagra is an infection of some kind."⁴⁰ In order to deny that pellagra was endemic to the South, Harris resorted to the McFadden-Thompson Infection theory. The McFadden-Thompson Commission supposedly proved in 1914 that pellagra "is due to an infection" and "*is not essentially a Southern Disease... it is found in other parts of the country.*"⁴¹ This infection theory of pellagra became a fallback for proponents of the New South when their region was specifically attacked for its occurrences, as they instead emphasized the declaration by the McFadden-Thompson Commission's Dr. J.S. Siler that pellagra was not a "Southern Disease." Even into the late 1920s, some newspapers, such as *The Austin American* in 1928, posted ads unequivocally stating, "Pellagra is not a disease of malnutrition... it arises from an infection in the stomach."⁴² The attribution of the disease to infection instead of malnutrition made it appear as if the disease could and did occur in any other region of the country as well and thus was not a harbinger of New South impoverishment. Statements such as these reveal the way that some New South proponents vehemently denied even the cause of pellagra by malnutrition by referencing earlier public health reports; they therefore also reveal that, when it came to this issue, public health was not objective or one-sided – pellagra was a political issue that often used "scientific study" to justify political stances.

Some other members of the New South elite denied the existence of poverty and conditions of hunger in the South altogether. Dr. W.S. Leathers, secretary and executive

38 "Pellagra Report Sent to Harding," *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 16, 1921.

39 Seale Harris, "The Pellagra Scare," *The Courier-Journal*, July 28, 1921.

40 Ibid.

41 J.F. Siler, P.E. Garrison, and W.J. MacNeal, "Pellagra: A Summary of the First Progress Report of the Thompson-McFadden Pellagra Commission," *JAMA* LXII(1) (1914): 8-12, accessed on December 9, 2016. doi:10.1001/jama.1914.02560260016004; "Pellagra Isn't Very Dangerous," *The Nashville Tennessean*, January 3, 1914.

42 "Display Ad 99," *The Austin American*, August 26, 1928.

officer of the Mississippi State Board of Health, declared, “I know of no famine in any place in Mississippi...of course there are some isolated cases...but that is also found in New York City.”⁴³ Dr. Leathers went on to claim, “no pinch of poverty is being felt...”⁴⁴ This utter denial of the existence of poverty or its peculiarity to the South is striking, especially coming from a medical doctor, yet it is not surprising, as a rural Arkansas teacher suggested; she stated that the richer folk denied conditions of poverty because “they had not been out into the country to see the true condition...times just as hard as the President had said.”⁴⁵ Thus, it appears that either the New South elite were so out of touch with reality, as Paul Gaston stated, that they could not understand or did not perceive the reality of impoverishment and resultant illness, or they chose to ignore reality in order to uphold their narrative of Southern prosperity, which to the elite – who were indeed profiting from cheap Southern labor and industry – must have been real.⁴⁶ Therefore, the inaction of Southern boards of health, according to Gaston, was not due to their unwillingness to aid the pellagrins, but was rather due to their complete embrace of an illusory world of New South prosperity that had been extolled since the end of Reconstruction, as well as their lack of interaction with the actual working folks of the South, who did not benefit from the New South like they did.

Others, while not denying the existence of pellagra or its connection to malnutrition or poverty, firmly believed that the reports by President Harding and Dr. Goldberger were exaggerated in an attempt to harm the South. Senator Byrne of South Carolina contended that “claims that pellagra is widespread and that starvation conditions are in existence” represent an “utter absurdity,” while Representative W.C. Wright of Georgia ridiculed the idea that “the people of Georgia were starving.”⁴⁷ These reports take issue with the idea that their state was deficient in any manner. The Georgia Senate even passed a resolution denouncing the President’s report of a pellagra epidemic as “damning,” and the Georgia State Board of Health declared that no increase of the disease was found in Georgia, Florida, or Tennessee.⁴⁸ The use of the word “damning” is ambiguous, but possibly indicates the rejection of the reports of pellagra because they would “damn” Southern culture and Southern business. Thus, for Southern politicians to deny Harding’s report as exaggerated was for Southern governments to defend the New South’s cultural adequacy and its economic sustainability.

Deniers of pellagra even went so far as to suggest that monoculture did not exist.

43 “The South Resents Federal Alarm,” *New York Times*.

44 Ibid.

45 Etheridge, *The Butterfly Caste*, 157.

46 Paul Gaston, *The New South Creed*, (Montgomery, NewSouth Book, 1970), 190.

47 “Pellagra Probe to Go Forward,” *The Atlanta Constitution*.

48 “No Alarm in the South Over Pellagra,” *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 17, 1921.

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Governor Thomas McRae of Arkansas suggested, as *The New York Times* reports, that “bankers and commercial organizations have been conducting diversified farming campaigns which have met with splendid results, and the State no longer is in the ‘one-crop class.’”⁴⁹ The most telling statement by a Southern politician was that of W.C. Wright of Georgia, who claimed that farmers had diversified with cows, peaches, and watermelons, while simultaneously proclaiming, “Cotton will once more be enthroned as King and the fair southland will again come into her own....”⁵⁰ This counterintuitive speech highlights a few of the paradoxes of the New South – emphasizing both diversification and the monolithic greatness of cotton culture; claiming the South as the “greatest” section and wanting to “out yankee the yankee” and join in one faith with him; heralding the greatness of the antebellum and Confederate South and simultaneously proclaiming that the South must industrialize and modernize. Pellagra simply unveiled the paradox inherent in coupling a longing nostalgia for the Old South with an industrial vision of a “New South.” It revealed the devolution and collapse of the “New South” fantasy before the world as New South elite scrambled to defend their southland and economic interests against this public health crisis.

To deny the existence or spread of pellagra was to deny the deterioration in the region’s claim to prosperity – it was thus near impossible for those steeped in the dogma of the New South to do anything else. As historian Elizabeth Etheridge suggests, “it was easier to deny pellagra existed than to confront the harsh realities dealing with it,” as the resurgence of pellagra coincided with the extensive campaign of Southern industrialists to lure more investment to the South by advertising its cheap, healthy labor force. Harding undercut the effectiveness of this campaign and thereby, in the view of the Southern elite, attacked the South directly.⁵¹ The New South elite defended the South against pellagra accusations both as a “natural reaction” of an investor to “anyone who attacks his income” and as a result of deep-rooted Southern hostility to Northern criticism of Southern society.⁵²

Etheridge argues that one reason for the defensive behavior of Southern politicians was simply a historical characteristic of Southerners. Southerners, in Etheridge’s view, took no criticism for their “peculiar institution” during the antebellum years.⁵³ Thus, to distract from any “peculiar” socioeconomic situation or illness, the South re-

49 “South Resents Federal Alarm Over Pellagra,” *New York Times*.

50 “Pellagra Probe to Go Forward,” *The Atlanta Constitution*.

51 Elizabeth W. Etheridge, “Pellagra an Unappreciated Reminder of Southern Distinctiveness,” in *Disease and Distinctiveness in the American South*, ed. Tom L. Savitt and James Harvey Young (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 111.

52 Blanshard, *Labor in Southern Cotton Mills* (New York, New Republic Inc., 1927), 6–7.

53 Etheridge, *The Butterfly Caste*, 151.

verted back to its antebellum declarations that the South was “the best and most desirable section of the best country in the world,” as Dr. Welch of Alabama stated.⁵⁴ Thomas Hamilton similarly claimed that the “South is the greatest country on earth” with the “greatest climate” and the “proudest people” who are “confident of their future and unashamed of their past.” Tom Watson of Georgia likewise framed the defense against pellagra as a situation in which the South must “defend the honor of the Homeland.”⁵⁵ This sort of jingoism, founded in past pride and future confidence, was part of the deep root of Southern sensitivity.⁵⁶

But, in addition to the above sentimentalist, Lost Cause romanticism of some Southern politicians, the Southern elite also became defensive because their dream and advertising campaign of a New South were threatened. Seale Harris, while denouncing pellagra, said that everyone from the North would “move their families to the South where cheap lands, fertile soil, and balmy climates offer the greatest advantage for the farmer...if these facts were known in New England the cotton mills would come to the cotton fields...”⁵⁷ This does not appear to be a proper statement from a doctor, but rather seems to be one of a businessman. This denunciation of pellagra evolved into an ad campaign for New South industry and investment, extolling the “cheapness” of the land and labor, the advantage to the farmer, the convenience of having cotton mills and cotton fields in the same region, and the great amount of “mineral and industrial resources” in need of more investment for development. Other reports, such as one in the *Nashville Tennessean*, blatantly framed the “pellagra scare” as “unfavorable advertising” and thereby rejected charity on the grounds that it would make the South appear less than self-sufficient.⁵⁸

Most importantly, pellagra uncovered the falsity of the New South “flight of fantasy” and thus needed to be defended against. Mills, once harbingers of the New South, now represented despair and sickness. Fields of snowy cotton, once emblematic of Dixie tradition, not only starved the soil of essential nutrients but also starved the croppers that raised it.⁵⁹ The New South ran on a series of assumptions and fantasies, and pellagra simply unearthed the contradictions in those fantasies. For example, it was assumed that the South had cheap, obedient, healthy and un-unionized farm tenants who were being “forced out of the unprofitable single-crop farming of cotton into the doors of the cotton

54 “Pellagra Probe Goes Further,” *The Atlanta Constitution*.

55 Etheridge, *The Butterfly Caste*, 153.

56 *Ibid.*, 151.

57 “The Pellagra Scare,” *The Courier-Journal*.

58 “Goldberger’s Theory Combated,” *The Nashville Tennessean*.

59 Etheridge, “Southern Distinctiveness,” 100.

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mills.”⁶⁰ It was assumed, as the Spartanburg Chamber of Commerce claimed, that “there [was] no poverty” in the cotton mill villages and that they “[kept] going, even at a loss” to the benefit of the community; thus, any case of pellagra must be due to ignorance, because the paternalist, benevolent mill village – where 87 percent of workers lived – provided all.⁶¹ The rejection of Red Cross and federal aid by every Southern state also suggests that if these states had accepted aid from the federal government, they would have been, first, capitulating to the detested federal government and surrendering the South to the will of the North; second, accepting incidences of pellagra and thus Goldberger’s theory that pellagra was caused by Southern poverty; and third, accepting that the “New South” model and advertising of cheap labor and industry was unsustainable because it led to “plague and famine.” Thus, when Dr. Leathers of Mississippi “emphatically” denied aid from the Red Cross, he was upholding the sustained dream and investment of the Southern elite in the project of the New South.⁶² The reality was that, while Southern mill labor was cheap – as earlier proved by the fact that over half of workers’ incomes were below a “fair standard” of compensation – the insufficiency of wages for buying food, the squalid conditions, and the prevalence of hookworm and pellagra revealed that this system was unsustainable.⁶³

Pellagra, like many public health issues, was not simply an issue of public health. Rather, it was an indictment of the faulty culture, economy, social order, and dream of the Southern Redeemers of the New South, who were every bit as venal as the “carpetbaggers.”⁶⁴ The poor of the South knew that they needed to eat better; the fact was that they simply could not afford the food they needed – even the independent farmer lived on a conditional basis with regards to proper nutrition. John Leard of North Carolina stated in 1939 that he would see his children get milk, eggs, and vegetables only “*when* the cow is doin’ right well...the chickens are laying” and “*when* the garden is in...”⁶⁵ Although it is true that some of the poorer folks did not eat properly because they “[liked] fat-back” too much or were ignorant of the causes of pellagra, thinking that “it runs in our family,” the majority of the poor, when informed of its causes, continued to eat poorly because, as Mary Hicks stated, “we couldn’t afford nothing else” or “the landlord” didn’t wish for us “to use the land for vegetables.”⁶⁶ Therefore, Goldberger was

60 Blanshard, *Labor in the Southern Cotton Mills*, 5.

61 E.B. Walker “Pellagra in the South: To the Editor of the New York Times,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1921.

62 “South Resents Federal Alarm Over Pellagra,” *New York Times*.

63 Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 420.

64 Sheldon Hackney, “Origins of the New South in Retrospect,” *Journal of Southern History* 38 (1972), 191.

65 “John Leard,” Frank Massimino and Quay Corn.

66 Kirby, *Rural World Lost*, 189–190.

correct in his assessment that fundamental economic transformations were most vital to the end of pellagra in the South. *The American Federationist* put it clearly in saying “even education cannot make bread out of a stone.”⁶⁷

Thenceforth, the Southern elite, not the common folk, denied the existence of pellagra in the South. Unfortunately, the leading doctors of the South, such as Seale Harris, as well as many state politicians and Boards of Health, supported this delusion. Hence, drastic social reorganization, as Dr. Goldberger suggested, was necessary for pellagra to be extinguished, because the elites’ ideology was so entrenched and unmovable. The continued spread of the boll weevil, an insect which decimates cotton crops, led to the end of Southern monoculture and thus the ability to diversify crops. The New Deal brought electrification, and thus refrigeration, allowing the preservation of meats other than salt-pork; it also ushered in the Farm Security Association, which provided farmers with packets of vegetable seeds and educated farmers on proper diet.⁶⁸ In other words, more drastic changes needed to take place to eliminate pellagra. Although Goldberger revealed a fundamental problem of the South and contributed much scholarship to the etiology of pellagra, it was not enough; neither Goldberger nor his disciples eradicated pellagra. The hopes, rhetoric and entrenched power of the proponents of the New South were just too strong, and, for them, to accept aid was to accept defeat. This study shows that public health agents cannot solve all public health issues, because some public health crises simply reveal too much. As Jack Temple Kirby stated, “such diseases tend to subside or disappear when economic systems change and ways of life are altered fundamentally.”⁶⁹

67 Etheridge, *The Butterfly Caste*, 194.

68 *Ibid.*, 204–205.

69 Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 187.

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TITLE IMAGE

An elderly pellagra sufferer in North Carolina, 1939. Photo by Marion Post Wolcott, courtesy of the Library of Congress. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017754518/>.