

Southern Honor: An Introduction

... [W]hen most folks think about honor in the States...what first comes to mind is invariably the *South*. There's a reason for that. While honor in the North evolved during the 19th century away from the ideals of primal honor and towards a private, personal quality synonymous with "integrity," the South held onto the tenets of traditional honor for a much longer period of time.

Unlike the Northern code of honor, which emphasized emotional restraint, moral piety, and economic success, the Southern honor code in many ways paralleled the medieval honor code of Europe — combining the reflexive, violent honor of primitive man with the public virtue and chivalry of knights.

The code of honor for Southern men required having: 1) a reputation for honesty and integrity, 2) a reputation for martial courage and strength, 3) self-sufficiency and "mastery," defined as patriarchal dominion over a household of dependents (wife/children/slaves), and 4) a willingness to use violence to defend any perceived slight to his reputation as a man of integrity, strength, and courage, as well as any threats to his independence and kin. Just as in medieval times, "might made right" in the American South. If a man could physically dominate or kill someone who accused him of dishonesty, that man maintained his reputation as a man of integrity (even if the accusations were in fact true).

While childrearing in the North emphasized the cultivation of inner *conscience*, and the feeling of *guilt* in wrongdoing, Southern parents instilled in their progeny a sense of *honor*, and feeling *shame* for violating the code. Young boys were encouraged by both their parents and the community to be aggressive and manly, and to fight to defend one's honor from an early age. And it wasn't just fathers who sought to impress upon their sons the importance of personal valor; mothers were equally adamant on this point. For example, Sam Houston's mother urged him to fight in the War of 1812, and when he decided to join up, she gave him a plain gold ring with "Honor" engraved inside it, and then handed him a musket saying, "Never disgrace it; for remember, I had rather all my sons should fill one honorable grave, than that one of them should turn his back to save his life."