

## Chapter 3

### The Driving Force: Economic Activity in Louisiana

Throughout their history the inhabitants of Louisiana pursued many economic activities, most of them centered on agriculture and commerce. Economic transformations have had much more impact on Louisianians than changes in the political regime (from France to Spain then back to France and finally to the United States). European exploration and settlement altered—and in many cases annihilated—the agricultural, hunting, and trading practices of Louisiana Indians. During the eighteenth century many Native American groups went from a position of power to one of dependency. From the perspective of its European rulers Louisiana was transformed over the same century from a marginal colony with a primarily regional exchange economy to a colony fully integrated into the Atlantic economy. By the end of the 1700s Louisiana's expanding plantations produced for export such commercial crops as cotton, sugar, and tobacco, and its major port city of New Orleans stood as "the grand mart of business, the Alexandria of America" (Zadok Cramer, 1801).

During the antebellum period most people moving to and living in Louisiana grew or marketed cotton or sugar. As in the colonial era, life in the countryside was very different from that of the city, but commerce along the waterways and roads linked rural and urban Louisianians. Cotton and sugar planters sold their crops and purchased goods through factors, also known as commission merchants, based in New Orleans. Small farmers sold produce and livestock in the cities. Urban dwellers flocked to the countryside during hot summer months, especially during outbreaks of yellow fever or cholera. Louisiana—and New Orleans in particular—truly was "the mighty mart of the merchandise brought from more than a thousand rivers" (William Darby, 1801), where one could find people of "all nations and kingdoms and tongues."

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## Louisiana Indian Economic Activities on the Eve of European Settlement

As in most societies, Louisiana Indians carried out tasks defined along gender lines. Males dominated political and religious affairs, protected their communities, cleared land, hunted, and constructed buildings and canoes with handmade tools. Women cared for children and the elderly, planted crops, manufactured clothes and utensils, and decorated their homes and religious centers. One early French settler, Antoine Simon Le Page du Pratz, observed that among Louisiana Indians "most of the labour and fatigue falls to the share of the women" and the men had "a great deal of more spare time than the women."

Hunting played an essential part in the native economy as an important source of food, clothing, tools, and jewelry. Louisiana Indian men pursued deer, bear, bison, and a multitude of smaller game animals. Native hunters stalked their prey or used a communal surround. When Europeans came to Louisiana, they noted that the Natchez in particular practiced the "communal surround." Upon sighting a deer, about a hundred men formed an open crescent. They drove the deer from side to side until it dropped to the ground exhausted.

At various times through the centuries Louisiana Indians caught their prey with stone, bone, and antler spear points, atlatls (spear throwers), bows and arrows, stone plummets attached to bolas and nets, and traps. They prepared meat and hides with stone scrapers and other hideworking stone tools. Louisiana Indians did not use iron tools until Europeans introduced that metal.

Surrounded by water, Native Americans in Louisiana enriched their diets with fish and shellfish, among them garfish, bowfin, catfish, paddlefish, sunfish, bass, clams, and oysters. Indian anglers snared their catch with hooks and lines, nets, traps, trotlines, weirs, spears, and poison.

Women and children gathered fruits, seeds, roots, leaves, and other plant foods from the land to supplement the Native American diet and fill their medicine chests. Indian women also plucked Spanish moss from the trees and processed it into bedding, furnishings, and construction and clothing materials. They made baskets and mats of cane taken from the marshes.

Semisedentary and sedentary Native American groups in Louisiana cultivated crops to support their high population densities. Agriculture, in conjunction with hunting, fishing, and gathering, provided Louisiana Indians with enough food for themselves and even for trade with other native groups. Corn, beans, and squash were the principal staples of native agriculture. Corn was first domesticated in Mexico and from there introduced into the Mississippi Valley region. Perhaps the earliest planters of corn were members of the Coles Creek culture, with substantial harvests beginning A.D. 600–700. Louisiana Indians also cultivated tobacco, sunflowers, gourds, and pumpkins.

The whole community participated in preparing fields and planting crops. Men broke the ground with bone, stone, and shell-blade hoes and with wedge-shaped, ungrooved axes called celts. Women made shallow holes with short, heavy, sharp sticks and placed seeds in the holes. Both males and females harvested crops, but women and children tended the fields and processed and preserved what was grown. They stored what they harvested in granaries, corncribs, and earth silos.

Trade helped compensate for unequal distribution of natural resources and skills. Louisiana Indians exchanged such local products as salt, shells, Spanish moss, smoked fish, hides, and even ivory-billed woodpeckers with native groups near and far. They imported copper from northern tribes, catlinite from Minnesota, shells from the Atlantic coast, oil jars and flint from Texas, turquoise and cotton blankets from southwestern North America, and novaculite from Arkansas. Some Louisiana tribes were well-known for their special manufacturing talents and created a demand among other native groups for their products. Among these were Caddoan pottery and Chitimacha baskets.

Native Americans did not conduct all their trade through barter or direct exchange and gave certain objects agreed-upon values. The most popular medium of exchange was the shell bead; others included pearls and quartz.

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### Colonial Economies: "To Run After Fortune in Every Way Imaginable"

As a colony within the empires of first France and then Spain, Louisiana was supposed to export raw materials and staple crops and import manufactured goods. It was expected that all trade would take place between the mother country and the colony, thereby keeping any profits within the imperial system. Hoping to exploit colonial resources, the mother country sought to maintain a favorable balance of trade, exporting goods of greater value than it imported. This relationship between crown and colony was part of an economic theory known as mercantilism.

Mercantilism did not work well in Louisiana. Reality rarely matched the ideal, mainly because within the grand scheme of empire and the Atlantic trading system, Louisiana was a backwater. It had few easily extracted resources—like gold or silver—and few people—white, Indian, or African—to exploit what raw materials there were. In addition, by the eighteenth century France and Spain were ill-equipped to supply their American colonies, especially marginal, unprofitable ones like Louisiana, with the goods they needed. Both monarchies constantly engaged in expensive wars, and their countries lacked a strong industrial base.

## Exchange Economy

Louisiana colonials compensated for France and Spain's inability or unwillingness to meet their needs by forging a frontier exchange economy. Colonists smuggled, traded, made, or grew goods they could not obtain otherwise. It was a cross-cultural economy, based on local and regional production and trade between Indians, settlers, and slaves along the Gulf Coast and into the Caribbean.

Native Americans quickly recognized potential markets for their goods among the newly arrived white settlers. They moved to supply the colonists' need for food and their desire for furs and hides. As more Europeans and African slaves came to Louisiana, they began to grow their own food. Officials and merchants began to demand greater quantities of furs and hides from the Indians, causing them to neglect their fields in pursuit of game. In some cases, Indians came to rely on Europeans for food supplies. Intertribal trade was reduced or stopped altogether as Indians, lured by European trade goods, reoriented their trading patterns toward white colonists.

Through trade and gift-giving, Native Americans acquired a taste for European material culture. In addition to weapons, Louisiana Indians came to prize and demand European liquor, cloth, glass beads, and other trinkets—things that they lacked, thus their allure. Europeans used their access to the supply of these goods to increase Native American dependency on both the products and their suppliers.

Europeans, Africans, and Indians adopted some of each other's foodways. Whites incorporated such native Louisiana ingredients as bear oil and filé and such foods as maize, beans, squash, pumpkin, wild rice, fruits, and nuts into their diet. Although they preferred wheat to corn, hungry French settlers could not afford to reject any source of food and learned from the Indians how to prepare corn dishes, like the Choctaw *tanfula*, called *sagamité* by the French and lye hominy by the English. Choctaw women made *tanfula* by boiling cornmeal and wood-ash lye.

Africans brought to Louisiana also knew how to grow and prepare corn. In addition, they introduced okra and rice cultivation to the lower Mississippi Valley. In 1718 officials of the Company of the West (a company chartered by the king of France to trade in Louisiana) instructed the captains of two ships bound for Louisiana to buy at least a few Africans who knew how to grow rice as well as some rice seeds.

Slaves pounded rice into a consistency similar to Indian cornmeal and used both grains to make what Le Page du Pratz heard some Louisiana residents refer to as "couscou." The Ursuline nun Marie Madeleine Hachard wrote shortly after her arrival in the colony in 1727: "Rice cooked in milk is very common and we eat it often along with sagamite, which is made from Indian corn that has been ground in a mortar and then boiled in water with butter or bacon fat. Everyone in Louisiana considers this an excellent dish."

White settlers contributed wheat, sugar, and livestock (mainly cows and pigs) to the Louisiana diet. Both Europeans and Africans were familiar with raising, herding, and branding domesticated animals. They taught these skills to the Indians and worked together to expand Louisiana's ranches and livestock herds.

In the early years of settlement white colonists often survived only by imitating Indian and African hunting and gathering techniques or by relying on native and African hunters to supply them with food. Louisiana Indians knew where to hunt, how to capture game, and which fruits, nuts, roots, and vegetables were edible. One of the major changes in native systems of trade was a shift from hunting animals for subsistence to hunting them for skins. Europeans demanded skins and furs in exchange for trade goods Native Americans desired, so they worked to meet this demand. By the mid-eighteenth century several Louisiana Indian groups had turned to stalking game professionally. Their involvement in commercial hunting disrupted agricultural practices and increased the Indians' dependence on Europeans for material goods.

This network for the exchange of goods and services between natives and newcomers worked well, many times to the detriment of the external commercial economy controlled by wholesale merchants, planters, and crown officials. British traveler William Bartram noted in 1777 that on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain there “are a few habitations [plantations], and some fields cleared and cultivated; but the inhabitants neglect agriculture, and generally employ themselves in hunting and fishing.”

Conditions changed toward the end of the colonial period, when an export-directed economy finally supplanted the colonists' frontier exchange economy. Commercial plantation agriculture became profitable, as did the deerskin trade with Native Americans, and Louisiana became more closely integrated into the Atlantic trading system. Economic developments at the close of the eighteenth century only hinted at the boom period that lay ahead for Louisiana. Unfortunately, this material prosperity came especially at the expense of black slaves and Indians.

### Commercial Agriculture

Once efforts to find precious metals failed, administrators and colonists turned to the production of crops for export. Little financial gain resulted from commercial agriculture, however, until a boom in cotton and sugar production began around 1800, at the end of the colonial period. Tobacco, indigo, rice, and corn were the major cash crops grown in Louisiana during most of the eighteenth century. Following successive crop failures in the 1790s, cotton replaced tobacco in regions north of Pointe Coupée, and sugar replaced indigo to the south. Writing in 1799, traveler Henry Troth noted this transition:

**On the West side [of the Mississippi River] for near[ly] 180 miles and the other about 120 miles above Orleans they raise [an] abundance of Rice, Cotton, & Indigo. . . . They likewise raise a good deal of Indian Corn and are getting in the way of raising Sugar Cane pretty plenty and erecting Sugar works. . . . I understand their Plantations consist generally of about 40 or 50 acres.**

By the 1720s some colonists had started to plant and harvest cash crops on large tracts of land. In 1727 a French priest, Father Du Poisson, observed that on a few of the early land grants "at least sixty negroes . . . cultivate[d] Indian corn, rice, indigo, and tobacco. These are the parts of the colony which are most flourishing." The Company of the Indies introduced rice from Africa, indigo from Saint-Domingue, and tobacco from British colonies in the Chesapeake and the Carolinas. Labor shortages, however, hampered large-scale production until later in the century, as British Captain Harry Gordon noted in 1766: "Their want of Negroes keep back the Indigo making."

Settlers must have been frustrated by this lack of labor because Louisiana land was so fertile, especially along the Mississippi delta region. English traveler J. F. D. Smyth wrote in 1784:

**On this river the soil is so extremely rich, and so luxuriantly fertile. . . .**

**The grand culture and staple here being indigo, this amazing fertility of the soil . . . enhances the value of the quality of it. . . .**

**Old plantations, cultivated by the French fifty or sixty years, produced last year . . . from forty to sixty bushels of Indian corn to the acre.**

Before being shipped, indigo and tobacco required some processing, most of which was done by slaves directly on the plantation. They chopped, dried, and bundled tobacco leaves in units called "*carrotes*." The manufacture of indigo was more complicated. Jean-Bernard Bossu, a French soldier stationed in Louisiana in the 1750s, related:

**When the [indigo] plant is ripe, it is cut down and brought to a . . . shed. . . In this shed there are three vats placed in such a way that water from one can run into the next. The indigo leaves and a certain amount of water, in which they are permitted to rot, are placed in the highest vat. When the man in charge of the operation decides, after frequent inspection, that the time is right, he opens a spout, and the water runs into the next vat. There is a precise moment when this must be done, for if the indigo remains in the first vat too long, it turns black.**

**When all the water is in the second vat, it is beaten until the overseer, through his long experience, decides that the process is to stop. The water is then permitted to settle, and the indigo forms a sediment at the bottom of the vat. As the liquid becomes clear, it is run off in gradual stages through a series of spouts placed one beneath the other.**

**The indigo is then removed from the vat and is placed in cloth sacks through which the remaining liquid is permitted to seep. It is then dried on boards and cut into little squares, which are packed into barrels for shipment to Europe.**

Indigo was in great demand in Europe because it produced a blue dye popular for coloring military uniforms. Louisiana indigo, however, was not as high in quality as that grown in Guatemala and elsewhere. Competition, along with insects and heavy rain, hurt the indigo industry in the early 1790s, and planters in lower Louisiana increasingly turned to sugarcane.

Africans proved to be the most reliable, available, and knowledgeable agricultural laborers in Louisiana. Most crops grown in colonial Louisiana had been cultivated in West Africa for decades, and slaves taken from this region were familiar with them. At midcentury Bossu remarked that "negroes are brought over from Africa to clear the land, which is excellent for growing indigo, tobacco, rice, corn, and sugarcane." Thirty years later, according to J. F. D. Smyth, "the culture of every thing here is done altogether by hand hoes, and manual labour of slaves, without the assistance of horses or oxen."

The Company of the Indies and the French and Spanish crowns wanted to make money off Louisiana and encouraged colonists to test several commercial crops. Early experiments with such exotic tropical products as silk, olives, and pineapples failed, mainly due to the colony's inappropriate climate. French colonists, reluctant to eat cornmeal supplied by Louisiana Indians, also tried to raise wheat, but ended up importing or smuggling it from upper Louisiana and New England.

### Natural Resources

The extraction, processing, and shipping of Louisiana's natural resources—most notably timber, furs, hides, fish, and seafood—also proved profitable. Colonials exported increasing quantities of furs and hides from upper Louisiana and lumber from the lower Mississippi Valley. Most pelts were obtained from Indians, with government agents and small traders alike exchanging cloth, beads, guns, iron implements, and liquor for beaver-, bear-, bison-, and deerskins. In 1766 Harry Gordon noted that the "principal Staple" of Louisiana "is their Trade for Furs & Skins from the Illinois."

This trade increased native dependency on Europeans, especially as it became more commercialized toward the end of the eighteenth century. Indians neglected agriculture and crafts to hunt full time and were compelled to fight rival European and Indian alliances on behalf of their white suppliers. On the other hand, rising demand and competition for deerskins and furs gave some Indian nations the opportunity to play traders and the European powers they represented off against one another.

Timber was one of Louisiana's most lucrative staples and a main source of revenue through most of the eighteenth century. In 1768 Governor Antonio de Ulloa urged his superiors in Madrid "to establish a commerce designed to handle the great quantity of lumber of all kinds, which is the principal item exported from here." Louisiana also made and exported timber by-products, as noted by Thomas Hutchins, a British military

observer, in the 1770s: “The French inhabitants, who formerly resided on the North side of this lake [Pontchartrain, before Britain obtained West Florida in 1763], chiefly employed themselves in making pitch, tar, and turpentine, and raising stock, for which the country is very favourable.” Export of timber and its products from Louisiana declined after 1785, primarily due to competition from the United States and a reduced market in the war-torn Caribbean. At the same time, demand for wood within Louisiana rose as its own sugar and shipbuilding industry grew.

Lumbering and staple-crop cultivation complemented each other on the plantation. During the slow winter months when there were no crops to tend, slaves cut timber, fashioned it into shingles, planks, beams, barrels, and sugar boxes, and transported it to the river or coast for shipment to the Caribbean sugar islands, which were sorely in need of wood. Some planters also paid runaway slaves (maroons) hiding in the cypress swamps to cut wood and haul it to the river. Hutchins once again provided a detailed description of the lumber industry at its peak in the 1770s:

**In the autumn, the planters employ their slaves in cutting down and squaring timber, for sawing into boards and scantling. The carriage of this timber is very easy, for those who cut it at the back of their plantations make a ditch, which is supplied with water from the back swamps, and by that means conduct their timber [to market] . . . with very little labour: others send their slaves up to the cypress swamps, of which there are a great many between New Orleans and Point Coupée. There they make rafts of the timber they cut, and float down to New Orleans. Many of the planters have saw-mills, which are worked by the waters of the Mississippi, in the time of the floods, and then they are kept going night and day till the waters fall. The quantity of lumber sent from the Mississippi to the West India islands is prodigious, and it generally goes to a good market.**

The most durable woods native to Louisiana are cedar and cypress, resistant to both rot and insects. Le Page du Pratz considered the qualities of Louisiana timber:

**White and red cedars are very common upon the coast. The incorruptibility of the wood, and many other excellent properties which are well known, induced the first French settlers to build their houses of it. . . .**

**Next to the cedar the cypress-tree is the most valuable wood. Some reckon it incorruptible; and if it be not, it is a least a great many years in rotting.**

One effect of Louisiana's prosperous lumber industry was the beginning of deforestation, especially around New Orleans. Le Page du Pratz reported:

**The cypresses were formerly very common in Louisiana; but they have wasted them so imprudently, that they are now somewhat rare. They felled them for the sake of their bark, with which they covered their houses, and they sawed the wood into planks which they exported at different places. The price of wood now is three times as much as it was formerly.**

Basic processing of both timber and hides was done in the colony, and although they exported most of what they produced, Louisianians consumed some locally. Tanners cured deerskins before shipping them. Sawmills located on plantations and in or near New Orleans (a total of thirty-six in the late Spanish period) prepared vast quantities of oak, ash, mulberry, walnut, cherry, cypress, and cedar for foreign markets, as well as for Louisiana's construction and furniture industries. In the 1770s the Spanish government granted Louisiana lumbermen and coopers a monopoly over manufacturing and selling sugar-packing boxes throughout the empire, a privilege formerly held by Cuba. Coopers also used Louisiana woods to make barrels for shipping goods or storing them locally.

Other natural resources exported from Louisiana were fish and seafood, which were packed and shipped to the West Indies. Caribbean planters employed their slaves almost exclusively in sugar and had to import most foodstuffs. Colonists and slaves living in Louisiana, however, consumed most of its fish and seafood, catching and eating it on farms and plantations and selling it at the fish market in New Orleans. According to Thomas Hutchins, the colony's waters were plentiful in the 1770s: "The Mississippi furnishes in great plenty several sorts of fish, particularly perch, pike, sturgeon, eel, and calts of a monstrous size. Craw-fish abound in this country; they are in every part of the earth. . . . A dish of shrimps is . . . easily procured." On a business trip from New York in 1801 merchant John Pintard visited the New Orleans fish market. He found "a great abundance of Fish & very excellent," including catfish, sheepshead, drum, redfish, mullet, perch, turbot, eel, trout, shrimp, crawfish, crabs, and oysters.

### **Import-Export Trade**

Louisianians used earnings from the export of cash crops and natural resources to purchase imported slaves and merchandise, primarily manufactured goods and foods they could not or chose not to produce themselves. These included textiles, furniture and household furnishings, stoneware, silverware, wine, olives, and flour. Thomas Hutchins described the wide variety of staples exported from the colony and their markets:

**The produce of the plantations, commencing below the English Turn, and continuing to the upper settlements of the Germans, form a very considerable part of the commerce of this country; the different articles are indigo, cotton, rice, beans, myrtle-wax and lumber. The indigo is much esteemed for its beautiful colour and good quality. . . .**

**The cotton formerly cultivated, though of a most perfect white, is of a very short staple, and is therefore not in great request. The different sorts of beans, rice, and myrtle candles, are articles in constant demand at St. Domingo.**

For most of the colonial period wholesale merchants imported items legally from first France and then Spain and their American colonies. They also purchased goods smuggled in on other European, British, and Anglo-American ships. Frequently unable to obtain manufactures and foodstuffs from the mother country because of neglect or warfare, desperate French and Spanish governors allowed the ships of other nations to sell their wares or did not aggressively prosecute individuals who obtained goods illegally. In the early 1780s J. F. D. Smyth wrote:

**The restrictions of the Spanish government on commerce render the prices of all European goods here very much advanced, and they would actually be almost intolerable, if the inhabitants did not contrive to get many things underhandedly from the English, French, and Dutch, by means of an illicit trade.**

**Indeed almost all the flour that supports New Orleans is imported from Philadelphia.**

By the end of the eighteenth century the Spanish crown had lifted many restrictions and permitted Louisiana's trade with other nations and colonies, as long as they paid the required customs duties. Needless to say, smuggling continued.

Also by the end of the century, American merchants and vessels dominated the export-import trade at New Orleans, still a part of Spanish Louisiana. Henry Troth noted this tendency when he wrote in 1799: "The Harbour [at New Orleans] appears to be pretty good. There is at this time about 30 sail of Vessells, nearly half of them American. The Spaniard seems to have but few Trading Vessels here. They have 3 or 4 Gallies and about as many other Armed Vessels." Two years later John Pintard remarked on the extent of imported goods—most from England and the United States—found in well-to-do New Orleans households: "For the want of porcelain, I have seen very common English figure stoneware displayed and that at the very first houses. The furniture in general is very plain, but American manufactured Chairs & tea tables are getting into vogue." Spanish reports on the arrival of ships in New Orleans for the year 1801—the year of Pintard's account—record eighty vessels from the United States, six from England, forty-three from the British West Indies, two from France, four from the French West Indies, fifteen from Cuba, and twenty-nine from the Spanish mainland colonies.

Travelers, merchants, and residents alike recognized New Orleans's importance as a commercial center. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, New Orleans was coveted and shortly obtained by the United States. American geographer William Darby noted the city's prominence and potential on the eve of Louisiana's transfer: "Almost the

total of the production of the industry of its inhabitants, must flow to one common center. . . . This rapidly increasing city will, in no very distant time, leave the emporia of the Eastern world far behind.”

### Regional Marketing

Regional and local trade affected the daily lives of most colonial Louisianians much more than did the external markets of the import-export trade. To facilitate this regional trade, whites of many nations, Africans, and Native Americans formed cross-cultural exchange networks along the Gulf Coast and throughout the Mississippi Valley. Differing groups traded goods they raised, caught, or made on a personal, face-to-face level, often exchanging elements of their culture—such as language or methods of food preparation—at the same time. With the exception of urban markets like that at New Orleans, the barter system dominated local trade. Scarce hard currency rarely changed hands.

On farms and ranches and in gardens and cultivation plots colonists, slaves, and Louisiana Indians grew vegetables, fruits, grains, and livestock to trade in New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Pointe Coupée, and other towns. African-American slaves were the most visible peddlers of food, sent to town to sell poultry, meats, vegetables, and milk on their owners' behalf. Slaves also used this opportunity to market game, fish, or foodstuffs raised on their own plots.

German, Acadian, Isleño (Canary Island), and free black farmers also provisioned local townspeople from their gardens and fields. Living along the Mississippi River, they raised fowl, corn, and vegetables to sell in New Orleans or smuggle across the river to British residents of West Florida. Thomas Jefferys, a British visitor to Louisiana around 1760, referred to the Germans, who had settled upriver from New Orleans beginning in the 1720s, as "the purveyors of the capital, whither they bring, weekly, cabbages, sallads [*sic*], fruits, greens, and pulse [edible seeds] of all sorts, as well as vast quantities of wild-fowl, salt pork, and many excellent sorts of fish."

The central hub of this regional trade network—like that of the import-export trade—was New Orleans. Goods flowed in and out along the waterways that surrounded the city. In the early 1800s William Darby noted:

**Most culinary vegetables suitable to the climate are cultivated in the parish, and brought into the market in New Orleans. The peach, orange, and three or four species of the fig, are the exotic fruit trees that have been most extensively introduced on the Mississippi. All those fruits are in their respective seasons abundant in the New Orleans market. Apples are mostly brought down the Mississippi, and are in winter and spring sold cheap. Of culinary vegetables the most abundant are pulse of all kinds, cabbages, turnips, sweet potatoes, onions, carrots and lettuce.**

A few decades earlier—in about 1760—Thomas Jefferys described the Germans' pattern of marketing, which was much like that of other Louisiana farmers:

**They load their vessels on the *Friday* evening, towards sunset, and then placing themselves two together in a pirogue, to be carried down by the current of the river, without ever using their oars, arrive early on *Saturday* morning at *New Orleans*, where they hold their market, whilst the morning lasts, along the bank of the river, selling their commodities for ready money. After this is done, and when they have provided themselves with what necessaries they want, they embark again on their return, rowing their pirogues up the river against the stream, and reach their plantations in the evening with provisions, or the money arising from the produce of their labours.**

Within New Orleans, retailers sold goods from shops throughout the city or from stalls along the levee. Others hawked their wares through the streets, going from house to house. Slaves gathered on the main plaza or the common grounds behind the city (in what became known as Congo Square) to trade, dance, and sing. Indian, slave, and free black women commanded much of this retail activity, as John Pintard observed in 1801:

**Market hours commence at 6 & are mostly over by 8. Very few people go to the market in person. All is bought by domestics, especially the females, who seem to be the chief buyers & sellers of the place. One meets with wenches with large flat baskets containing all kinds of goods with a measure in her hand traversing the streets & country in all directions. They are very expert at selling—wait upon the ladies with their wares and are very honest & faithful to their employers.**

Engaged in very lucrative trades, bakers and butchers usually owned several slaves who made and then sold breads, pastries, and meats throughout the city. Large herds of cattle, mules, and hogs raised on the grasslands of Attakapas and Opelousas in western Louisiana supplied New Orleans with much of its meat supply. Indian, white, slave, and free black hunters also sold game in the market, which Pintard noted as "in the greatest plenty & reasonable—Wild ducks, Teal, Geese, English Snipes, Rabbits & Squirrels abound."

In an effort to provide inhabitants with fresh, unspoiled, and plentiful meat, government officials tried to regulate the livestock industry and butchers' shops—without much success. Pintard described the meat market at New Orleans:

**The flesh market is entirely enclosed, each separate stall, of which there are about 7 or 8, being a distinct apartment with a door & window. This of all places of the kind is the most filthy I have ever seen. . . . As to the Beef it is very indifferent & cut into shreds for soup, no other use being made of it. I do not believe it would be possible for an American to obtain a joint of meat to furnish a dinner after the manner of his own country. . . . Mutton I have seen but once . . . the meat w[oul]d have disgraced even a college dining room.**

Pintard praised New Orleans bakers, even though their shops were less than sanitary, too:

**The Bread in this city equals any in the world. It was a high relish to my appetite after going into a bakery & seeing a number of Negroes without shirts & almost naked sweating over the kneading troughs. I was rightly served. No person who has any squeamishness ought ever to thrust his nose into a French Cuzine [*sic*]. Ah mon Dieu quelle spectacle! quelle odeur!**

During the Spanish regime officials established a central marketplace in New Orleans along the river, where Louisiana Indians had traded long before Europeans arrived and where the French Market stands today. The cabildo (town council) wanted to tax and regulate New Orleans's growing retail industry more effectively. In 1784 it constructed a market large enough to house all traders; the marketplace stood independent of the butchers' market built two years earlier. After the fire of 1788 destroyed the stalls, the cabildo authorized construction of new vegetable and meat markets in the 1790s, along with a fish market in 1798.

### Manufacturing and Service Industries

Many items that Indians, whites, and blacks traded in regional markets were made in the colony. Louisianians manufactured goods and provided services they could not get legally from France and Spain or illegally from other countries and colonies. During Louisiana's colonial period most manufacturing involved the processing of crops and natural resources and the production of articles needed in the home: furniture, leather goods, clothing, utensils, and iron implements.

Many colonial Louisiana craftsmen and skilled workers were slave and free African Americans. In 1795 about half of New Orleans carpenters, joiners, shoemakers, silversmiths, gunsmiths, and seamstresses were free blacks. Alabama Indians near Manchac, Louisiana, made baskets and earthenware and sold them in New Orleans, as did the Choctaw Indians and other native groups.

Manufacturers used both locally available and imported products. A furniture maker, for example, might craft a chair from mahogany imported from Saint-Domingue, cover it with leather or deerskin obtained and tanned in Louisiana or with cloth imported

from France, and stuff the seat with Spanish moss gathered from Louisiana trees. In the 1750s Jean-Bernard Bossu, a French soldier, lauded the white and red cedars growing in Louisiana, which "are made into beautiful inlaid work, keep insects away with their odor, and do not rot." Colonial inventories often listed tables, beds, armoires, and other furniture crafted from materials native to Louisiana. Carpenters and masons built many of the homes and buildings in Louisiana using sundried mud bricks placed between cypress posts and roofed them with cypress shingles.

Preindustrial societies like that of eighteenth-century Louisiana depended on artisans—rather than machines—to manufacture the items they used every day. Carpenters, joiners, ironworkers, masons, and caulkers constructed houses, public buildings, fortifications, bridges, and sailing vessels. Shoemakers, hatters, tailors, seamstresses, wigmakers, tanners, and watch- and jewelrymakers fashioned colonials' personal apparel, while joiners, turners, cutlers, gunsmiths, upholsterers, cabinet- and furniture-makers, and gold- and silversmiths manufactured their household effects. Saddlers, blacksmiths, cartmakers, and wheelwrights made getting around in the city and countryside much easier.

Many colonials, especially those living outside New Orleans and other towns, made at least some of the goods they used within their homes, rather than purchasing or trading for them. Household production included spinning thread, weaving cloth, stuffing mattresses and other furnishings, making simple furniture, molding candles, and dyeing homespun with indigo grown and processed in Louisiana. When he traveled among the Acadians in the 1770s, Englishman Thomas Hutchins observed, "They are sober and industrious; they clothe themselves in almost every respect with the produce of their own fields, and the work of their own hands." As in other colonial regions, women and slaves controlled most aspects of the household economy.

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## Antebellum Economies: Rural and Urban

### Agrarian Life

Agriculture was the major economic activity in Louisiana during the nineteenth century, as it had been during the preceding colonial era. Louisiana produced and exported two major commercial crops: cotton and sugar. Sugar production required large amounts of land, labor, and capital, and it was along the fertile river bottoms of the Mississippi delta that one could find the grand, extensive plantations so commonly associated with the antebellum South. Most Louisiana slaves lived and worked on plantations that had twenty or more laborers.

Not everyone living in rural Louisiana was a planter or a slave. Small farmers made up a majority of the rural free population and were much more numerous than the better-known cotton and sugar planters. Some of these farmers grew a surplus of cotton,

corn, vegetables, livestock, or other items and sold it in Louisiana's towns and cities. Others grew only enough for their own needs and had little contact with urban areas.

### The Plantation Complex

When most people think of the antebellum South they envision ornate mansions surrounded by lush gardens, slave cabins, cotton gins or sugar mills, and other outbuildings. Louisiana had many of these plantation complexes, although few were as grand as fiction has portrayed them. The largest complexes were mainly self-sufficient, in that slaves produced and manufactured most of the food, clothing, and goods needed on the plantation. Even smaller holdings usually had at least one slave carpenter or blacksmith. Most plantations also reserved one field for growing corn, the basis of the diet for both slaves and livestock.

Slave housing was usually separate from the main plantation house, although servants and nurses often lived with their masters. Slaves lived either in long barracks that housed several families and individuals, or in individual huts. One French visitor to Louisiana in 1831, P. Forest, described the slave cabins he saw on plantations below New Orleans: "The negroes' habitations—made of wood—look like bee-hives, arranged in a semi-circle around the main house. . . . Sometimes there are 40 or even 50 of these cabins. The whole looks like a Camp arranged around the noticeably prominent hut of the leader."

### Cotton Cultivation

Cotton was king in Louisiana and most of the Deep South during the antebellum period. Between 1840 and 1860 Louisiana's annual cotton crop rose from about 375,000 bales to nearly 800,000 bales. In 1860 Louisiana produced about one-sixth of all cotton grown in the United States and almost one-third of all cotton exported from the United States, most of which went to Britain and France. Planters and farmers grew cotton in all regions of the state, but the highest yields came from areas north of Pointe Coupée, especially along Louisiana's many fertile river bottoms.

Although Louisianians grew some cotton in the colonial period, they, like other producers, did not find it profitable until Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793. Prior to the cotton gin, laborers separated cotton seeds from fiber by hand, a long and tedious process. Because gins were fairly simple machines that many firms could manufacture, cotton production increased rapidly throughout the South.

Attracted by rising cotton prices and rich, untouched land, cotton producers moved to Louisiana from the older eastern regions of the South. Locals also joined the cotton boom, purchasing additional properties and converting what land they already owned to cotton fields. Cotton prices stayed high until the nationwide Panic of 1837, then declined, but rose once again, although not to their pre-1837 level.

Producers could grow cotton just as profitably on small farms with few laborers as they could on large plantations with many slaves. Thus, many Louisianians raised cotton. Cotton was fairly easy to grow, although bad weather and insects could destroy the crop. As soon as the weather warmed, cotton workers, most of them slaves of both sexes, planted cotton seed by hand along rows of raised soil. Hoe hands thinned out the growing

cotton plants and cleared unwanted grasses until the plants rose tall enough to shade out grass. Cotton bolls grew until the late summer, when the plant died and sap stopped flowing into the boll. Lint inside the boll dried, expanded, and finally popped the boll open.

Pickers harvesting the crop averaged about 150 pounds per day, from sunrise to beyond sundown. Cotton picking was hard, backbreaking, finger-splitting work. Once workers filled their sacks, they emptied them into large baskets and trampled down the cotton in preparation for the next sackful. At the end of the day, pickers carried the seed cotton from field to gin-house, where it was weighed. Ex-slaves often commented that those slaves who did not meet an established quota were usually whipped. In the gin-house animals or steam powered the machines that separated lint from seed. Workers then pressed the lint into four- or five-hundred-pound bales that were shipped to New Orleans and pressed into even larger bales for export.

### Sugar Production

Almost all the sugar grown in the United States during the antebellum period came from Louisiana. Louisiana produced from one-quarter to one-half of all sugar consumed in the United States (most of the remainder was imported from Cuba and Brazil). In any given year the combined crop of other sugar-producing states—Texas, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Alabama—was less than five percent of Louisiana's.

Louisiana's sugar harvest rose from 5,000 hogsheads (a large barrel that held an average of 1,000 pounds of sugar) in 1802 to 30,000 in 1823, 75,000 in 1833, and peaked in 1853 at 449,000. Production dropped to 220,000 hogsheads in 1860. Sugar prices were highest in 1858, when hogsheads sold for an average price of \$69 each, bringing the total value of Louisiana's sugar crop to \$25 million. Most Louisiana sugar was exported by sea to Atlantic ports and upriver to western states. Louisianians refined very little sugar prior to the Civil War. They consumed some of the local crop in its brown sugar or molasses form and distilled it into rum and taffia (a cheap grade of rum).

Although sugar dated from the colonial period of Louisiana's history, it did not become a major crop until the second and third decades of the nineteenth century. Colonists first cultivated sugarcane in the 1750s, using a variety called Creole cane that was easily damaged by frost and thus not well-suited to Louisiana, even the lower part. Refugees from Saint-Domingue brought Otaheite or Tahiti cane to Louisiana in 1797. Its principal advantages over Creole cane were increased resistance to cold and greater quantity of sugar. Even more suitable to Louisiana's climate was ribbon cane, introduced in 1817 and cultivated throughout the sugar regions within a few years.

Etienne de Boré was the first Louisianian to risk his resources successfully in an enterprise to turn Creole cane into sugar. To do so Boré employed the technology and skills of experienced Saint-Domingue sugarmakers, who had come to Louisiana at the outbreak of warfare between slaves and masters in 1791. Although initially expensive, Boré's plans paid off, and he died a rich man.

Upon seeing Boré's success, numerous other south Louisiana planters turned their fields to sugar, erected sugar mills, and consolidated the lands of many small plantations

into large holdings. Production in Louisiana was also helped by the Haitian Revolution (1791–1803), which destroyed the world's largest sugar supplier and improved the position of competitors like Louisiana, Cuba, and Brazil.

To grow sugar profitably, planters needed large amounts of land, labor, and capital. The most expensive part of a sugar plantation was the sugar mill, and to justify the expense of a mill, the planter had to process a lot of cane. To grow all this cane, the planter also had to have large quantities of land and workers, most of them slaves. Planting, growing, cutting, and milling cane was extremely hard work; most free workers refused to do this work or could not be relied upon during the busy harvest (called grinding) season. In addition, since the sugar growing and processing took up an entire year, planters could keep their slaves busy all the time.

Sugarcane grows best in Louisiana south of Baton Rouge. It is a tropical plant that yields the most juice when given a year-round growing season, but in Louisiana the cane must be cut before frost kills it. Each fall planters gambled on when to cut the cane: if too early, yields were low, and if too late, the crop was ruined. Compared to cotton, sugar growing involved greater risks but also greater profits. According to an old Louisiana saying, "it took a rich cotton planter to make a poor sugar planter." In antebellum Louisiana the average sugar plantation had a value of \$200,000, whereas even the largest cotton plantations were worth only \$100,000.

Kidnapped free black Solomon Northup described the planting, tending, and harvesting of sugar on a Louisiana plantation. His master grew cotton but found it profitable to hire out Northup to a neighboring sugar planter:

**Cutting cane was an employment that suited me, and for three successive years I held the lead row at Hawkins' [plantation], leading a gang of from fifty to an hundred hands. . . .**

**The ground is prepared in beds, the same as it is prepared for the reception of the cotton seed, except it is ploughed deeper. . . . Planting commences in January, and continues until April. . . .**

**Three gangs are employed in the operation. One draws the cane from the rick, or stack, cutting the top and flags from the stalk, leaving only that part which is sound and healthy. . . . Another gang lays the cane in the drill, placing two stalks side by side in such a manner that joints will occur once in four or six inches. The third gang follows with hoes, drawing earth upon the stalks, and covering them to the depth of three inches.**

**In four weeks, at the farthest, the sprouts appear above the ground, and from this time forward grow with great rapidity. A sugar field is hoed three times, the same as cotton, save that a greater quantity of earth is drawn to the roots. By the first of August hoeing is usually over. About the middle of September, whatever is required for seed is cut and stacked in ricks, as they are termed. In October it**

**is ready for the mill or sugar-house, and then the general cutting begins.**

Young male and female slaves made up the first and second gangs, children and the elderly the third gang.

Artist John James Audubon resided on St. Armand's sugar plantation near New Orleans for a few months in 1821. In his journal he described the harvesting and making of sugar in Louisiana:

**The Slaves [are] employed at Cutting the Sugar Cane—this they perform with Large heavy Knives not unlike those used by Butchers to Chop—some cutting the Head of the plants and others the Cane itself—tying the Last in small fagots with the Tops. Carts with Entire Wooden Wheels drawn by 4 oxen haul it to the House where it is, bruised, pressed, Boiled & Made into Sugar.**

The making of sugar required more machinery than any other type of agricultural production in the antebellum period. Sugar-making was very industrial in nature and called for much technology, skill, and capital. Early sugar mills were powered by animals and later ones by steam engines. Many slaves working very quickly and for long hours fed sugar into the mill and operated the machinery.

Constant improvements were made in the manufacture of sugar, especially between 1830 and 1860. One of the most notable technological innovations was Norbert Rillieux's vacuum-pan method of manufacturing sugar. It was much more efficient than the open-kettle process (also known as the "Jamaica Train") popular at that time.

A free black man born in New Orleans in 1806, Rillieux went to Paris for his education and became an engineer, scientist, and inventor. After testing and perfecting his newly invented vacuum evaporator on Louisiana sugar plantations in the 1830s, he patented it in 1843. Rillieux modified the single vacuum-pan process already used in Louisiana, adding another vacuum pan to the system. This method utilized the heat produced by the first pan to boil the syrup in the second pan, thereby conserving fuel. Rillieux further refined his procedure with a third pan and took out a second patent in 1846.

Like many free persons of African descent, Rillieux experienced increasing racial discrimination prior to the Civil War, and he left Louisiana. Rillieux spent the rest of his life in Paris, where in 1881 he patented more efficient technology for beet-sugar production.

## Tobacco Cultivation

Louisianians continued to grow tobacco, a crop cultivated here since colonial times, most of it north of the Red River. Antebellum farmers and planters often raised both cotton and tobacco, for they or their slaves could grow and harvest the two crops at different times. Perique, a strong, aromatic tobacco primarily used for flavoring purposes, grew only in St. James and St. John Parishes, upriver from New Orleans.

## Planters

Although plantation owners and their families made up only a small part of the agrarian population, they controlled much of the wealth and political power in pre-Civil War Louisiana. Nevertheless, very few realized the myth of the planter family later idealized in novels and movies. Most masters and mistresses had little time to sit on their verandahs drinking mint juleps or cavort from one grandiose mansion to another socializing and dancing. Management of large landholdings, labor forces, and other investments required a lot of time, talent, and luck. During the boom and bust years of the antebellum era fortunes were hard to come by and easy to lose.

Louisiana's planters, both free black and white, were among the wealthiest in the South. The state's most valuable plantations were in the lower Mississippi Valley region, where masters and mistresses supervised vast sugar and cotton estates and many slave laborers. Although most planters were astute businessmen who bought and sold crops and slaves at the best price and reinvested profits in their plantations, many often spent at least some of their earnings on luxurious consumer goods. Fine furniture, tableware, artwork, clothes, and jewelry added to the planter family's comfort, as well as allowed them to show off their wealth to friends and business associates. The wealthiest planters also kept houses in New Orleans, where they stayed during the winter cultural season.

Visitors often commented on the hospitality of Louisiana planters. In 1831 French traveler P. Forest found them "in general, quite open and generous." One dining experience at a plantation near New Orleans solidified Forest's high opinion:

**There were eight at the table, and three negro women to serve us, besides a small negro boy, who, hidden under the table, was occupied in chasing away mosquitoes from under the marbled petticoats of our hostess. . . .**

**One of the negro women held in her hand a large fan made of ostrich feathers, and which she lackadaisically passed back and forth under the noses of the guests, in order to refresh them by giving them a little ventilation. Another slave was preparing ice for the glasses which she made sure were never empty. . . . It is customary to stay at the table till the coffee, the punch and the *genièvre* (gin) have kindled the heads of all the guests.**

Although men owned and controlled most large holdings in Louisiana and throughout the South, women contributed significantly to the daily operation of plantations and frequently ran them during their husbands' absences. While the master supervised slaves in the fields, the plantation mistress managed the domestic labor force for the entire household, which included not only the great house but also the dairy, gardens, smokehouse, barnyard, and slave cabins. In addition, women administered the production, purchase, and distribution of food and clothing. The plantation mistress also bore and cared for numerous children, heirs to her husband's cotton or sugar kingdom.

Because plantation homes were so far apart, their mistresses so busy, and their masters so protective of white women and honor, planter women lived primarily isolated from one another. Their letters reveal that they tried to maintain ties with friends and family, visiting other plantations or venturing to New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and other towns, where they attended balls, concerts, operas, and plays. Slavery and the plantation system elevated the standing of whites within antebellum southern society, and at the same time subjugated women, both black and white. Plantation mistresses exercised some control over their slaves, but the master was "father," both literally and figuratively, to all who lived and worked on his plantation. As such, he held ultimate authority over his dependents, including his wife and children. Southern slave society was built upon a foundation of patriarchy and paternalism.

Some Louisiana planters and large slaveowners were free people of color, frequently referred to as Creoles of color. Like whites, free African Americans used increasing numbers of slave laborers to maintain their agricultural enterprises and make them profitable. According to census data from 1830, forty-three free persons of color in eight sugar and cotton parishes owned 1,327 slaves—almost one out of nine slaves owned by blacks in the United States. Among these free black planters were Jean-Baptiste Meuillon, who farmed 1,240 acres in St. Landry Parish; Andrew Durnford, a Plaquemines Parish sugar planter; and the Metoyer family of Natchitoches, who produced much of the cotton in that area.

### Small Farmers and Ranchers

The vast majority of rural whites and free blacks lived on small or modest-sized holdings and owned no slaves or maybe just two or three, with whom they worked side by side in the fields. Many of Louisiana's small farmers and ranchers were Acadians (also known as Cajuns), Germans, Isleños, Anglo-Americans, free African Americans, and American Indians. They raised food and livestock, manufactured clothing and other items, fished, and hunted game for their own consumption. In addition, they sold any surplus goods, as well as small quantities of cash crops like cotton, sugar, rice, and tobacco, in neighboring towns and cities.

### Urban Life

Louisiana's far-reaching network of rivers and waterways and less numerous carriage roads and railroads linked together its cities, country towns, plantations, and farms. There were close ties between agriculture and commerce, planters and merchants

in antebellum Louisiana. Most activities in urban areas like New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Shreveport revolved around commerce. Manufacturing and services flourished as related enterprises.

### Com m e r c e and Trade

Most of the goods that passed into and out of Louisiana and the entire Mississippi Valley region came through New Orleans. During most of the antebellum period it was the second leading port in the United States, behind New York City, and in the 1840s the Crescent City was the fourth leading commercial center in the world in value of exports. Between 1830 and 1860 the value of the city's exports rose from \$15.5 to \$110 million and its imports from \$7.5 to \$18.5 million. Exports consistently exceeded imports.

New Orleans was also second only to New York City in tonnage. In 1850 1,131 ships of United States and foreign registry carrying 487,690 tons cleared the port of New Orleans. Comparable figures for New York were 2,673 ships carrying 931,509 tons. From 1820 to 1860 the increase in New Orleans trade (nearly fifteenfold) far outstripped growth of its population (about fivefold). Visitors were struck by the Crescent City's vital, flourishing commercial activity. In 1846 French pianist and composer Henri Herz marveled at the scene before him:

**Like all foreigners who visit the great Louisiana city, I was seized with admiration on seeing the activity which reigned on the docks, literally covered with bales of cotton, casks of sugar, barrels of flour, sacks of cereals, lumber, tobacco, salted meat, etc. It is a world of commission men, speculators, and dealers who argue feverishly in the midst of this piled-up merchandise. Horses, wagons, Negroes, and whites bustled about in an area six hundred feet wide, where half the business of the United States takes place.**

Antebellum New Orleans was the transfer point for United States and foreign goods. Wheat, corn, lard, pork, furs and hides, whiskey, hemp, and lead from the Old Northwest (today's Midwest) and cotton, sugar, molasses, and tobacco from the South flowed down the Mississippi River and its tributaries on steamboats, flatboats, and keelboats to New Orleans. These products were offloaded and stored in warehouses or transferred directly to oceangoing vessels, and then shipped to the Northeast, Europe, and the Caribbean.

Manufactured and luxury goods, salt, coffee, West Indian and Brazilian sugar, specie, and a wide variety of items entered the Crescent City from foreign and United States ports. They were distributed in New Orleans or shipped upriver. Officials collected duties on all these imported goods at the Custom House located near the levee in New Orleans.

Most river trade was conducted by steamboat. The first steamboat to come down the Mississippi arrived in the Crescent City in 1811, and by the 1850s around three

thousand steamboats docked at New Orleans each year. Britishwoman Frances Trollope was one among many antebellum travelers to comment on the steamboat's visibility in Louisiana: "The innumerable steamboats, which are the stagecoaches and flywagons of this land of lakes and rivers, are totally unlike any I had seen in Europe, and greatly superior to them. The fabrics which I think they most resemble in appearance, are the floating baths at . . . Paris." In 1849 another British traveler to Louisiana, Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley, related the nighttime wonder of "the magnificent 'floating palaces' of steamers, that frequently look like moving mountains of light and flame, so brilliantly are these enormous river-leviathans illuminated, outside and inside."

Beginning in the 1820s canals and then railroads more closely linked the Old Northwest with the Northeast and siphoned off trade from New Orleans. By 1845 direct trade between the two northern regions of the United States—rather than down the Mississippi, through the gulf, and up the Atlantic, and vice versa on the return—was well established and broke the Louisiana river monopoly on western trade. Ever-increasing exports of southern cotton, however, helped the Crescent City retain its status as a leading antebellum port.

Commerce in Louisiana was also boosted by the opening of the Red River above Alexandria, from which more plantation products could flow up and down the Mississippi River. Over a five-year period in the 1830s Captain Henry Miller Shreve removed the "Red River Raft," a mass of logs and trees that clogged the main channel of the Red River. In 1837 Captain Shreve also helped found Shreveport, which quickly grew into an important commercial center linking Louisiana and Texas.

Although most transportation in antebellum Louisiana was by water, residents also traveled and traded by overland road and railroad. The Pontchartrain Railroad was the second completed in the United States. It began operation in 1831, carrying passengers and goods between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain. A few years later developers of the West Feliciana Railroad began building a line between Woodville, Mississippi, and St. Francisville, Louisiana.

Prior to the Panic of 1837, which ended railroad building in Louisiana for more than a decade, workers began laying a few other short lines. Among these were the New Orleans and Nashville Railroad, chartered in 1835, and the Clinton and Port Hudson and the Mexican Gulf (between New Orleans and Lake Borgne) Railroads, each twenty-seven miles long. Riding the Mexican Gulf was an adventure in itself; passengers often arrived in the Crescent City with clothes muddy from their efforts to lift the train back onto the track after derailments.

Railroad mania swept Louisiana again in the 1850s, with investors and merchants hoping to capture the California and western trade. The most important railroad in antebellum Louisiana was the New Orleans, Jackson, and Great Northern, started in 1852 and financed with state and city subsidies. By 1860 track reached northward to Canton, Mississippi, where it connected with other lines and tied Louisiana to markets in the South and West. Another major line was the New Orleans, Opelousas, and Great Western, which ran from Algiers (across the river from New Orleans) westward to Brashear City (now Morgan City) on the Atchafalaya River.

## Trade in New Orleans

**The trade of the city [New Orleans] is conducted, for the most part, by four classes of men. Virginians and Kentuckians reign over the brokerage and commission business; the Scotch and Irish absorb all the respectable commerce of exportation and importation; the French keep magazines [warehouses] and stores; and the Spaniards do all the small retail of grocers' shops, cabarets, and lowest order of drinking-houses. People of colour, and free negroes, also keep inferior shops, and sell goods and fruits. (Thomas Ashe, 1806)**

## Commission Merchants

The most influential, powerful, and prosperous businessmen in New Orleans were the factors, commission merchants who acted as agents for planters in Louisiana and surrounding states. There were more than 450 commission merchant and cotton factor firms in New Orleans in 1861, handling the business transactions of over 9,300 planters in Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Texas alone.

Factors based in New Orleans bought and sold goods for planters in the countryside and provided links between urban and rural economies. When planters harvested their crops, they shipped them to their New Orleans factors, who sold the crops at the best prices and earned customary commissions of two and a half percent. Factors also received commissions when they purchased goods, such as furniture and clothes, on the planters' accounts and shipped them upriver. At the end of the year, if planters had bought items of greater value than their crops, they had negative balances and paid their factors interest of usually ten percent on the difference.

Louisiana exported such large quantities of cotton and sugar that some factors specialized in these products alone and were often the most wealthy of all commission merchants. The 1855 directory for New Orleans listed 89 cotton factor firms and 50 firms of sugar and molasses factors, in addition to 181 firms of general commission merchants and 4 firms of tobacco-leaf factors. In that year the Crescent City exported about 60,000 hogsheads of sugar and 1.5 million bales of cotton.

## Ancillary Services: Bankers, Lawyers, and Insurance Agents

Bankers, lawyers, and insurance agents provided services that helped make planters' and merchants' commercial dealings more profitable and less risky. New Orleans law firms, numbering seventy-five in 1855, tried to keep their clients' business affairs operating within the limits of the law, and its six insurance companies assumed some of the risks—and profits—associated with shipping large quantities of slaves, agricultural products, and manufactured goods.

New Orleans was the financial center of the Mississippi Valley. From 1835 to 1842 its banking capital exceeded that of New York City, financial leader of the United States in most years during the antebellum period. The Crescent City's twenty-six banking companies in 1855 loaned money for the construction of railroads, expansion of plantations, purchase of goods, and many other enterprises. Because the state's conservative banking rules promoted stability rather than speculation, Louisiana suffered much less from the nationwide Panic of 1837 and other economic downturns than did neighboring states. Louisiana's Bank Act of 1842 was the first law passed in the United States requiring banks to keep a specie (gold or silver) reserve against notes and deposits.

### Wholesalers

Wholesale merchants imported goods into Louisiana from foreign countries and other parts of the United States and sold them to retailers in New Orleans or neighboring cities and country towns. Some specialized in one or two items, while others marketed a wide variety of goods. Cécée Macarty, a free black woman, inherited \$12,000 and built up a business worth \$155,000 by the time of her death in 1845. In addition to her import business in New Orleans, Macarty had a depot in Plaquemines and traded as far west as the Attakapas country. Among the Crescent City's hundreds of wholesale and import firms in the 1850s and early 1860s were G. N. Morison and Company, Wheeler and Blake, and A. Massel, wholesalers of drugs, home furnishings, and luxury goods, respectively. Some firms, like Petellat, Gillet and Company and David Felt and Company, the former in dry goods and the latter in stationery, combined wholesale and retail activities.

### Large-Scale Retailers

Large-scale retail merchants bought great quantities of goods from wholesale and import merchants and sold them to the public in their New Orleans and Baton Rouge stores. They also supplied smaller urban retailers, country shopkeepers, planters, and peddlers with merchandise. As with wholesalers, some large retailers sold only one or two types of merchandise, while others offered more selection. In New Orleans many retail shops were located along Canal Street and between the levee and Bourbon Street, one of the city's most active commercial districts.

### Small Retailers and Manufacturers

Small retail shops and groceries could be found in almost every antebellum Louisiana city and town. They drew customers and suppliers from the nearby countryside, in addition to catering to urban dwellers. Several small shops were often located next to each other in a row or in one large building, a forerunner of today's strip and shopping malls.

Small retailers also sold their goods in large urban marketplaces or hawked their wares on city streets and door to door. Most market and street vendors were women, African American and American Indian in particular.

Architect Benjamin H. B. Latrobe also described markets along the New Orleans levee in 1819, noting the great variety of products and vendors, in none too flattering of terms:

**Along the levee, as far as the eye could reach to the West & to the market house to the East [the meat market] were ranged two rows of market people, some having stalls or tables with a tilt or awning of canvass, but the majority having their wares lying on the ground, perhaps on a piece of canvass, or a parcel of Palmetto leaves. . . . White men and women, & of all hues of brown, & of all classes of faces, from round Yankees, to grisly & lean Spaniards, black negroes & negresses, filthy Indians half naked, mulattoes, curly & straight haired, quarteroons [*sic*] of all shades, long haired & frizzled, the women dressed in the most flaring yellow & scarlet gowns, the men capped & hatted. Their wares consisted of as many kinds as their faces. Innumerable wild ducks, oysters, . . . bananas, piles of oranges, sugar cane, . . . trinkets, tin ware, dry goods, in fact of more & odder things . . . than I can enumerate. I cannot suppose that my eye took in less than 500 sellers & buyers, all of whom appeared to strain their voices, to exceed each other in loudness.**

### Manufacturers /Retailers

Several businesses manufactured items and sold them in one location, with their main activity the conversion of raw materials into finished products. Among these producer/retailers were bakers, butchers, clothiers, shoemakers, furniture-makers, silversmiths, tobacconists, lithographers, daguerreotypists, printers, and bookbinders. Many New Orleans shoemakers, cigarmakers, ironworkers, furniture-makers, and lithographers were free African Americans.

The large market for silver goods kept New Orleans silversmiths busy. They supplied fine silver products to wealthy urban dwellers and to planters throughout the Mississippi Valley region. In addition, some silversmiths contracted with large retail establishments, like Hyde and Goodrich and D. H. Holmes, to provide them with merchandise. Many leading Louisiana silversmiths were German immigrants. Furniture-makers also flourished in New Orleans.

### Skilled Trades

New Orleans was the deep South's major manufacturing center during the antebellum period and home to many skilled workers, among them native whites, immigrants, free blacks, and slaves. Demand for skilled labor was high, as were wages. Competition between whites and blacks for high-paying skilled employment was also strong, although most labor clashes in the antebellum period were over unskilled jobs.

During the 1850s, when large numbers of foreign-born whites entered Louisiana, the ratio of skilled to unskilled workers in New Orleans was much higher among free black men than among Irish and German immigrants. Free blacks participated in most skilled trades and dominated certain ones, such as carpentry, masonry, and barrelmaking. Many free black and slave women plied their trade as seamstresses.

Male slaves were highly skilled as well, working as carpenters, masons, bricklayers, painters, plasterers, tanners, coopers, wheelwrights, blacksmiths, cabinetmakers, shoemakers, millers, and bakers. The return on skilled labor was so high that many masters apprenticed their slaves to white and free black artisans and then hired them out. Although hired-out slaves usually had to give a large portion of their wages to their masters, they often were able to save enough to purchase material goods of their own choice and occasionally even their freedom. Some even lived in houses away from their masters.

### Service Industries

Slaves, free blacks, and whites also worked in Louisiana's growing service industries. In cities like New Orleans and Baton Rouge they were porters, waiters, maids, and cooks in hotels and restaurants, nurses and orderlies in hospitals, barbers and hairdressers in shops and homes, ship stewards, and cab and carriage drivers.

### Labors

During much of the antebellum period slaves and free blacks supplied New Orleans's demand for unskilled manual labor. With the surge of immigrants coming to Louisiana in the late 1840s and 1850s, blacks and whites began to compete more fiercely for unskilled jobs. German and Irish immigrants, in particular, began to take over positions previously dominated by free and slave African Americans.

## Changes Brought by the Civil War and Reconstruction

The violence, destruction, and economic uncertainty that accompanied the Civil War and Reconstruction destroyed many Louisiana plantations and their owners' fortunes. Union and Confederate armies bombarded and occupied plantation homes and outbuildings. Many planters deserted their homes or stayed but could not afford to maintain them according to antebellum standards. Although presidential pardons enabled some Confederate white planters to regain their land from Union officials, declining land values made them almost worthless.

Southern white and free black planters lost much of their capital assets when their slaves were freed. These losses were estimated at \$500 million. They also lost such plantation goods as barns, mills, fences, tools, and livestock during the war and to creditors following the war. Auctions were held throughout Louisiana during Reconstruction to sell off plantations their owners could no longer afford.

Travelers to the state noted the declining fortunes, and consequent hospitality, of Louisiana planters. In 1867 Giulio Adamoli observed:

**On the other side [of Canal Street in New Orleans] live the Creoles, of French descent, aristocratic and proud of their great plantations, which were formerly cultivated by armies of slaves. Their fortunes received a fearful blow when the Negroes were emancipated, and their lands were left untilled. But they still own the soil, and prosperity will again smile upon them when labor has accustomed itself to its new status.**

A few years later Edward King found that “there was no longer the spirit to maintain the grand, unbounded hospitality once so characteristic of the South.”

Once freed, many African Americans tried to acquire their own land and work it with their reunited families. Government promises of "forty acres and a mule" raised their hopes, but these hopes went mainly unfulfilled. Ten years after emancipation barely five percent of former slaves in Louisiana and other ex-Confederate states owned their own land. In addition, those who did own land lacked the capital and credit to develop it.

The Louisiana Homestead Association tried to help the state's African Americans realize the "agrarian myth" by becoming independent small farmers. Congress set up the association as part of the Southern Homestead Act 1866. According to the act, the federal government gave individuals eighty acres of its land in exchange for a filing fee of five dollars and living on the land and making improvements to it over a five-year period. Any individual receiving land had to prove that she or he had not supported the Confederacy.

Few Louisianians took advantage of the Homestead Act and the state homestead association's assistance. For one thing, much of the federal land available in Louisiana was worthless. Homesteading also required capital, which most poor blacks and whites did not have. In addition, the association ran into opposition from white propertyholders who wanted a supply of landless workers to labor on their plantations.

### Replacing Slavery on the Plantation

Development of labor systems to replace slavery was one of the major problems that Louisiana planters had to solve during the Reconstruction period. Wartime decline in the number of working-age men, revival of agricultural production after the war, and migration to the cities all contributed to labor shortages, and thus competition. Most whites believed that blacks had to be coerced to work productively. Some planters even augmented their work forces with Asian immigrants.

In occupied Louisiana Generals Butler and Banks instituted a forced wage-labor system, which continued under presidential Reconstruction in the form of the Louisiana Black Codes. This system applied mainly to former slaves; the idea was to keep blacks working on the plantations so that crops could be produced and sold, thereby bringing

economic recovery to the state. Labor edicts and legislation set wage scales and working conditions. Workers had to sign labor contracts of at least one year's duration. Laborers who could not prove that they were employed by showing their contracts or passes were arrested as vagrants and forced to work for individuals or the government.

The daily lives of workers on cotton and sugar plantations varied greatly. After the war the lands of many cotton plantations were divided into smaller plots that workers rented as tenant farmers or sharecroppers. Laborers who in antebellum days lived close together in slave quarters now moved into cabins on individual holdings. Like middle- and upper-class white women, most African-American women withdrew from field labor. They only worked in the fields alongside their husbands and children when necessary, such as during harvest season.

Most Louisiana sugar plantations continued to operate using a gang-labor system, with free-wage laborers rather than slaves. These mostly male workers lived in centralized living quarters much like those they occupied before the end of slavery.

### Subsistence Farming

Life did not change much during Reconstruction for Louisianians who farmed for their daily subsistence. Few had owned slaves before the Civil War, and thus did not suffer great losses when slavery was abolished. They continued to produce food and process raw materials for their own use, as well as care for their households.

### Urban Labor

During Reconstruction African Americans continued to dominate many urban occupations, especially those involving manual work, such as laborers, servants, and roustabouts (wharf workers and deckhands). Almost half the employed black males in New Orleans in 1870 practiced skilled trades, and many of them had been free before the war. Although black males made up only a quarter of the New Orleans labor force in 1870, they held a greater proportion of jobs in several fields: masons (65.6 percent), cigarmakers (54.5 percent), bakers (52.7 percent), roustabouts (46.1 percent), plasterers (42.7 percent), draymen (37.5 percent), barbers (37.2 percent), gardeners (35.1 percent), and carpenters (30.3 percent). African-American urban laborers faced stiff competition from immigrants and native whites. In 1870 almost half of New Orleans's male labor force was composed of immigrants. Immigrants and native whites increasingly excluded blacks from skilled positions and labor unions.

Women city dwellers, both black and white, continued to labor as market and street retailers, domestic servants, and boardinghouse keepers. In 1861 slightly more than half the boardinghouse owners listed in the New Orleans directory were women; ten years later they numbered almost two-thirds. War widows in particular converted their mansions into boardinghouses, as noted by journalist Edward King in 1874:

**From the balconies hang, idly flapping in the breeze, little painted tin placards, announcing 'Furnished apartments to rent!' Alas! in too**

**many of the old mansions you are ushered by a gray-faced woman clad in deepest black, with little children clinging jealously to her skirts, and you instinctively note by her manners and her speech that she did not rent rooms before the war.**

## Innovations

### Sugar Cooperatives

Sugar cooperatives gained popularity during Reconstruction because they were economical. Many large Louisiana sugar plantations were broken into smaller units following the Civil War. Owners or tenants of these smaller holdings, however, could not afford to build and maintain individual sugar mills. They thus pooled their resources for the upkeep of one mill used by all. This type of cooperative production was modeled on similar arrangements practiced in the sugar-producing areas of Martinique, Cuba, and Brazil.

### Marketing Cotton

As Edward King, a writer for *Scribner's Monthly*, observed, the marketing of cotton became increasingly decentralized in the postwar years:

**Previous to [the Civil War] a large portion of the business was done directly by planters through their merchants; but now that the plantations are mainly worked on shares by the freedmen, the matter has come into the hands of country traders, who give credits to the laborers during the planting seasons, and take their pay in the products of the crop, in harvest time. These speculators then follow to market the cotton which they have thus accumulated in small lots, and look attentively after it until it has been delivered to some responsible purchaser, and they have pocketed the proceeds.**

Before the war large planters conducted business directly with New Orleans factors or commission merchants; after the war growing numbers of farmers sold their cotton to traders and peddlers, who then transported and sold it to merchants in New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Many of these country traders were Jews who had connections with Jewish mercantile communities in New Orleans and New York. They were present in antebellum Louisiana towns but gained prominence during Reconstruction and beyond.

In 1871 cotton producers and merchants formed the New Orleans Cotton Exchange to transform postbellum cotton marketing into a more efficient and profitable enterprise. Three years later the exchange had three hundred members and expended "thirty thousand dollars annually in procuring the latest commercial intelligence, and maintaining a suite of rooms where the buyer and seller may meet, and which shall be a central bureau of news," according to Edward King.

### Ice Manufacture

The first successful commercial manufacturing of ice in the United States took place in Louisiana during Reconstruction. Beginning in 1864 Louisianians conducted experiments with ice manufacture, and four years later the first plant to make ice on a regular basis opened on Delachaise Street in New Orleans. Louisianians used much of this product to cool their favorite beverages.

### Tabasco Sauce

Edmund McIlhenny produced the first bottles of Louisiana's famous Tabasco brand pepper sauce in 1868. Constant skirmishes between Confederate and Union forces engaged in the Teche and Red River campaigns destroyed the rice and sugar crops near Avery Island. Peppers were all that remained in the fields. McIlhenny used these peppers and the abundant salt found at Avery Island to create a tasty seasoning that enlivened the drab postwar fare most Louisianians were forced to eat.

\* \* \*

### Conclusion

Economic factors—especially reliance on the production of one or two major commodities for export—have shaped much of the history and character of Louisiana. The dependent nature of Louisiana's economy persisted during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, some would argue, even to the present day. Commerce, service, and manufacturing enterprises somewhat diversified the economy and gave it a measure of stability, particularly in towns and cities. Throughout its continuous boom and bust cycles, during periods of plenty and poverty, the economy truly has been the “driving force” in Louisiana's past.

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