

## A Survey of Alabama's Economic History from 1795 to 1860

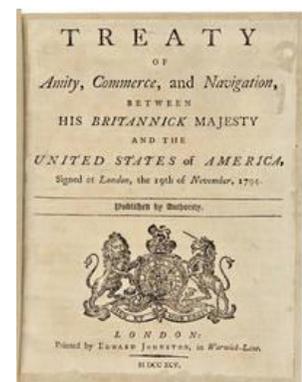
(John Mason)

From the time Alabama first became a territory in 1817, its economic heart was based in agriculture. In fact, her entire economic future would be based on the seeds that early white planters sowed across her fertile fields, and then suffer the hardships imposed as a result on not only the manner in which those fields would be harvested, but also as a result of her continued almost total dependence on that very agriculture itself. So the purpose of this paper is to give the reader some sense of the state's economic history so that they may draw their own conclusions as to how, and why, we got to where we are today.

Disputes about the border between East Florida and West Florida had been ongoing since 1763 when Great Britain established the colonies from lands won during the French and Indian War from France and Spain. Then, when the American Revolution ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1783, England conceded those territories back to Spain, but with borders in the West Florida area that would continue to be disputed among the international powers.

In response, Spain considered the latitude line of 32 degrees 22 minutes as its rightful border and proceeded to build and hold strategic forts around the borders of the disputed territory. For clarity, that line runs roughly along a line stretching between Jackson, Mississippi to Montgomery to Savannah, Georgia. The United States disagreed, since Great Britain had always claimed hold to the lands (parts of today's Alabama and Mississippi) in between. So on October 27, 1795, the Treaty of Madrid was established to clarify those boundaries.

And in addition to the boundary resolutions, this treaty provided for one more thing essential to the formation of our state:



for her part, Spain also ceded to the United States the lands east of the Mississippi between 31°N and 32°28'N. Three years later, in 1798, Congress organized this district as the Mississippi Territory.

From here, boundaries changed relatively quickly. In 1812, Congress added the Mobile District of West Florida to the Mississippi Territory, claiming that those lands had been included in the Louisiana Purchase. Then, in 1817, the Mississippi Territory itself was further divided. The western portion, which had attracted population more quickly, became the state of Mississippi, and the eastern portion became the Alabama Territory, with St. Stephens on the Tombigbee River as its temporary seat of government. Shortly thereafter, Alabama would become the 22d state on 14 December 1819.

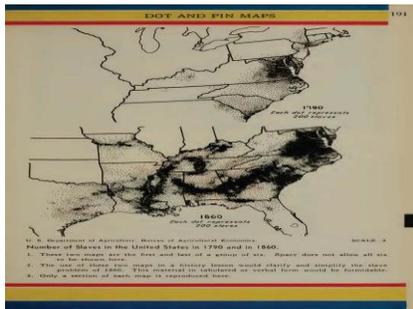
Agriculture has been practiced in what is now Alabama for centuries and certainly from the time of the state's conception. Prehistoric Native Americans practiced slash-and-burn agriculture, in which they cut and burned forests to make room for their patches of corn, beans, and squash. And when the early European settlers began travelling through Alabama, they described vast areas of the landscape that were open savannahs, the result of natural and human-made fires. These seemed to be the perfect places to plant their crops.

During Alabama's territorial period, settlers established the first farms, primarily along navigable rivers in these open fields near where Native American villages once stood. Note I said, "Once stood". Bowing to pressure from the wealthier farmers, one of the state's first acts was to round the Indians up and move them off of those fertile lands so that the white interlopers, I mean settlers, could farm them. This theft was further and forever codified in 1830 by the Indian Removal Act, and thus began the Trail of Tears.

The pattern of agricultural development is closely associated with Alabama's major soil types and geographical regions. Early settlers moving south from Tennessee and Kentucky found the clayey, limestone-derived soils of the Tennessee Valley and other north Alabama valleys extremely well suited to crop production.

The soils of the Piedmont area were initially attractive to settlers moving westward from Georgia, but they quickly discovered that soils on the hilly land tended to wash away easily after plowing. So they moved on to the central Alabama Black Belt Prairie region, once known as the "Canebreak," an area that appealed even more to those emigrating from the Carolinas and Georgia. The region was accessible because of its rivers, and its dark, clayey soils were perfectly suited to plantation-style cotton production.

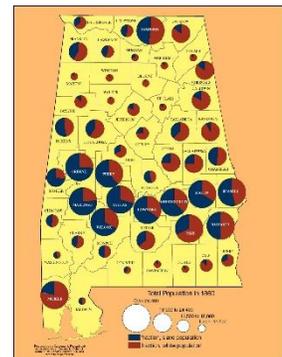
Now at about this same time, across the pond, the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain had created an insatiable appetite for cotton fiber. By the time Alabama became a state in 1819, the interior of the state was easily accessed via the Tombigbee, Warrior, Alabama, and Chattahoochee rivers, making largescale commerce more easily attainable. Crops could also be transported to European and New England markets via the ports of Mobile and Apalachicola, Florida. So settlers poured into the new state with one objective: to grow cotton and lots of it. And growing cotton required another implement to be profitable: large quantities of human slaves. As a result, the slave trade in the state boomed.



This map shows American slave distribution in 1790 (top) and 1860 (bottom). By the way, each dot on the map represents 200 slaves. By 1860, as many as 435,000 slaves lived in Alabama, comprising about 45 percent of the state's total population. As Europe's mills began to scream for more and more cotton, the southern

states and Alabama answered. and you can follow the increase in the number of slaves across the Cotton Belt accordingly.

And this map can give you an idea of the populations centers and numbers in the 1850's, and what per centage of that population was composed of slaves.



It's fairly apparent where most of the cotton in the state was grown. The population of the "Black Belt" counties, with the exception of Butler and Pike, all were comprised of at least 50% slaves, while some, like Greene and Marengo, had more than 75%. In 1850, Madison County had a total census population of 26,427, and in 1860, 26,451. And according to this map, roughly 45% of those in 1850 - ~ 11,900 - were slaves. In 1860, that number grew to 14,573 slaves.

Data indicates that there were 114 slaveholders who held 30 or more slaves in Madison County, accounting for 5,836 slaves, or about 40% of the County total. The rest of the slaves in the County were held by a total of 1,003 slaveholders, but they were not included in the official counts.

One such slave-owning plantation here in Huntsville was Oaklawn (also known as the John Robinson House and the Robinson-Dilworth House). This a 6-acre historic residence and plantation built in 1844 by John Robinson, a longtime revenue commissioner in Madison County who would go on to become one of the county's largest landowners. It would grow to over 600 acres at one point, and was used, at least in its later years, as a stock farm. It had 50 slaves in 1850 and grew to 550 by 1860.

During the Civil War, the house was used by the Union Army as an officers' quarters.

The family vacated the house in the late 19th century, and during the Spanish-American War, and the grounds were used as an army camp and hospital. In 1919, the house was purchased by the Dilworth family and restored from its poor condition. The house was later owned by Max Luther, a prominent local merchant.

### **Plantation Economics**

On a 1,000-acre plantation, a third of the acreage might be planted in cotton as a cash crop. Then timber, pastureland, buildings, and gardens would cover the remaining acreage. Supplies for the plantation would be ordered through the

plantation's factor (representative) in Mobile who also sold the cotton as an agent of the owner. Planters usually bought yard goods (material), tools, and foods such as coffee, tea, flour, and sugar through their factors because these items were not produced on the plantation. Farm animals though were usually purchased locally.

But two-thirds of the farmers in Alabama in 1860 were not planters, but simply yeoman farmers working smaller farms who were seldom slave owners. These farmers raised cotton as cash crop too, but they grew their own food, and raised cattle. In addition to supplying meat and milk to the yeoman and his family, these cattle – as well as any other extra livestock that might have been raised – were then often sold to the plantations.

And where did all this cotton go?

Cotton was king in Alabama for many years and cotton mills sprang up around the state. The manufacture of cotton goods was first included in statistical reports for the State in 1839, when the value of cotton products reported by the United States Census Bureau that year was \$17,547. During the next 50 years the textile industry increased slowly, but from 1889 to 1909 its growth was remarkably rapid, especially during the decade following 1899. By 1899 Alabama held ninth place among all the cotton-manufacturing States, having a value of products aggregating \$22,211,748 for that year.

But the reader might be surprised to learn that cotton was not the only "crop" produced in the state. The iron and steel industry also has a storied history in Alabama.

With ample supplies of iron ore, coal, and limestone, north Alabama, particularly the Birmingham area, was well-positioned to be a center for iron and steel manufacturing. The industry began to flourish around Birmingham in the late 1800s, with southern investors and northern bankers coming together to finance the large capital investments required, while northern and midwestern engineers provided technological expertise. By 1940 Birmingham provided 40 percent of the U.S. supply.

By the beginning of the Civil War, Selma had become a major transportation center in both Alabama and the Confederacy and went on to become one of the main military manufacturing centers supporting the South's war effort. Its foundries produced much-needed supplies, particularly iron and munitions, and its Navy yard constructed Confederate warships, including the ironclad CSS *Tennessee*, and they outfitted the CSS *Nashville*.

The Selma Ordnance and Naval Foundry, also known as the Selma Naval Foundry and Ironworks and the Selma Arsenal and Gun Works, was a leading manufacturing center for the South during the Civil War. Located on the Alabama River in Dallas County, it produced finished war materials for the Confederate armed forces from pig-iron ingots from the state's blast furnaces.

At its peak around 1863-64, this manufacturing center employed as many as 10,000 workers in approximately 100 buildings and was second only to the Tredegar Ironworks in Richmond, Virginia, in the production of war materials.

In 1861, Colin J. McRae, a former Mississippi legislator, secured a contract with the Confederate government to cast cannon and erected a foundry at Selma. McRae's foundry joined a large number of private enterprises that were producing items such as shovels, uniforms, swords, and buttons.

Her manufacturing center received another major addition in 1862, when General Josiah Gorgas, chief of the Confederate Bureau of Ordnance, moved the former Federal Arsenal located at Mt. Vernon near Mobile to Selma. This relocation was necessitated by the fall of New Orleans and the increasing vulnerability of Alabama's coast to Union naval forces. McRae sold the foundry to the government for \$450,000 when he left for Europe in 1863 to serve as a Confederate purchasing agent.

The government then appointed Commander Catesby ap Roger Jones to supervise the production of cannon for coastal defense and naval bombardment. Under Jones, the Selma foundry became the only site within the Lower South capable of

manufacturing the Brooke rifle for the Confederate Navy as well as other large caliber artillery.



The facility cast its first cannon, a 7-inch Brooke rifle, in July 1863. The most common pieces produced at Selma were the 6.4-inch Brooke, which was just over 11 feet and weighed more than 10,000 pounds, and the 7-inch, 12-plus foot piece, weighing as much as 15,000 pounds. Selma is also believed to have cast 11 of the 11-inch Brooke smoothbore guns that weighed in excess of 20,000 pounds but completed and shipped only eight.

Alabama, like the rest of the South, experienced drastic economic and social change in the post-Reconstruction, or New South, era. The term "New South" refers to the economic shift from an exclusively agrarian society to one that embraced industrial development. The period has also been characterized by civil and social upheaval; farming hardships and exploitative labor practices led to the emergence of labor unions, and Jim Crow laws allowing racism to flourish under the guise of a policy known as "separate but equal."

Still, most Alabamians—nearly 90 percent—still lived on and worked farms. Cotton production rebounded by the 1880s to pre-Civil War yields, but market prices dropped continuously through the 1880s and 1890s. As a result, conditions for Alabamians engaged in agricultural production did not improve after Reconstruction, being described by many as little better than the slave system that preceded it. It would take until turn of the next century for her economy to even begin the process of recovery.