



SOCIAL STUDIES “ALABAMA: THE NEW SOUTH”

by Bode Morin

The history of Alabama can easily be broken down into three broad time periods. The first is the antebellum period, where agricultural interests dominated the state. The second is the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. The third is the period following the Reconstruction, sometimes called the Redemption, that marked the beginning of the New South when broad economic changes ushered in large-scale industrial ventures.

Antebellum Alabama

Agriculture in early Alabama centered on thirteen counties aligned across the south central part of the state. This region was part of the Southern Black Belt that included portions of South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee. It was so called because of its rich dark soil base and high number of slave- holding farms, the Black Belt contained some of the most lucrative Southern plantations and some of the largest populations of African-Americans living in the country. In the 1820s, following statehood for Alabama and an increased demand for mass-produced textiles, cotton was introduced to the region. The rich soil proved so compatible to cotton growth that the state’s 9,000 residents in 1810 surged to 128,000 in 1820 then to 310,000 in 1830 with only one percent living in a city. The African- American portion of the population (a majority of whom were slaves) similarly jumped from 42,000 in 1820 to 119,000 in 1830.

Mobile, because of its access to inland waterways, and proximity to Black Belt Plantations and the Gulf of Mexico, became the chief social and financial center for the state. By 1830, it was the fourth largest cotton exporting city in the nation. Only New Orleans, Savannah, and Charleston ranked higher. During the decade of the 1830s, blight-proof cotton and better water drilling techniques were developed, and Alabama’s cotton production grew nearly 4 1/2 times. By 1840, the state’s total population, of which only 2.2 percent were city dwellers, reached 591,000. Of that total, the number of African-Americans living in Alabama reached 256,000.

By 1849 Mobile had become the second largest cotton-exporting city in the nation and, with a population of 30,000, it laid claim to the 27th largest city in the country and the only city in Alabama with a population greater than 10,000.

Antebellum Jefferson County, by contrast, was sparsely populated. Without the rich soil base to support cotton growing, the number of slaves accounted for only twenty percent of its population in 1860, compared to eighty percent in some Black Belt counties. Jefferson County's 1870 population was 12,345 compared to 49,302 for Mobile County and 42,705 in Montgomery County. Throughout the antebellum period, agriculture clearly dominated the state's economy. Industry was viewed as the scourge of the North, which was thought to be dirty, congested, and contaminated. Attempting to slow nearly nonexistent industrial development, in 1840 powerful agricultural interests pushed a referendum through the state legislature to restrain rail development. Although railroads would have provided quicker communication and mail service between the regions, the referendum promoted "safer" macadamized (paved) roads over railroads.

Without adequate transportation to import materials or export products, only a few isolated Northern Alabama companies produced iron in the antebellum period. These first furnaces and forges mainly supplied bar stock to blacksmiths and cast simple agricultural implements and hollow ware (pots and vessels). Although the first blast furnace, erected in 1818, predated the first cotton mill by twelve years, most Alabamians never considered iron or railroads as more than a minor service industry to agriculture. Cotton planting was, according to Ethyl Armes, who wrote the definitive history of iron and coal in Alabama, the "gentleman's trade."

By mid-century, however, the state government, prodded by the state's geological survey and Southern capitalists seeking another "future besides growing cotton," began to consider connecting Alabama's separate regions and exploiting its mineral resources. In addition to increasing the state's wealth, exploiting mineral resources was also seen a means to reduce the South's dependency on the North for manufactured goods. In 1858 the state apportioned \$10,000 to provide a cost analysis and railroad line survey to connect the Tennessee River to Mobile Bay. Work on the line began in 1860 and had extended north into the mineral region when the Civil War broke out and construction effectively ground to a halt. These nascent attempts at industrialization, however, did not greatly dissuade much of the public. In fact, agriculture, still so dominated the economy that as late as 1860, the state's leading industry, cotton gin manufacturing, had become the largest in the nation.

Civil War and Reconstruction

During the war, Confederate demand for iron grew very quickly as the South attempted to defend its agricultural-based economy. Rising to this effort, several new Alabama furnaces went into blast, such that the total number of iron producing companies rose from "but few" in the 1850s to sixteen by war's end. New railroads linked parts of Alabama's mineral region with the arsenals and foundries in Selma, and the rolling mills and machine shops in the north central counties. Alabama's fledgling iron industry, however, did not remain viable for long as Union troops occupied much of state in 1865. Eliminating the South's industrial capability, the North destroyed all but one blast furnace and nearly every forge and foundry in the state.

The Civil War decimated Alabama's economy. The Reconstruction that followed attempted to reform and restructure the South did little, however, to promote economic rebuilding. It simply

provided a moral and political springboard for Northern politicians while failing to increase regional per capita earnings beyond 27% of the North. During the Reconstruction years, city life in Alabama became much more difficult and witnessed for the only decade in its history, a greater increase in the number of rural residents than urban dwellers. Of the sixteen furnaces destroyed during the war, only six reopened.

During Reconstruction, many Southerners realized that the only way to redeem itself was through the development of industries and a capitalist economy. Seen as a decisive edge to the North's victory, they believed that economic recovery would only come through the development of the mineral belt and the construction of railroads.

In the midst of the Reconstruction, a group of Montgomery businessmen, with ties to developing railroads, formed a company to purchase land at the pending junction of two railroads in the mineral region of the state. With the intention of selling the lots and developing an "industrial city to take advantage of the immense natural resources in Jefferson County," the organization chartered Birmingham in 1871.

The New South

As Reconstruction ended in the late 1870s, conservative Southern Democrats began taking over congressional and gubernatorial seats from liberal Republicans and the political and economic climate in the state began to change. Not only had Reconstruction been seen as a failure in the South, but many Northern groups also saw the limited success for dollars spent as a waste. By the end of the 1870s, the economic climate of the nation began to brighten. Northern capitalists especially began to see the South less as a region for political and moral postulating and more for economic development. Land speculators looked to the vast forests of virgin timber; industrialists considered the extensive virtually untapped mineral fields, and merchants saw the population as large open market for their goods. Clearly the economic barriers that separated the South from North prior to the Civil War were breaking down.

Early entrepreneurs especially promoted the growth of railroads in the South. Between 1881 and 1890, 180 new railroad companies began operations south of Pennsylvania and east of the Mississippi River. Railroads in the South grew by 135 per cent for the decade, while the rest of the country grew at only 86 percent.

This critical means of transportation coupled with vast untapped exploitable resources and highly favorable business conditions transformed the old South. Publications such as "How to get Rich in the South," and "The Road to Wealth" promoted business opportunities. Newspapers, such as the Philadelphia Telegraph proclaimed, "Southern land, labor, fuel, water power, and building facilities are cheap. The way to clear and large profits is open."

The South's economic metamorphosis of the 1880s prompted historian Edward Ayers to write:

"Signs of the New South Appeared...shoved up against the signs of the old...Hundreds of new towns proudly displayed raw brick buildings...Investors began to put money into saw mills, textiles, and coal mines...Railroads connected the landscape...[and] enthusiastic young editors

talked of a New South.”

At the same time, large-scale mineral exploitation began in Jefferson and five of its surrounding iron and coal rich counties which became known as the Birmingham District. Boosters claimed that the region was the only one in the world with all of the necessary materials for making iron within five miles of each other. Aided financially by new railroad lines eager to increase traffic, eight new blast furnace companies had opened by 1883. (This included the Sloss Iron Company, 1881).

In 1888, the L&N Railroad, dominant in Alabama and Tennessee, carried more iron ore, coal, and pig iron than the combined weight of all cotton produced in the United States for the prior fifteen years. Between 1880 and 1900 more new blast furnace companies opened in the Birmingham District than any other region in the United States (outside of Pittsburgh) prompting Andrew Carnegie to declare the South, “Pennsylvania’s most formidable industrial enemy.”

Residing on the dramatically increased iron production and great potential for rivaling Pittsburgh’s great steel production, Birmingham’s population grew from 3,000 in 1880 to 26,000 a decade later, and by 1900, became Alabama’s largest city with a population of 38,000. Amid this tremendous growth, civic leaders coined the nickname “Magic City” for Birmingham.

By 1930, Birmingham with its associated boundary expansions, had grown to 259,000, and at 431,000, Jefferson County ranked as the largest county in the South, behind Orleans Parish, Louisiana. Chemical and structural constraints, however, limited the ability of the Alabama’s iron and coal to make high quality steel as had been hoped. The materials did, however, combine to make ideal foundry iron, and merchant pig iron production increased ten fold during the 1880s. Because of low transportation and labor costs, the Birmingham District quickly became the largest and cheapest foundry iron producing area. By 1915 twenty-five percent of the nation’s foundry pig iron was produced in Birmingham. This number grew to forty percent by 1940.

The economy of Alabama has had many transformations since statehood in 1819. Endowed with vast mineral wealth, it was able to overcome the decimating effects of a civil war and, within two decades, create an economic infrastructure that was unlike anything else the state had ever seen. Although agriculture never left and the greatest production of cotton was to come after the war, industry clearly left its mark on Alabama. This transformation is visible today in places like Sloss Furnaces, Tannehill Ironworks and Brierfield State Parks.

READING CHECK:

“Alabama: The New South”

1. What began happening in the late 1880s to make Birmingham competitive with Pittsburgh?
2. Name three historic iron-making sites in the Birmingham region.
3. What was the state’s leading industry in 1860?
4. Why was iron so important to Confederate interests?
5. In 1849, which Alabama city was the chief social and financial center for the state?
6. What happened between 1881-1890 to transform the South?
7. What are the three time periods of Alabama history?
8. Explain why a certain region is called the Southern Black Belt.
9. Why was the L&N Railroad important to iron production in the early 1900s?
10. What historic event decimated Alabama’s economy?

ANSWER KEY:

“Alabama: The New South”

1. More new blast furnace companies opened in Birmingham than any other region in the US (outside Pittsburgh) during that time.
2. Sloss Furnaces, Tannehill Ironworks and Brierfield State Park
3. Cotton gin manufacturing
4. Iron was important to make the arms needed to defend the South’s agricultural based economy.
5. Mobile
6. 180 new railroad companies began operations in the South, favorable business conditions existed, and the availability of untapped mineral resources altered the economy.
7. The Antebellum, Civil War/Reconstruction and the Redemption Periods
8. It was called the Black Belt because of the high number of slave holding farms (plantations) that existed in this region, as well as refer to its rich dark soil.
9. The L&N Railroad carried a significant amount of iron ore, coal and pig iron.
10. The Civil War