

Section 3

The Antebellum Economy

As you read, look for:

- the workings of the plantation system,
- transportation improvements in antebellum Louisiana, and
- vocabulary terms exports, factor, canal, internal improvements, and manifest destiny.

Louisiana's economy grew in spite of the political unrest. The plantation system had already been well established by the Creoles. The American newcomers bought existing plantations or created new ones along the Mississippi River. These plantations created some of the wealthiest people in America.

Below: Antebellum New Orleans was a bustling port and came to be called the "Queen City of the South."



Lagniappe

The typical plantation had between ten and twenty-five slaves. Only the largest sugar plantations had hundreds of slaves. The majority of whites in antebellum Louisiana did not own slaves.

Below: Houmas House in Ascension Parish was the state's largest sugar plantation.



The profitable plantation economy relied on the port city of New Orleans. The only larger United States port was New York, and only three world ports had a larger export volume. (**Exports** are goods sent or sold to another country.) New Orleans was the state's commercial urban center.

Banking

New Orleans also developed as the banking center for Louisiana. The growing economy required investment capital (money that could be put into or loaned to businesses to help them grow). People needed loans to buy land. Those who operated businesses or plantations needed to borrow money to pay expenses.

The factor system developed partly from the planters' need for quick financial and business assistance. A **factor** is a commercial agent. The factor represented the planter in the sale of a crop and earned a percentage of the profit. During the year, the factor might advance money to the planter for various expenses. Some factors also represented the planter by buying needed goods and sending them to the plantation. If the planter needed a large loan, the factor often agreed to repay the loan if the planter could not. The plantation economy made many factors as wealthy as the planters.

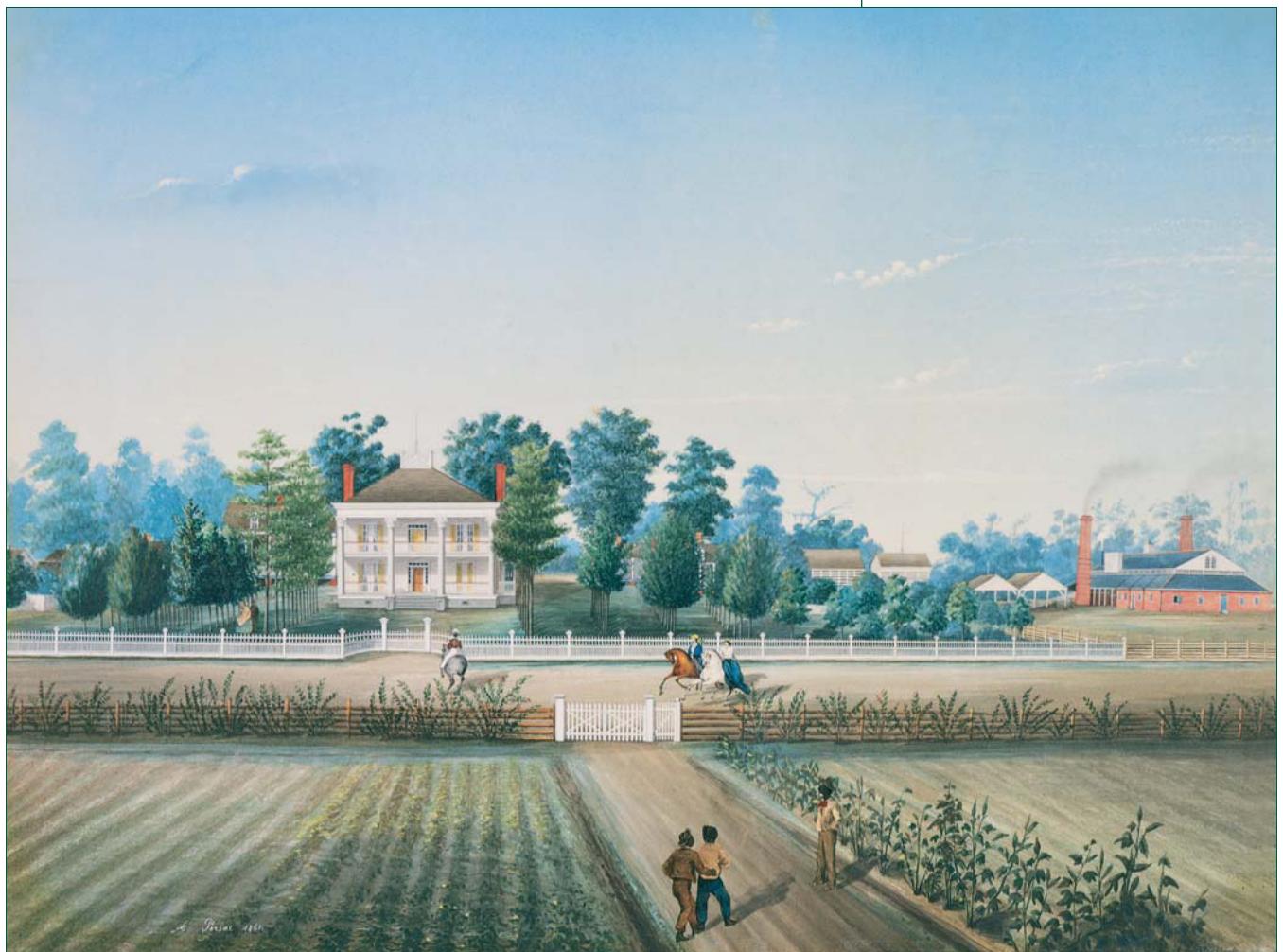
The early banks in Louisiana were sounder than those in much of the United States, but they could not avoid the national banking crisis of 1837. Many who had borrowed money to pay for land could not repay their loans. Louisiana dealt with these banking problems through new banking laws and provisions in the constitutions of 1845 and 1852. By 1860, Louisiana banks ranked among the best. Those banks supported the business interests and the plantation system.

Agriculture

Cotton became a profitable southern crop when Eli Whitney designed an efficient cotton gin in 1793. The gin (short for *engine*) removed the cotton seeds from the cotton fibers, a time-consuming task when done by hand. Once cotton could be ginned quickly, more cotton was grown and more slaves were needed. Long grown in Louisiana, cotton soon became a major cash crop.

The Plantation System

Louisiana wanted a share of this wealth. Both large plantations and small farms could produce cotton. A farmer could grow a few acres of cotton, sometimes with just the help of his family. As profits increased, the farmer bought more land and planted more cotton.



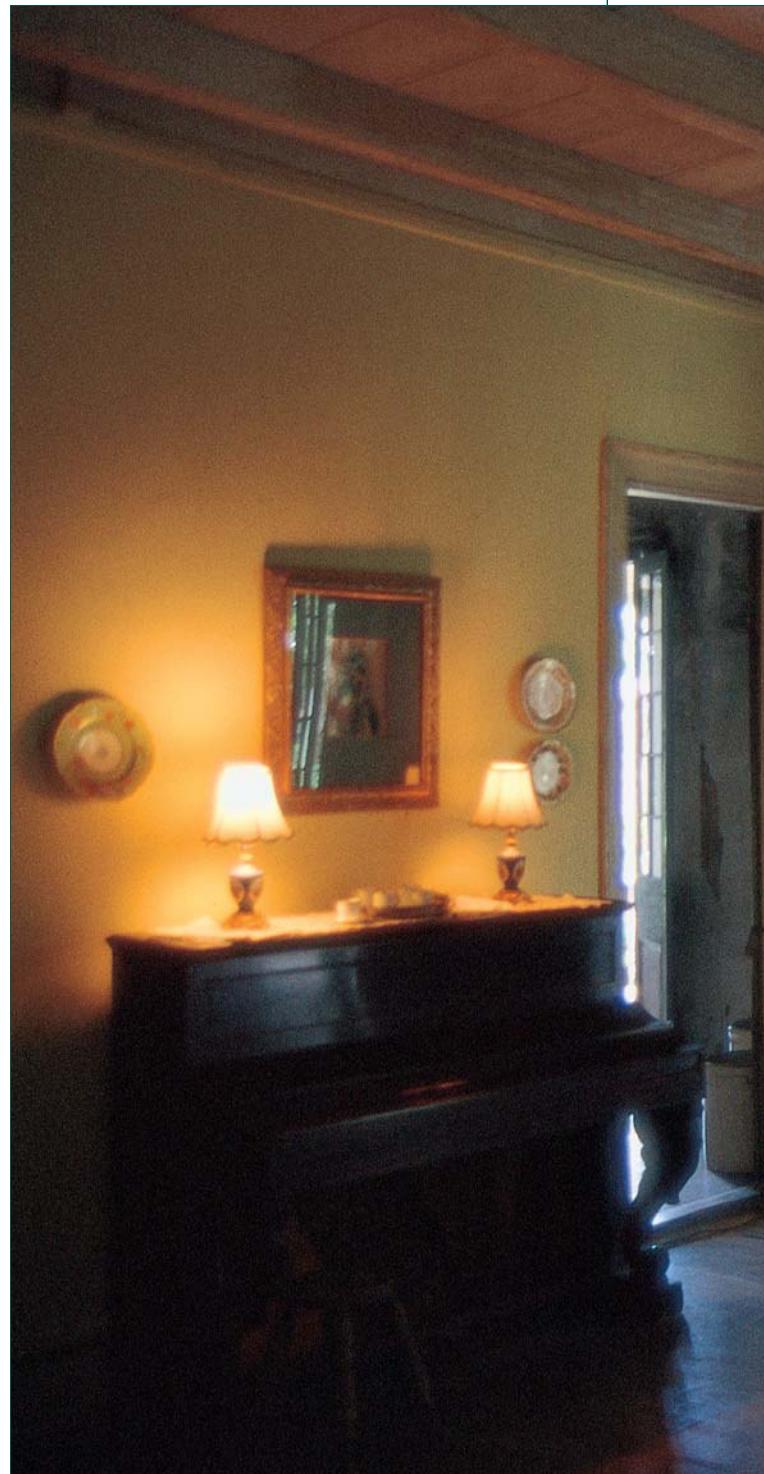
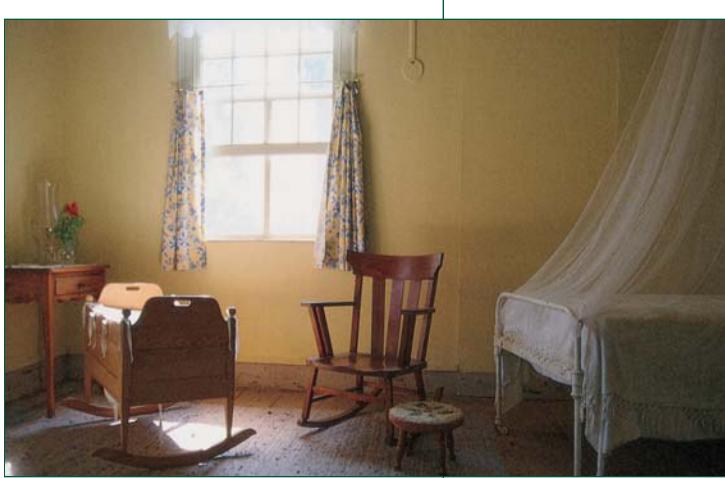
Factories in the North and in Great Britain turned the South's cotton into cloth. Industrial progress—steam engines, automatic spinning machines, and power looms—made it easier and cheaper to produce cloth, which increased the demand for cotton. While not quite spinning gold from straw, growing cotton created great riches.

The boom in agriculture was not limited to cotton. Sugar plantations made even more profits than cotton plantations, but they required a larger capital investment of workers and equipment. The South Louisiana climate was perfect for growing sugar cane. Sugar was the main plantation crop in the West Indies. Immigrants from that region brought their sugar-producing skills to Louisiana.

An invention by Norbert Rillieux, a free man of color from New Orleans, revolutionized sugar production, just as the cotton gin increased cotton production. Rillieux invented a vacuum pan evaporator for refining sugar. This invention resulted in finer, whiter sugar with a huge reduction in costs and labor. The device made the crop even more profitable.

One of the richest sugar planters was John Burnside of Houmas House in Ascension Parish. He owned over 98,000 acres of land and 1,000 slaves. His

Above: St. John Plantation was a sugar plantation in St. Martin Parish. Note the factory buildings on the right.



Top: Laura Plantation in Vacherie is a Creole-style plantation. **Bottom:** The four slave cabins on the grounds were built in the 1840s.

huge plantation made him very wealthy and enabled him to live the lifestyle usually associated with the plantations. For example, guests were offered portable bathtubs filled with water and blocks of ice to provide relief from the muggy Louisiana heat. At the time, ice was an expensive luxury that had to be brought from northern lakes. Steamboats carried the ice, packed in sawdust, to Burnside's landing on the Mississippi River.



Slave Labor

Behind this view of luxury was another scene. Slavery supported this lifestyle and economic structure. Not only did slaves provide the labor in this economy but it was their status as property that made slave owners wealthy. Slave labor produced the plantation crops. But slaves also did basic manual labor, worked in the plantation houses, and performed skilled tasks. Workers such as blacksmiths

Above: The dining room at Laura Plantation. **Opposite page, middle:** This bedroom is less ornate but brightly decorated.



Above: The hardest jobs were those of the field hands. Women often worked the fields. **Right:** Some slaves were skilled workers such as carpenters. Others worked inside the home, such as this maid. **Opposite page, above:** These preserved slave cabins from a Louisiana plantation are exhibits at the LSU Rural Life Museum. **Opposite page, below:** Slaves were considered property and were bought and sold at auctions, as seen in this engraving of the Rotunda in New Orleans.

and coopers (barrel makers) were valuable assets. These skilled slaves were often hired out; field hands too might be hired out to bring in crops.

Plantation owners hired *overseers* to supervise work. Some slaves were selected to be *drivers* and were held responsible for the work of other slaves. The work day usually was from “can to can’t,” meaning from daylight (“can see”) to dark (“can’t see”). A bell or horn started their work day before dawn. Every hour was structured to produce as much work as possible and to control the slaves. They were allowed to leave the plantation only with permission and a written pass.

Punishment was used to keep order in this rigid system. Slaves were disciplined when they stole, ran away, or did not work. Documents from the time show that the punishment varied from fairly mild to extremely cruel. Whipping was the most common form of punishment.

But even under the best conditions, the slave system was paternalistic. A plantation owner with this attitude felt responsible for the slaves but still controlled all aspects of their lives. A journalist from the North visited Richard Taylor’s Fashion Plantation in Ascension Parish and said he found the best conditions he had ever seen for slaves. But he also learned from the carriage driver that the good treatment did not lessen the slaves’ desire for freedom.





Farmers

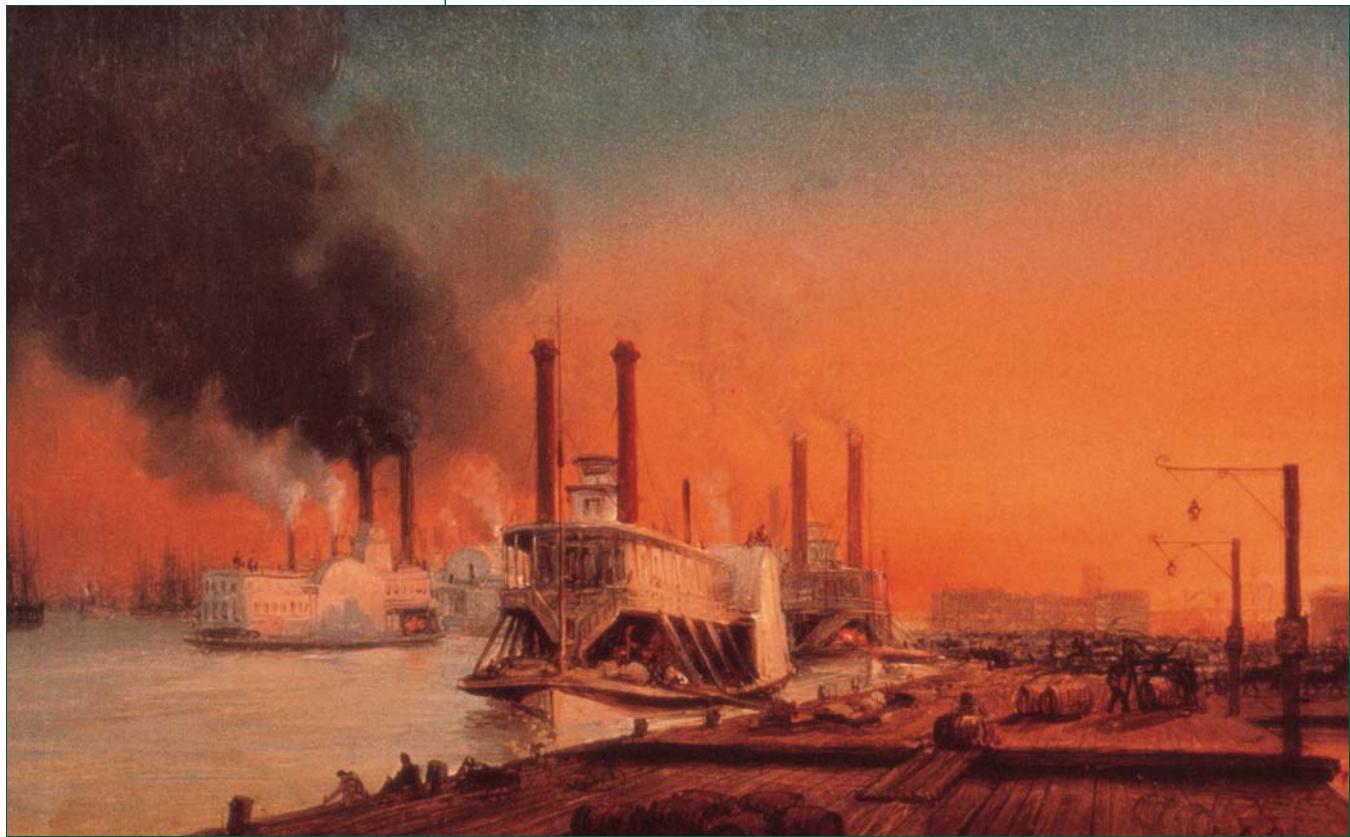
Slave-holding plantations dominated Louisiana's antebellum economy. But more than 71 percent of the white population did *not* own slaves. These people included merchants, skilled crafters, professionals, laborers, and small farmers.

While the planters' goal was profit, the small farmers were mainly concerned with feeding their families. Generally, the small farmers owned just enough land to raise crops for their own use. Sometimes the farmers had excess crops that they could sell for cash. The farmers and their families provided the labor.

Farmers also raised cattle and hogs. The animals were branded or had their ears notched for identification and were allowed to roam the nearby woods. The corn crop helped feed these animals as well as the farm families. In fact, the basic farm diet was often described as "hog and hominy" (*hominy* was a dish made from corn).

The small farms were basically self-sufficient. But peddlers traveled to isolated farms, bringing goods the farm could not provide. Coffee and sugar were two of the prized items purchased from these traveling salesmen.





Above: Steamboat travel was the main method of transport along the Mississippi until the coming of the railroads in the late 1870s.

Lagniappe

By the 1850s, about three thousand steamboats docked at New Orleans each year.

Transportation

Imagine a ten-mile trip taking six days. This was not uncommon on the roads of antebellum Louisiana. Wagons pulled by teams of oxen often had to struggle through deep, muddy ruts on the wilderness roads. Rural residents urged the state government to improve roads because they needed the access to markets. But rainfall and the Louisiana soil made road-building difficult. In 1827, the first road-improvement bill funded the road from Covington through Washington Parish to Mississippi.

Water travel was always easier than trying to build a road. The coming of the steamboat in the early nineteenth century made water travel faster.

Water Travel

The steamboat became the main transportation in Louisiana. Not only did the steamboats travel the state's rivers, but they also transported freight through **canals**, manmade waterways that connected Louisiana's rivers and bayous.

The first canals were dug by private *investors* (people who risked their own money on a project) who charged users a fee. Later, banks and the government funded canals in New Orleans and outside the city. In 1831, a special bank was organized to build the New Basin Canal in New Orleans.

Water-filled Louisiana required another major improvement. A levee system was needed to protect the plantation economy. From the time of the French colony, the government had required landowners to build and maintain their

own levees. Now, the demand for government-funded levees became a major political issue.

In 1832, the state created the Board of Public Works, which gave special attention to waterways, including levees. In 1856, the board developed a system of levee districts to maintain the levee by sections. These districts made some efforts, but not as much as was needed. The Civil War, however, halted further efforts for flood control.

Railroads

The political and economic focus on **internal improvements** (roads, bridges, canals, and other transportation needs) increased with the coming of the railroad. The Pontchartrain Railroad was the first railroad west of the Alleghenies. Begun in 1831, the six-mile-long track ran between New Orleans and Lake Pontchartrain.

Passengers on the earliest railroads in Louisiana paid a 25-cent fare for an exciting but not always pleasant ride. The train often slipped off the unstable tracks. Getting the train going again required the passengers' help. Other obstacles were common. One traveler described in graphic detail the cow that was run over by the train.

Building and improving the railroads cost huge sums of money, but New Orleans needed those railroads to compete with the North. As the demand for the railroads increased, the state and the city of New Orleans helped finance the railroad building. By the 1850s, three major railroad lines had been funded in this way. One line was planned to link New Orleans with Nashville, another was to run westward from New Orleans to Texas, and the third line was to connect Shreveport and Vicksburg. The building of these railroads was slowed by the Panic of 1837 and completely stopped when the Civil War started.



Map 31

Transportation in Antebellum Louisiana

Map Skill: How might a traveler get from Shreveport to Vicksburg?

Check for Understanding

1. What was the only port larger than New Orleans in the antebellum United States?
2. What were the duties of a factor?
3. What effect did Norbert Rillieux have on Louisiana agriculture?
4. What was the major means of transportation in antebellum Louisiana?

Lagniappe

Passengers jokingly complained about the Pontchartrain Railroad by calling it the "Smoky Mary."