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# The politics of improvement: internal improvements, sectionalism, and slavery in Mississippi 1820-1837

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**THE POLITICS OF IMPROVEMENT:  
INTERNAL IMPROVEMENTS,  
SECTIONALISM, AND SLAVERY IN MISSISSIPPI, 1820-1837**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
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## ABSTRACT

The increased consensus among historians that the emergence of a market revolution engendered widespread economic, political, and social changes throughout the second quarter of nineteenth-century America has brought a number of provocative questions to bear on the antebellum South. Among *the* most provocative is the assertion that during the 1830s, a strain of reform-minded southern planters took it upon themselves to integrate the regions subsistence farmers into the market economy. The historian Harry Watson has asserted that a small, but influential, group of southern planters sought to confront Dixie's dilemma of pursuing a modern economy without cutting ties with the archaic and brutal system of slave labor. For these forward-thinking planters the promotion of internal improvements represented the most logical strategy for accomplishing such disparate goals.

Mississippi provides an excellent location to perform a test case. Specifically, this study will examine events in Mississippi beginning 1820, at the time of the state capitol's relocation to Jackson, until the economic crash of 1837. My purpose is to seek out attitudes and behaviors found in Watson's study, without overlooking events and circumstances particular to life in Mississippi during the 1820s and 1830s.

## INTRODUCTION

In an essay published in 1996 historian Harry L. Watson attempted to integrate the antebellum South into national economic transformations resulting from what is widely labeled as a market revolution in America. Between the periods of the Revolution and the Civil War, primarily during the Jacksonian Era, the market revolution influenced all spheres of politics, economics, and religion bringing about a multitude of cultural changes in society and ushering in a modern capitalist age. However, Watson suggests, “The economic and cultural circumstances of the South make clear...that the regional impact of commercialization was highly uneven.”<sup>1</sup>

The emerging market linked “farmers, planters, and merchants to national and international patterns of production and trade, laying the robust foundations of industrial power and creating commercial and financial institutions essential to a dynamic capitalist society.” From the time of the Democrats contentious battles with Whigs over national economic policies to Abraham Lincoln’s presidential election, the market influenced “fundamental shifts in the way American people conducted their lives and constructed their relationships with one another...shaping many of the rifts, conflicts, and inequalities that divided them.”<sup>2</sup> Put another way, the market revolution highlights those who welcomed changes engendered by industrialization and those who resisted.

A notable drawback is that the market revolution is not a historical event. When Democrats cast their votes in the presidential election of 1828 they were not voting against the social phenomenon of a *market revolution*—they were voting for Andrew Jackson. While

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Watson, “Slavery and Development in a Dual Economy: The South and the Market Revolution,” in Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway, eds, *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800-1880* (Charlottesville, 1996), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Clark, “The Consequences of the Market Revolution in the American North,” in Stokes and Conway, 23.

analytical constructs assist historians in organizing and classifying historical events into manageable frameworks, they also have the negative effect of imposing ahistorical designs on the past. However, the market revolution *does* provide a suitable system of synthesizing such disparate events as the division and commoditization of labor, the Second Great Awakening of the 1830s, and the unresolved tensions between capitalism and democracy.

Scholars' attention to the market revolution will inevitably lead directly to explanations of societal changes, primarily in the industrialized North, while overlooking the agrarian South. If the market revolution is understood as the origin of modern capitalism in America, then it is easy to understand *why* scholars face such difficulty integrating the South.

While the North's financial and industrial enterprises prospered under a system of "free labor," the South remained largely an agrarian society built upon slave labor. A less obvious distinction between the two regions may be found in the South's "dual economy." Northern financial institutions, mercantile enterprises, textile mills, even farming, fall under the nexus of one single market based economy, while the South, according to some historians, hosted two separate economies.

Cotton planters' dependence on national and international markets was no different than that of any northern merchant, which resulted in planters' acceptance of the realities of the marketplace—both good and bad. But there were others who opposed the uncertainty of the market and remained isolated from its influences. Subsistence farmers living throughout the South rejected the enticements of the market, choosing a modest life in return for personal autonomy. For those independent farmers the risks of entering the volatile market outweighed

its rewards. The South's dual economy coupled with its brutal and archaic practice of slave labor determined its idiosyncratic ties to the market revolution.<sup>3</sup>

Harry Watson's essay "Slavery and Development in a Dual Economy: The South and the Market Revolution" is an imaginative and complex attempt to demonstrate how southerners—especially planters—reconciled their embrace of a modern economy while promoting the cruel practices of chattel slavery within a dual economy. In his study of antebellum North Carolina, Watson finds evidence that reform minded politicians and planters understood the shortcomings of the dual economy and sought to remove it as a barrier to modernization.

Edward Lee Winslow, the president of a plank road under construction in western North Carolina, comprehended better than most the importance of embracing economic progress—especially transportation. Winslow calculated that farmers living throughout the backcountry would benefit greatly by traveling by road to save time, while the volume of traffic on roads might increase by ten to twelve percent. More importantly, improved transportation might bring more farmers to market increasing the overall wealth of the region. In a sanguine message Winslow declared, "Man was placed on the earth to subdue and conquer it..., and there are no barriers which Nature has erected, which may not be overcome with energy and exertion. Improve and cheapen the means of transportation,—relieve the productive labor of the country of the evils arising from bad roads,—give a quick and healthful circulation through all the arteries of trade,—and raise the value of all descriptions of property, to say nothing of the blessings of the improvement in the social and religious condition of the population..."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism, Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Morton Rothstein, "The Antebellum South as a Dual Economy: A Tentative Hypothesis," *Agricultural History* 41 (October, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> Watson, "Slavery and Development in a Dual Economy", 43.



Winslow's optimism is representative of most nineteenth-century champions of internal improvements. While the economic advantages were self-evident, promoters always emphasized the cultural advantages that networks of transportation might bring to isolated, rural outposts. Of course enthusiasm often masked a defensive posture among advocates for internal improvements.

Watson notes Winslow's "defensiveness and frustration" at the time of his statements, and asks, "Why, as late as 1850, were some southern Americans apparently still indifferent to the benefits of internal improvements?"<sup>5</sup> The answer, of course, is the South's dual economy and the apprehension it sustained among independent producers who feared the uncertainties of the market. Watson agrees that sections of the South had already been linked to the Atlantic market by the seventeenth century, while others remained isolated as late as the middle of the nineteenth century. Overtime, reformers worked to accelerate change and bring isolated parts of the South into the sphere of the market, which promised to "cement thereby the loyalties of nonslaveholding whites to the threatened institution of African slavery."<sup>6</sup>

Watson's assertions are as compelling as they are contentious. The suggestion that an organized group of "reform minded" planters actively sought to integrate backcountry farmers into national markets to promote the overall wellbeing of slavery in the South is certainly stimulating, but also raises many questions. The most important question Watson's essay raises is who else, besides those reformers living in North Carolina, promoted internal improvements with the intent to encourage staple crop production and slave ownership among subsistence farming communities?

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*,44.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

A number of factors must be in place to test Watson's ideas in other states. First, any test case must begin within the boundaries of a southern state before the Civil War ensued. Second, at least two distinct geographic regions within a single state must be compared, and the demographics and attitudes of the citizens living within those separate regions must reflect patterns of thought and behavior similar to those found in Watson's North Carolina. Third, public debates and tensions over the construction of internal improvements are a necessity. Finally, all of these factors must be considered within the context of growing national and local concerns over the present and future conditions of slavery, beginning in earnest, around the time of Andrew Jackson's presidency.

For all of these reasons antebellum Mississippi provides an excellent location to perform a test case. Specifically, this study will examine events in Mississippi beginning 1820, at the time of the state capitol's relocation to Jackson, until the economic crash of 1837. Of course, Mississippi is its own state and any comparison to other southern states must not be too rigid. My purpose is to seek out attitudes and behaviors found in Watson's study, without overlooking events and circumstances specific to life in Mississippi during the 1820s and 1830s.

The importance of Watson's essay is evident in its suggestion that "the reformers pronouncements reveal a bitter struggle on the part of proslavery 'progressives' to 'modernize' the South by bringing its yeomanry population under the sway of commercial agriculture and the bourgeois values of hard work and self improvement." As a result "...southern reformers would have abolished the dual economy, recruited the yeomanry to wider slave ownership and greater commercial production, and ultimately pushed the plantation system into the South's remotest

corners.”<sup>7</sup> Implicit in Watson’s view is a need among slave owning elites to buttress the institution of slavery from increased scrutiny and attacks. Planters and politicians alike knew well what “wider slave ownership” meant to the future of the South.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 59

## SECTIONALISM

The idea of a unified and distinct South has received increased scrutiny over the years, prompting some scholars to question the future of southern history, and presumably southern historians. As one scholar has written, “The very story of the south is a story of unresolved identity, unsettled and restless, unsure and defensive. The South, contrary to so many words written in defense and in attack, was not a fixed, known, and unified place but a place of constant movement, struggle, and negotiation.”<sup>1</sup>

The earliest interpretations of a monolithic South have been assaulted on all fronts, resulting in new interpretations and a medley of fresh curiosities for scholars to explore.<sup>2</sup> New findings have revealed a South, “that is more complicated than the stories we tell about it.”<sup>3</sup> But despite the enthusiasm generated by new avenues of study emphasizing the importance of class, gender, and race, the history of a “more complicated” South continues to engender frustration.

Threadbare generalities and order have been replaced with a fragmented body of literature that borders on incoherence, often bewildering the most dedicated scholars in the profession. While historians are encouraged to embrace the complexities of the past and relish the uncoiling of twisted facts, it is evident that scholars of Southern history strain to make sense of the region’s peculiarity and ambiguity. For this reason many of the most influential studies in the last three decades have focused attention on specific southern states, steering clear of

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Pred, *Making Histories and Constructing Human Geographies: The Local Transformation of Practice, Power Relations, and Consciousness* (Boulder, Westview, 1990)

<sup>2</sup> The number of influential works is too diverse and vast to list here. For one of the more recent and cogent demonstrations of a diverse South during the antebellum era, see William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay 1776-1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Early influential works include, David Potter, *The South and the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), and Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York and London: Norton, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Edward L. Ayers, “What We Talk About When We Talk About the South,” in Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuf, *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 81.

attempts to generalize about the region as a whole. By discussing politics and economics, or cultural matters, local studies have confronted most of the troublesome questions facing scholars of the South. While the findings have been significant, the limited geographic scope of such studies leave many far reaching questions unanswered, and any promise of synthesis in doubt.<sup>4</sup>

The history of antebellum Mississippi, specifically the political and economic history of the state from the 1820s up until the economic depression of 1837, illustrates many of the issues discussed in previous local studies, but also demonstrates its own unique experiences that fail to blend neatly into an all encompassing history of the South. Popular topics include: intrastate antagonism, class stratification, the pervasive impact of a market based economy, the debate over whether or not antebellum southerners engaged in a capitalist economy or pre-capitalist paternalism, allegiances to national political parties, the hegemony of planters, the obscurity of yeoman, the tragic struggles and heroic efforts of four million slaves, and the centrality of slavery—and its defense—in southern politics.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the most insightful local studies of social tension and political change in antebellum, see J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Harry L. Watson, *Jacksonian Politics and Community Conflict* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); Lacy K. Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Stephanie McCurry, *Master of Small Worlds: Yeomen Households, Gender Relations, & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). For several titles that address changes after the Civil War and are particularly relevant to this study, see Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism, Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Michael Wayne, *The Reshaping of Plantation Society: The Natchez District, 1860-1880*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> For discord between various southern states, see William W. Freehling, *Road to Disunion*. On the subject of class conflict in the South, see Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism*, Harry L. Watson, "Conflict and Collaboration: Yeoman, Slaveholders, and Politics in the Antebellum South," *Social History*, 10 (October, 1985): 273-298, and J. William Harris, *Plain folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterlands* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1985). The best synthesis on the impact of market forces in the antebellum South is, Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); also Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Norton, 1978). Regarding "paternalism", see Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965); Roll Jordan, *Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). For capitalism, see James Oakes, *Slavery and Freedom: An interpretation of the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). On political allegiances, see Holt, *The Politics of 1850*; William J Cooper's, *The South and the Politics of*

By the 1820s the inhabitants of Mississippi had already begun to engage in internal sectional disputes, which exposed class stratifications and dictated allegiances to national party politics. Clearly market forces were already at work along the Mississippi River, illustrated by the disproportionate accumulation of wealth among the river counties. The territory's first settlers recognized the promising opportunities that awaited them along the Mississippi River, leaving the lands to the east unsettled. Those who could not compete economically, or arrived later, were forced to settle to the east of the river counties, where the soil was less fertile and prosperity uncertain.

Situated along, or near, the banks of the Mississippi River, the five river counties dominated the economic and political landscape of Mississippi throughout most of the 1820s. Consisting of Wilkinson, Adams, Jefferson, Claiborne, and Franklin counties, the river region's elites enjoyed fabulous wealth and decisive influence in state politics. Although prosperity took time, the earliest settlers of the river counties managed to carve a civilized society out of a frontier wilderness.

The oldest and most prominent of these Lower Mississippi Valley settlements was the town of Natchez. Named for the Natchez Indians, the town rested along the lofty bluffs overlooking the river and quickly established itself as a pivotal trading post in the West.<sup>6</sup> By the 1720s settlers of mostly French descent were turning out significant quantities of indigo, rice,

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*Slavery: 1828-1856* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1978). On the social dominance of planters, see James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). For a classic study of yeoman in the South, see Frank L. Owsley, *Plain Folk of the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1949); for the best recent study, see Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*. For two distinct interpretations of slave experience, see Kenneth Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956); Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*. Finally, the clearest argument for the preponderance of slavery's defense in southern politics is William Cooper, *Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860* (New York: Knopf, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> The Natchez Indians established upwards of sixty villages up down the Lower Mississippi Valley stretching three hundred miles to the north of where the town of Natchez stands today. For details into the early history of the Natchez District see D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 1-2.

cotton, pitch, and timber, all to be exported to domestic and world markets. The trade of horses, acquired from the Spanish in Texas, was especially lucrative and critical to the commercial successes of Natchez and its unrelenting competition with markets in New Orleans and Mobile. By the middle 1720s Natchez was not only emerging as center of trade, but also showing promise as a stable settlement as its population and wealth began to climb.

Reports in 1723 reveal a populace of 303, including over one hundred black slaves; by 1777 totals had swelled to 713 including 280 slaves. Predictably, the amount of cleared land for domestic and agricultural use increased as the population of the river counties continued to swell.<sup>7</sup> By 1800 the population of what was now referred to as the Natchez District exceeded four thousand inhabitants and showed few signs of receding. But regardless of the steady growth and expansion of the District, Natchez remained very much a frontier community.<sup>8</sup>

Before 1796 very little cotton was exported from Natchez and cultivators chose to expend their efforts growing tobacco and indigo instead. It is well known that the introduction of Eli Whitney's cotton gin greatly impacted the production of cotton throughout the south, and Mississippi was no different. The once primitive economic life of the Natchez District soon subsided, and its residents began to evince the modern behaviors and attitudes exhibited among market oriented regions of the South.

By 1803 the United States' opportune purchase of the Louisiana Territory precipitated greater changes throughout the Mississippi region. The acquisition of Louisiana immediately provided the river counties with a secure political future and removed the threat of interference from foreign states. The purchase also accelerated the transformation of the river counties from a wilderness outpost, and improved the exportation of goods along the Mississippi River—

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 7-9.

<sup>8</sup> Charles S. Sydnor, *A Gentleman of the Old Natchez District* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1938), 15.

including cotton.<sup>9</sup> William Claiborne, a Mississippi historian and editor of the *Mississippi Free Trader* in 1840 noted, “After the acquisition of the country by the Americans the population increased very rapidly, and the Spanish and other foreign classes as rapidly disappeared.”<sup>10</sup>

Stability and security also resulted in an increase in immigration, which in turn brought diversity and a measure of sophistication to the river counties. As historian Charles Sydnor writes, “Life began to move at a higher plane” and the “the raw conditions of life of the pioneer had bound his thoughts and activities to supplying the basic needs of physical life.”<sup>11</sup> Naturally, “The inhabitants of the Natchez region were experiencing about the turn of the century a notable upward movement in civilization... Cotton had become a sturdy economic foundation, and the acquisition of the region by the United States had given promise of a more stable political future.”<sup>12</sup> With French and Spanish intrusions eliminated and the uncertainties of the frontier dispelled, the Natchez District’s planters were free to move out of the shadows of the wilderness and self-assuredly look forward to a civilized society in which to build.

By the time of Mississippi’s admission to the Union in 1817, a select group of Natchez District planters enjoyed a disproportionate amount of wealth and political influence. The prosperity of Natchez itself was visibly on display for all to see, and symbolized the region’s commercial promise. But the great planters, merchants, and professional men could not anticipate the effects their success had on those who lived on the periphery of the plantations and counting houses. One historian contends that the early territorial era produced a relatively fluid social structure where mobility between the classes was “common.” But the extraordinary

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 17-18.

<sup>10</sup> J.F.H. Claiborne, *Mississippi as a Province, Territory, and State* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University press, 1964), 530.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Sydnor, *A Gentleman of the Old Natchez District*, 18.



growth of the cotton market throughout the 1820's had a profound impact on life along the Mississippi and by the end of the decade, "the growth of urbanization had produced not only some degree of order and sophistication at Natchez, but also a tendency toward class stratification."<sup>13</sup>

Residents of Natchez and its surrounding areas understood all too well the allure of the cotton market and went to great lengths to capture their piece of prosperity. Joseph H. Ingraham, a New Englander and faculty member of Jefferson College in near by Washington, noted the feverish ambition of Natchez residents when he wrote, "A plantation well stocked with hands, is the ne plus ultra of every man's ambition who resides at the south. Young men who come to this country, to make money, soon catch the mania, and nothing less than a broad plantation, waving with the snow white cotton bolls, can fill their mental vision."<sup>14</sup>

Another northern immigrant ,as well as, future governor and Southern Rights vice-presidential nominee, John A. Quitman could not believe his eyes when he disembarked from a steamer December 3, 1821 and stepped out onto the "oldest" and most "infamous" section of Natchez referred to as "Under-the-Hill."<sup>15</sup> Quitman immediately noticed the social and economic sway the Natchez aristocracy held over the region. By the time Quitman arrived in 1821 Natchez was still considered the political center of Mississippi politics; after all it was the capital of the state. But word had spread that the political dominance of the region was in

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<sup>13</sup> James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 137.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph H. Ingraham, *The South-West, by a Yankee vol.1* (New York, 1835), 84-86.

<sup>15</sup> Robert E. May, *John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University, 1985), 19. Like Ingraham, John Quitman immigrated from the northeast, leaving behind his native Hudson River community of Rhinebeck, New York for the prospects of the Southwest.

jeopardy and the seat of government might be relocated to a more central location, farther east, to satisfy the emerging eastern settlements.<sup>16</sup>

Regardless of what rumors may have been circulating at the time, Quitman felt confident about his prospects after spending several days acquainting himself with all of Natchez's civic amenities, including a three-story brick hospital, a coffeehouse, reading rooms, and "other symbols of cultural and social progress."<sup>17</sup> Quitman was seduced by the grandeur and extravagance of the plantation households located outside Natchez, removed from the mosquito infested swamps along the river. He noted that during yellow fever season, certain plantation owners accommodated residents who had fled town to avoid the risk of infection. Once settled in the lavish confines of the plantation, the townspeople enjoyed the hospitality of their hosts as they sipped mint juleps after breakfast, followed by riding and fishing in the afternoon. This "indolent, yet charming life" must have seemed like a dream to those unaccustomed to such leisure and luxury. While such privilege was far from common, over forty families in Natchez alone enjoyed similar standards of living, not to mention those plantation households scattered throughout the river counties.<sup>18</sup>

In his travels throughout the South in the 1850s Frederick Law Olmsted paid a visit to Woodville, Mississippi, located in the extreme southwest corner of the state in Wilkinson County. Bordered to the north by Adams County (Natchez) Woodville was representative of the planter society along the banks of the Mississippi. In May of 1854 Olmsted recorded in his travel journal, "The plantations are all large...No poor white people live upon the road, nor in all

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<sup>16</sup> The relocation of the state capital in 1823 played a major role in Mississippi's internal disagreements and is particularly important in this study. The relocation of the capital to Jackson and the emergence of the eastern piney woods region as a major political factor in Mississippi politics will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapters.

<sup>17</sup> May, *John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

this country of rich soils are they seen, except *en voyage*. In a distance of seventy-five miles I saw no houses without negro-cabins attached, and I calculated that there were fifty slaves, on average, to every white family resident in the country under my view.”<sup>19</sup>

Olmsted’s assessment of the planter’s domination was accurate and his conclusions are supported by the steady increase of improved lands in Adams County from 1820 to 1860. By 1850 seventy percent of farms had 200 hundred or more acres of improved land; in 1860 seventy eight percent of farms contained 200 or more acres of improved land. During this same period farms with 1,000 or more acres of improved land increased from 11 percent to 14 percent. Similarly, non-slave land holdings in the county dwindled from 48 to 22 between 1850 and 1860, while slaveholder’s farms increased from 133 to 209. Naturally, cotton production soared during this remarkable period of growth.<sup>20</sup>

As Frederick Olmsted traversed the “uneven” yet “well engineered” roads north of Woodville he not only observed the opulence of the region’s plantations, but also took the time to interview some of its residents. Before leaving Woodville, Olmsted asked a local, “What sort of country is it, then, between here and Natchez?” The reply came in an unmistakably blustery tone, “Big plantations, sir. Nothing else, Aristocrats, Swell –heads, I call them, sir. Nothing but swell-heads, and you can’t get a night’s lodging sir. Beyond the ferry, I’ll be bound, a man might die on the road ‘fore he’d get [a] lodging with one of them.” Working up to a fever pitch the resident warned, “You’ll take note of ‘em in Natchez. You can tell them by their walk. I noticed it yesterday at the Mansion House. They sort o’ throw out their legs as if they hadn’t got

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<sup>19</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. (The Modern Library, 1984), 411.

<sup>20</sup> James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 149.

strength enough to lift ‘em and put them down in any particular place. They do want so bad to look as if they weren’t made of the same clay as the rest of God’s creation.”<sup>21</sup>

Olmsted observed a class consciousness in Mississippi all too familiar to his own New York. The region’s planters and financiers projected themselves as leaders of the community, often resulting in imperious attitudes and haughty behavior. The Natchez elite’s snobbery is particularly infamous because, “The singular fact is that regardless of occupation this Natchez aristocracy was homogeneous at the start, and it became more homogeneous and caste-conscious through...intermarriage.” Natchez as a community “seemed too animated by a common desire to build stately homes, to furnish them lavishly, and to ensure their retention by their own kinsmen.”<sup>22</sup>

Clearly the foundation for such economic and social dominance in the 1850s found its origins back in the 1820s when established planting families held the majority of land, slaves, and social standing throughout the state.<sup>23</sup> But despite the prominence of the District’s elite, there were others. While the population of slaves declined in urban centers throughout the South, the opposite was true of Natchez. From 1810 to 1860 the number of slaves in Natchez increased from 459 to 2,131. The rise in slaveholding took place primarily among middle and upper class business owners. Yet, “Little is known about slavery within the city limits.”<sup>24</sup> What seems apparent is that whites and slaves coexisted in relative harmony, with few incidents.

Much of Natchez’s free labor consisted of young men bound to their masters. Predictably, apprentices earned little, trading their time and energy for room and board, as well as, vocational training. Once apprentices fulfilled the terms of their contract, they were often

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<sup>21</sup> Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 415-416.

<sup>22</sup> Hodding Carter, *Lower Mississippi* (New York: Rinehart & Company Inc. 1942), 235.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 149.

<sup>24</sup> James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 171.

hired by their former masters as printers, weavers, blacksmiths, bricklayers, tailors, and inn keepers, earning \$150 to \$500 annually. While apprentices may not have intermingled with middle and upper class citizens, they did not suffer denigration for their modest status. Public condemnation was reserved for those who earned their living trading slaves and operating prostitution houses. Because of its location along the river, Natchez attracted a large number of slave traders passing through on their way to the markets in New Orleans. The river town also attracted its fair share of wanderers, runaways, even criminals, who patronized the local saloons and brothels. The gentry reserved their harshest ridicule for these undesirables.<sup>25</sup>

The middle class consisted mostly of small farmers and merchant capitalists. Bankers, wholesalers, and commission merchants managed to earn enough wealth to be considered part of Natchez's upper class but, "The social distinctions of the time which separated middle-class from the elite are impossible to define."<sup>26</sup> It has been suggested that a reasonable, quantifiable delineation is \$50,000 in real or personal property, and slaveholdings of twenty or more.<sup>27</sup> Yet these figures are arbitrary, and provide only a guideline to the social composition of the Natchez elite. Furthermore, the figures give no clear indication to the pecuniary demarcation that set middle and lower class citizens apart. It is therefore difficult to judge the limits of social interaction between higher and lower orders of Natchez.

Also, little evidence suggests any great tension existed between the elite planters and the middle and lower classes of Natchez. While the class structure of Natchez was typical of antebellum southern towns, it possessed unique characteristics because of its location along the banks of the Mississippi River. Natchez demonstrated a commercial and financial element that

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 160.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 165.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 165.

most towns in the southwest, with the exception of Mobile and New Orleans, had yet to create by the 1820s. It is plausible that class conflict was mitigated by the fact that Natchez failed to develop into a city, and its economy lacked a certain industrial quality that has often fomented enmity between laborers and business owners throughout history. While “swell heads” may have walked the streets of Natchez, one may conclude—with a degree certainty—that the town enjoyed relative social harmony among its various classes. But sectional tensions were beginning to fester between the river counties and their neighbors to the east, which promised to unsettle the state’s internal politics

In 1830 seven counties accounted for the Natchez District, which made up only 34 percent of Mississippi’s white population, but owned 65 percent of the slaves, paid 69 percent of the taxes, and possessed 78 percent of the appraised property in the state.<sup>28</sup> Based on the socio-economic character of the Natchez District, many of its inhabitants were market oriented and espoused most of the economic policies of the National Republicans, and later, the American Whig party. It has been suggested that, “The economic demarcation between the parties’ constituencies was especially clear in the number of southern states because soil types varied from region to region and wealthy and poor counties were separated geographically... regional antagonisms therefore often reinforced the different economic needs and values of Democratic, National Republican and Whig voters.”<sup>29</sup> Similar patterns emerged throughout Mississippi during the 1820s and 1830s.

While wealthy planters in the southwest enjoyed the benefits of the river, access to the South’s largest commercial center (New Orleans), and the rich and fertile soils of the river basin,

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<sup>28</sup> Edwin A. Miles, *Jacksonian Democracy in Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 18.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 116.

their neighbors to the east struggled to erect a suitable society of their own. It should be noted that while the most influential planters and bankers of the river counties considered themselves staunch members of the National Republican and Whig parties, they did not necessarily support all of the national programs championed by the party's leaders.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, the more rural region northeast of Adams County did not support the national Whig party, turning instead to Andrew Jackson's Democrats.<sup>31</sup>

By the 1820s seventeen counties lay to the east of the Natchez District. The first ten, known as the piney woods, were officially acquired during the War of 1812. Located directly east of the Natchez District the piney woods, primarily inhabited by subsistence farmers, possessed poor soil for staple crops.

Frederick Law Olmsted could hardly ignore the disparity between the prosperous plantations along the river counties and the squalid settlements of central Mississippi. Upon arriving at a residence to seek lodging for the evening Olmsted observed, "The house was all comprised in a single room, twenty-eight by twenty-five feet in area...no windows at all. Two bedsteads, a spinning wheel, a packing-case, which served as a bureau, cupboard, made of rough hewn slabs, two or three deer-skin seated chairs, a Connecticut clock...constituted all the visible furniture, either useful or ornamental in purpose."<sup>32</sup> After entering the dwelling Olmsted noted his peculiar reception by its inhabitants, "The woman of the house sat sulkily in a chair tilted

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<sup>30</sup> The specific policies of the Mississippi Whigs and the national Whig party will be discussed in the following chapter, which deals specifically with politics and policy.

<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Mississippians residing within the interior regions of the state did not necessarily vote in-step with Democratic national policies. Ironically, it was the interior's support of government subsidized internal improvements—traditionally a Whig platform—which caused sectional disputes between the river counties and the counties located to the east from the 1820s to 1830s. Especially during the early development of towns to the east of Natchez, such as Jackson, the Jacksonian personage and rhetoric must have been particularly appealing to those frontiersman and subsistence farmers who missed their opportunity to settle in close proximity to the Mississippi River. It is no mistake that the town of Jackson, named after 'Old Hickory', remained a Democratic stronghold throughout his presidency.

<sup>32</sup> Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 376.

back and leaning against the logs, spitting occasionally at the fire, but took no notice of me, barely nodding when I saluted her.”<sup>33</sup>

Statistics from 1830 show that the piney woods region represented twenty eight percent of the white population, owned fourteen percent of the slaves, paid thirteen percent of the taxes, and possessed 15 percent of Mississippi’s appraised property.<sup>34</sup> The piney woods district shared a community interest with its interior neighbors including the rapidly developing settlements east of the Mississippi River situated between the Yazoo, Big Black, and Pearl rivers.

Similarly, a third settlement known as the “New Purchase” established seven counties to the northeast of Natchez. By 1830 the “New Purchase” counties accounted for thirty percent of the state’s white population, eighteen percent of the black slave population, but possessed only four percent of Mississippi’s property, and paid only thirteen percent of its taxes.<sup>35</sup>

By the 1830s settlements throughout central Mississippi began to attract waves of settlers arriving from east and west. The promise of these emerging frontier communities even attracted interest among people of Natchez, and over time many enterprising residents of the town emigrated east to seek prosperous fortunes in farming and lumber.

Whether in the upcountry of the Carolinas or the piedmont of Georgia and Alabama, southern subsistence farmers evinced similar behaviors and attitudes all through the antebellum period. Of primary concern to small farmers was the protection of their families and independence as white citizens in slave society. Despite the disparity in material wealth from their neighbors to the west, piney woods farmers “asserted their command of liberty and

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 377.

<sup>34</sup> Miles, *Jacksonian Democracy in Mississippi*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 19. The “New Purchase” communities came into existence following the Treaty of Doak’s Stand, negotiated by non-other than Andrew Jackson. This negotiated peace between the Choctaw Indians and Jackson in 1820 doubled the potential area of settlement along the Mississippi, Pearl, and Black River regions, and guaranteed Andrew Jackson a devoted constituency in the piney woods and New Purchase communities for years to come.



virtue.”<sup>36</sup> Such vigilance existed among many independent farmers, who often displayed a “communitarian” set of publicly held values. There is a sense, especially among struggling farmers, that each citizen shared in their neighbor’s hardships and drew strength from the belief that each member of the community was bound to the next.<sup>37</sup> Shared values manifested itself through house raisings and assistance with crops. More importantly, communitarian values invoked a sense of civic responsibility to the state, motivating citizens to join in local leagues to promote political and economic measures, such as road building, levee construction, clearing of streams and rivers.<sup>38</sup> The result of this quasi communalism heightened sensitivity for the overall good of the community and belief that local matters should be addressed internally, not by distant governing bodies. But this does not mean that the backcountry of Mississippi was inhabited by radical dissenters. Too the contrary, much of the political behavior demonstrated by farmers represented the very essence of the Jeffersonian tradition in American political economy—self sufficiency.

While communitarian values permeated Mississippi’s population, the stark regional differences between those living in the interior and those living along the edge of the great river placed a great deal of strain on Mississippian’s unity. As noted earlier, piney wood residents possessed a minimal amount of Mississippi’s wealth, and produced a marginal amount of it good and services, and consequently owned fewer slaves than their neighbors to the west. Naturally, class tensions played a roll in what became an increasingly antagonistic relationship between the river counties and counties accounting for the piney woods and New Purchase regions. But

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<sup>36</sup> Bradley G. Bond, *Political Culture in the Nineteenth Century South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 8.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

while class enmity may have contributed to intrastate friction, unforeseen political and economic disputes ultimately revealed Mississippi's sectional attitudes.

In 1822 debate over the location of the state's seat of government emerged as one of the most public disagreements between Natchez and central Mississippi. Eventually Mississippians settled the issue, and the centrally located Jackson became the state capital in 1823. The far reaching economic and political implications revealed intensifying differences of opinion by the middle of the 1820s. Predictably, the elites of Natchez did not welcome a redistribution of power in the state's legislature and feared for their political future. Indeed, the relocation of the state's capital signified the potential of the piney woods and New Purchase regions, and represented a symbolic moment in Mississippi's brief history as a state.

With an economy largely based on small land holdings the eastern settlements typically "banded together against the representatives of the old Natchez District on such issues as internal improvements, banking, and state politics regarding Indians and slaves."<sup>39</sup> Before the emergence of the eastern settlements, representatives of the river counties, especially Adams County, rarely experienced any barriers to their political and economic policies. Without any organized opposition, planters dictated the course of Mississippi's public affairs before 1823, often pursuing agendas that benefited local interests above the greater good of the state. The domineering posture of the river county elites, especially Natchez, continued after the relocation of the capital, but substantial opposition had risen from the east.

No amount of communitarian values could suppress the escalating tensions between western and eastern interests in Mississippi by the middle of the 1820s. Questions regarding

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

The debates over internal improvements in the 1820s and 1830s were particularly prominent and illustrate the sectional biases of both regions.

economic development became increasingly urgent as the newly settled interior strived to achieve a level of prosperity similar to more established settlements along the Mississippi River. Simultaneously, a lively discourse concerning economic issues began to rise on a national level, and no doubt impacted the internal clash of Mississippi. It is no coincidence that intrastate discord began to rear its ugly head in Mississippi during the middle of the 1820s, when the emergence of a national battle over economic policies, concerns over western expansion, and the future of slavery began to provoke debate.

National concerns regarding federal support of internal improvements, protective tariffs, and a national bank coincided with the rise of the second political party system in America. Following the disputed election of John Quincy Adams in 1824, a discernible political coalition coalesced around the policies of Adams' administration, and his temporarily defeated opponent—Andrew Jackson. The “American System” devised by Henry Clay, and adopted by Adams, promoted an active federal presence in the construction of roads, canals, and railroads, connecting the nation through diverse system of transportation systems. Ostensibly the next step to Alexander Hamilton's earlier ruminations on American economic and industrial growth, the American System stressed the protection of international trade, the stabilizing influences of the Bank of the United States, and the establishment of a national university.

Despite the political stature of Adams and Clay, their economic policies failed to capture the imagination and support of many Americans. Regardless, after losing the popular vote to Jackson, Adams achieved his victory in one the most controversial presidential elections in the nation's history.

Andrew Jackson's dubious defeat in 1824 resulted in a ground swell of support, especially among southerners. Employing the talents of shrewd political strategists, like Martin

Van Buren, Jackson cemented his image as the leader of the Democrats and the “people’s” candidate in the presidential election of 1828. While the Whigs did not formally coalesce as a national party until 1832, the policies of Adams and Clay in 1824 were identical to those supported by Whigs in 1832. The political rhetoric surrounding debates between Democrats and Whigs over internal improvements and the national bank often descended to the depths of demagoguery, and represent the nation’s first glimpse of modern political behavior. Unapologetic political campaigning, interest group politics and pandering, trite slogans, and character assassinations, emerged as an acceptable means of winning the vote. Democrats were the first to employ such methods, though Whigs later perfected it.

Such class-centric rhetoric was particularly effective as Americans struggled with the anxiety and impersonality created by industrialization and an intruding market based economy. Democrats promoted their party as the “party of the people” and castigated the opposition as representatives of corrupt aristocrats. Historians continue to debate whether, or not, Jacksonians truly stood for the common American, and if they should be taken at face value as a final barrier to capitalism and its enveloping effects on American society in the 1830s.<sup>40</sup> Regardless, the class rhetoric, while possibly disingenuous, was no doubt effective.

Furthermore, as uncertainties surrounding national economic programs and a second political party system began to mount, Americans were also confronted with questions over western expansion and the future of slavery. By 1824 slavery had been abolished in the North, but the Missouri Compromise of 1820 made clear that the peculiar institution remained a fundamental component of the South’s political, economic, and social way of life. Not only was slavery central to white southerners way of life, it was prospering. The Adams administration

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<sup>40</sup> Daniel Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise: America 1815-1840* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

understood all too well that his nationalistic policies and the integration of western states were encumbered, if not threatened, by the escalating issue over slavery and its perpetuation.

National partisan politics and fears over the course of America's empire building filtered downward to the states, often resulting in divisive political battles that revealed pronounced sectional attitudes on a state level. With national issues such as internal improvements, western expansion, and slavery now intertwined with state politics, political mobilization and party discipline took hold as the stakes of state politics continued to rise. By 1824 the elite planters and financiers of Natchez, now faced with serious opposition to their political and economic livelihood, prepared to show their hands.

## INTERNAL IMPROVEMENTS

By the early 1820s government subsidization of internal improvements emerged as the most debated issue in Mississippi state politics. While the General Assembly passed a number of appropriation bills for roads uniting Jackson with numerous regions of the state, most inhabitants of central and eastern Mississippi recognized that the state's roads were abysmal. More importantly the citizens of central Mississippi demanded the improvement of the state's interior rivers, especially the Pearl, which promised to open new navigation routes to commercial centers throughout the region, including New Orleans.

As early as January 29, 1822, the General Assembly agreed to appropriate four thousand dollars to improve the navigation of the Pearl River, from latitude thirty-one, to its point of deposit at Lake Borgne, just east of New Orleans.<sup>1</sup> Brewster H. Jayne of Lawrence County, an ardent champion of the act, demanded, "That so far as the said act relates to the improvement of the navigation of Pearl River, your committee deem it of the highest importance to the interest and prosperity of a large and respectable proportion of the people of this State." Jayne envisaged a direct route of trade from central Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico and proclaimed, "The banks of Pearl River will, at no distant day be adorned and beautified with flourishing towns and villages."<sup>2</sup> The advantages of the Pearl River improvement were manifold.

Economically the project promised to allow accessible, inexpensive, and safe transport of interior crops to suitable markets by cutting the arduous voyage to New Orleans in half. The citizens of central-Mississippi could hardly disagree with Jayne's declaration that, "The

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<sup>1</sup> *Mississippi Session Laws*, 6 Sess. (1822-1823), 96-97.

<sup>2</sup> *Mississippi House Journal*, 5 Sess. (June, 1822), 121-122.

attainment of these great ends ought to call forth the best efforts of the State, and demand of all of us the aid which the condition of our fiscal concerns will admit.”<sup>3</sup>

While the citizens of Jackson and its surroundings enthusiastically anticipated the prosperity awaiting the region, the elites of Natchez looked on with dismay and recalcitrance. Edwin A Miles, a scholar of Jacksonian Mississippi, has shown how the merchants of the Old Natchez District were reluctant to support clearing of rivers and the cutting of roads within central Mississippi. Wealthy planters and merchants along the banks of the Mississippi fully understood the risks of subsidizing internal improvements that immediately benefited their eastern neighbors.<sup>4</sup>

Residents of Natchez had already witnessed a drain on the political power of the river counties with the relocation of the state’s capital to Jackson, but improvements throughout the interior threatened western planters’ and merchants’ monopoly on trade and commerce. Specifically, the river communities feared that southwestern trade might be diverted to New Orleans through Lake Borgne and Lake Ponchartrain. Representing two-thirds of the states taxable property, southwestern planters and merchants were reluctant to relinquish their economic supremacy for the benefit of the emerging communities of the interior.<sup>5</sup>

The Monticello *Advocate* reported that the occupants of the river communities contested “every measure calculated to improve this section of the country that might afford us facilities to make use of the natural outlet, and direct the trade, by improving the Pearl River, to N[ew] Orleans.”<sup>6</sup> By 1830 the stubborn resistance of the river planters came as no surprise to central

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 5 Sess. (June, 1822), 122-123.

<sup>4</sup> Edwin A. Miles, *Jacksonian Democracy in Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Monticello *Pearl River Advocate*, May 7, 1830.

Mississippi's politicians who championed state supported internal improvements along the Pearl River. Economic and political supremacy continued to rest at the center of western and eastern Mississippians disputes over the improvement of transportation networks, but Mississippi's parochial disagreements began to reflect broader, and more complex, patterns of discord displayed throughout the South.

Morton Rothstein suggests the sectionalism that persisted throughout the antebellum South was largely due to a "dual economy," which polarized wealthy planters and modest farmers along political and class lines. While cotton planters remained committed to the market economy, many of the South's independent producers, less reliant on trade and commerce, focused instead on subsistence agriculture. The subsistence farmers' resistance to the uncertainties of the market was largely based on retaining personal autonomy, fearing the ebb and flow of market forces might do more harm than good. Living throughout the South, small farmers eschewed the oppressive nature of a modern economy and the vortex of staple crop production, preferring instead to maintain a habitual agrarian lifestyle.<sup>7</sup>

The increased consensus among historians that the emergence of a market revolution engendered widespread economic, political, and social changes throughout the second quarter of nineteenth-century America has brought a number of provocative questions to bear on the antebellum South. Among *the* most provocative is the assertion that during the 1830s, a strain of reform-minded southern planters took it upon themselves to integrate the regions subsistence farmers into the market economy. The historian Harry Watson has asserted that a small, but influential, group of southern planters sought to confront Dixie's dilemma of pursuing a modern economy without cutting ties with the archaic and brutal system of slave labor. For these

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<sup>7</sup> For an articulation of the dual economy in the Antebellum South, see Morton Rothstein, "The Antebellum South as a Dual Economy: A Tentative Hypothesis," *Agricultural History* 41 (October, 1967): 373-83.



forward-thinking planters the promotion of internal improvements represented the most logical strategy for accomplishing such disparate goals.<sup>8</sup>

The means of transportation in the United States underwent significant changes after the War of 1812 and had a profound effect upon the economic and social life of the country. Up until 1815 the United States had been an agrarian merchant-capitalist economy, dependent on foreign trade, especially with Europe. The second war with Britain reemphasized America's pressing need for economic self sufficiency and ushered in a multitude of economic changes. Among the most pressing concerns was the need to link commercial markets, improve communication and national defense, and accelerate the transportation of people and goods. Turnpikes represented the logical step towards a national transportation system, but interstate jealousies barred any hope of a truly national system of internal improvements.<sup>9</sup>

Why did Watson's reformers focus on internal improvements? First, the construction of roads, canals, and railroads promised to relieve the South of its financial hardships by further integrating the regions staple crop industry into national and international markets. Second, internal improvements may have been linked to the defense of the South's most embattled institution—slavery. From the 1820s to the 1850s the same reform-minded planters continually stressed the benefits of building state systems of internal improvements. Among the planter's pressing concerns was the modernization and commercialization of the dual economy.

While slaveholding planters were tied to the market economy, subsistence farmers owned few slaves, produced few staples, and were isolated geographically from the marketplace.

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<sup>8</sup> Harry Watson, "Slavery and Development in a Dual Economy: The South and the Market Revolution," in *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800-1880*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> John L. Larson, *Internal Improvements: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

Watson suggests progressive planters, mostly Whigs, viewed the dual economy as a threat to the institution of slavery and targeted internal improvements as a remedy to their problem. As the argument goes, internal improvements promised to integrate farmers into the market, encourage staple crop production, create better standards of living, increase slave ownership, and finally promote greater commitment among independent farmers to take part in and defend the South's slave society.<sup>10</sup>

What is interesting about the sectional disputes over internal improvements in Mississippi, as opposed to Watson's study of North Carolina, is the subsistence farming communities of the interior did not resist the market economy, nor did they object to the institution of slavery. As already demonstrated, the citizens of central-Mississippi actively pursued internal improvements to facilitate commerce and trade, and while most inhabitants of the interior region were primarily small landholders and subsistence farmers, no evidence suggests that they opposed the staple crop market as modes of suitable transportation became available.

Neither did the planter elite of the old Natchez District express a will to expand the market economy beyond their own boundaries. At least throughout the 1820s and early 1830s the wealthiest Mississippians showed little interest in internal improvements that did not advance

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 59. Watson's thesis is largely based on his own research interests, which deal primarily with North Carolina's state politics during the 1830s and 1840s. But Watson clearly suggests that his findings may be applicable to other southern states. Watson argues that the planter elite were "concerned about the economic health of slavery and the plantation system, but reasoned that a judicious measure of modern technology would be more productive than social or political adventurism. Coming together in the ranks of the emerging Whig party politicians called for greater efforts to build state systems of internal improvements, deepen and broaden the South's commitment to market society, and import the blessings of nineteenth-century progress." Watson goes on to suggest that, "Taken as a whole, the reformers' pronouncements reveal a bitter struggle on the part of proslavery 'progressives' to modernize" the South by brining its yeoman population under the sway of commercial agriculture and the bourgeois values of hard work and self-improvement."

their own local interests. Furthermore, the inhabitants of central Mississippi did not resist the opportunity to own slaves and demonstrated no signs of opposition to slavery as an institution.

Nearly two decades later, the morning after he had set foot inside a poor central Mississippians' modest home, Frederick Law Olmsted recounted the following conversation.

*“Are there many niggers in New York?”*  
*“Very Few.”*  
*“How do you get your work done?”*  
*“There are many Irish and German people constantly coming*  
*...who are glad to get work to do.”*  
*“Oh, and you have them for slaves?”<sup>11</sup>*

The residents of the interior may have owned less of Mississippi's taxable land and wealth, yet this reality had not shaken their faith in the South's peculiar institution by 1850.

Most Mississippians pursued stock raising and cotton cultivation; the latter being synonymous with prosperity in the South. For the farmers of central-Mississippi, entering the nascent market economy, not only meant a commitment to staple crops like cotton, but a commitment to slave labor. One scholar of Mississippi argues, “Through cotton cultivation...Mississippians consciously strove to touch the web of the market economy...Producing for the market...allowed them to avoid poverty and to be virtuous citizens.”<sup>12</sup>

This particular view of Mississippi's cuts across the grain of what many historians have written on subsistence farming communities in the antebellum South. The traditional account stresses resistance, rather than acceptance, of the pervasive market economy among southern farmers. According to this interpretation, uncertainty and the complexities of banking and

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<sup>11</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. (The Modern Library, 1984), 378.

<sup>12</sup> Bradley G. Bond, *Political Culture in the Nineteenth-Century South: Mississippi, 1830-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 79.

finance influenced small farmers to resist the urge for material decency and guard their agrarian lifestyle. The ethos shared between southern farmers was based on a community of interests which emphasized family, tradition, cooperation, and self-sufficiency.<sup>13</sup>

It is unlikely that residents of Jackson opposed the introduction of a market based economy in central Mississippi, especially when one considers the initial attempt to improve the Pearl River. To be sure, the citizens of Jackson can hardly be classified as small farmers, but the outlying communities and counties surrounding Jackson were inhabited by subsistence farmers, much more so than the developed river counties. Generally speaking, small farmers and small business owners in central Mississippi supported internal improvements in the state. More importantly, no evidence suggests the elites of Natchez supported the introduction of canals, navigable river routes, and passable roads to central Mississippi during the middle of the 1820s. Rather than promote the expansion of a market economy throughout Mississippi's developing communities, the five river counties chose to protect their own economic interests at the expense of their neighbors to the east.

The national controversy over internal improvement was itself a question of geography. From the time of Thomas Jefferson up until Andrew Jackson, presidents and congressman were forced to consider the constitutionality of government funded internal improvement projects. Federal subsidization of internal improvements forced legislators to ask two fundamental questions; does Congress possess the authority to appropriate funds to state and local projects, and how are funds to be divided up?

The phenomenal success of the Erie Canal in New York state demonstrated the potential of a massive transportation project, but the prohibitive cost of such undertakings had a mitigating

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<sup>13</sup> Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism, Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

effect on the enthusiasm of state and federal legislators. The financing of internal improvement projects and the appropriateness of the federal government's subsidization of roads and canals within a single state represented the essence of the internal improvement question.<sup>14</sup> The issue of internal improvements became ensnared in national politics and by the close of the War of 1812 James Madison declared such federally funded projects unconstitutional. Madison, like his predecessor Thomas Jefferson, favored a constitutional amendment that might clarify the powers of the national government.

The first significant controversy in the internal improvement story emerged during Madison's presidency, when John C. Calhoun proposed his Bonus Bill in 1817. After several years of recovery following the second war with England, the United States economy began to reestablish stability, and by 1816 a flurry on land sales, trade, and war taxes resulted in national revenues of nearly \$40 million, and a surplus of \$9 million. Calhoun seized on the propitious opportunity facing the country and proposed a \$1.5 million bonus from the National Bank be set aside for a network of canals and roads throughout the Appalachians, projects to improve the Ohio and Mississippi river systems, and an expansive road running south through the Atlantic interior to New Orleans. Calhoun's proposal echoed the developmentalism of Alexander Hamilton and Albert Gallatin, and promised to connect the nether regions of the republic to the already developed eastern seaboard.<sup>15</sup>

Madison shared Jefferson's strict constructionist views when considering the constitutionality of such national projects. Like Madison's re-chartering of the Bank, the Bonus Bill highlighted fundamental questions concerning the implied powers of the national

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<sup>14</sup> George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1951).

<sup>15</sup> , Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 78.

government. And like his fellow Virginian, Madison preferred a constitutional amendment which explicitly laid out Congress's authority to appropriate federal funds for state and local projects. As one might predict, Madison and Jefferson, approached the internal improvement question from a philosophical-constitutional perspective, while Calhoun at this time "was no advocate of refined arguments on the Constitution." But arguments over broad and strict construction of the Constitution dominated the early debates over internal improvements, overwhelming Calhoun's "plain, good sense."<sup>16</sup>

The day before he left office in March 1817, Madison informed Calhoun he was vetoing the Bonus Bill. He had already brought his Republican orthodoxy under scrutiny by re-chartering Hamilton's Bank; he feared that approving Calhoun's proposal might permanently damage his reputation as the Constitution's "architect" and "expositor."<sup>17</sup>

Madison's veto of the Bonus Bill established a precedent that directly influenced fellow Virginian James Monroe's support of a constitutional amendment which clearly outlined the role of national government--especially its role concerning internal improvements. By the middle of the 1820s federal support of internal improvements became a central tenet of the National Republican platform. A recent scholar of internal improvements from the early national period to the Civil War maintains the Bonus Bill was "the central piece of legislation in the national campaign for system of internal improvements."<sup>18</sup> Indeed the debates over internal improvement continued to escalate until 1830 when Andrew Jackson announced his thunderous veto of the Maysville Road, placing the burden of internal improvements on the states and private ventures.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

<sup>18</sup> Larson, 139.

Passed by the House of Representatives April, 1830, the Maysville Road was expected to be the next westward extension of the National Road beginning in Cumberland, Maryland. Opponents of the bill noted the latest extension ran only within the state of Kentucky, and asked, why the federal funds should be applied to a local project. Naturally, questions concerning the constitutionality of the road multiplied.

Following its passage in the House, the bill successfully navigated the Senate, and westerners anxiously awaited President Jackson's final approval. Jackson handed down his veto despite his Tennessee roots and overwhelming success among western states in the election of 1828. The veto message sent back to the House of Representatives opened with Jackson's declaration that he was, "Sincerely friendly to the improvement of our country by means of roads and canals, I regret that any difference of opinion in the mode of contributing to it should exist between us."<sup>19</sup> Jackson went on stating, "It is, however, sufficiently definite and imperative to my mind to forbid my approbation of any bill having the character of the one under consideration. I have given to its provisions all the reflection demanded by a just regard for the interests of those of our fellow-citizens who have desired its passage, and by the respect which is due to a coordinate branch of the Government, but I am not able to view it in any other light than as a measure of purely local character."<sup>20</sup>

According to Jackson, "The question regards the character of the work, not that of those by whom it is to be accomplished" but "the inquiry will still remain, Is it national and conducive

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<sup>19</sup> James D. Richardson (comp.), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897* (10 vols.; Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896-99).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

to the benefit of the whole, or local and operating only to the advantage of a portion of the Union?”<sup>21</sup>

Jackson’s veto of the Maysville Road was consistent with his promise to reform the national government and protect the rights of common working Americans. Nationalist policies endorsed by former president John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay, known as the American System promoted protective tariffs, internal improvements, and centralization of federal power in Washington, scorned Democrats as potentially harmful to decent, hard working citizens. For Jackson and the Democrats, the increase in federally funded projects was poisonous. Jackson argued that while politicians and financiers stood to benefit from the expansion of the federal powers, the liberty of common farmers and laborers would only suffer. Urging Congress on, Jackson declared, “The preservation and success of the republican principle rests with us.”<sup>22</sup>

But Jackson’s veto of the Maysville Road reached beyond the Democrats’ predictable rhetoric. His obsession with balancing the nation’s budget precluded his signing off on the House of Representatives plan to appropriate funds from the national treasury. Jackson ardently upheld the view that a national surplus would make the United States independent of foreign nations, especially those entangling alliances in Europe. Finally, internal improvement projects might require increases in taxes, and Jackson did not want to see his working class constituency adversely affected by additional taxes, especially with his re-election looming in the distance.

Like Madison’s veto of the Bonus Bill, Jackson’s decision to veto the Maysville Road placed the burden of funding internal improvements squarely on the shoulders of the state legislatures and private enterprises. But Jackson and the Democrats molded the Maysville veto into a divisive partisan issue, which later spilled over into the Jackson’s refusal to re-charter

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



Nicholas Biddle's Bank of the United States. By deploying the demagoguery synonymous with American politics during the 1830s and 1840s, the Democrats cast themselves as, yet again, the defenders of the common people, while also achieving their economic and foreign policy objectives all in the spirit of democracy. The Democrats may have harbored sincere misgivings about the constitutionality of internal improvements or the impact they might have on the republic and its virtuous farmers and laborers, but political and economic interests played a substantial role.<sup>23</sup>

What is perhaps most important about the Maysville veto, especially when considering how it affected individual states, is the politicization of the internal improvements debate. Jackson's veto ostensibly transformed government subsidization of canal and road building into a partisan issue, and along with his veto of the Bank of the United States, ushered in one of the most divisive eras in American politics. Democrat's continual attacks on national works of internal improvements, as well as, the Bank directly influenced the creation of the American Whig Party, a party singularly motivated to dethroning King Andrew and his Democrats.

Surprisingly, partisan politics did not greatly influence the debates over internal improvements in Mississippi. It is not that Democrats and Whigs were not organized in Mississippi, they were, but geography rather than political allegiances continued to determine where politicians and editors stood on the improvement of the Pearl River region. Mississippi Whigs enjoyed overwhelming support among the five river counties, but they disregarded the

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<sup>23</sup> For the most distinguished monographs and biographies on Andrew Jackson's presidency, see Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1945); Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and Course of American Freedom* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1981); and Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democracy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

national party's line when it came to internal improvements within their state, choosing to protect local interests.

By 1830 members of the Mississippi General Assembly still struggled to “remove sectional jealousies,” and promote “reciprocity...upon which depends the amalgamation and unity of the different sections of the State.”<sup>24</sup> Dismayed by the lack of cohesion to develop a comprehensive and statewide plan for internal improvements, editors from the interior began to vent their frustrations in the press. One editor cried “the disparity between the two regions of the state, as to the money facilities enjoyed, is rendered still more glaring and obvious by their relative state of improvement.”<sup>25</sup> After more than eight years, the interests of the river communities refused to surrender their economic monopoly. But times were rapidly changing as, “The East now dates political birth...having an equal number in the U.S. Senate, and the only representative in Congress: It awakens our surprise to see how long, it has bowed to the Aristocracy of the West, and been tolled by the knell of imaginary authority.”<sup>26</sup>

After almost a decade of continued resistance from river counties, advocates of internal improvements in Mississippi turned to the federal government. Because of the state's admission to the Union, Mississippi received three percent of the proceeds of public land sales within its borders specifically for the purpose of internal improvements. But by 1828 only a fraction of the proceeds had been received, and opponents of internal improvements devised an alternative plan for the revenues of public land sales. Instead of funding the construction of roads and canals throughout the developing regions, opponents of internal improvements proposed investing land

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<sup>24</sup> *Mississippi House Journal*, 13 Sess. (January, 1830), 144.

<sup>25</sup> *Woodville Woodville Republican*, October 18, 1831.

<sup>26</sup> *Woodville Mississippi Democrat*, February 5, 1831.

revenues in the Planter's Bank of Mississippi in 1831.<sup>27</sup> Naturally, the most enthusiastic supporters of the Bank resided in the five river counties, whose financiers and wealthy planters stood to gain the most from its operation. But while banking emerged as the most discussed topic in Mississippi state politics, the fight to improve the Pearl River Valley continued.

The events surrounding a meeting of political leaders from Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama threatened to unseat the Natchez District as *the* commercial center of the state. In 1834 representatives from the surrounding states met in New Orleans to discuss the prospects of a railroad that would connect the Gulf South to Nashville, Tennessee. The original plan intended the railroad to run across Mississippi, west of the Pearl River, into the northwest corner of Alabama and into Tennessee. The railroad promised to integrate the adjoining states and harness the commercial and agricultural potential of the Gulf region. By 1836 much of the railroad had been approved by the state legislatures and construction proceeded—except in Mississippi.<sup>28</sup>

Not surprisingly the sectional divisions within Mississippi precluded the passage of the railroad charter in the state legislature. Predictably the river counties, led by Natchez, believed the regional railroad would draw trade away from the western river counties, inevitably draining the economic life blood of the region eastward.

In 1833 an editor at the *Natchez Courier* pondered, “What will Natchez be worth after the completion of the roads, when more than half its present business will have been diverted to other towns on the Mississippi?” Speculating on the inauspicious future of Mississippi's commercial center, the editor feared “Natchez will have no country around it to preserve it from becoming what all towns necessarily become when capitalists are not interested sufficiently in its

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<sup>27</sup> Miles, *Jacksonian Democracy in Mississippi*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> R.S. Cottrill, “The Beginnings of Railroads in the Southwest,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 8 (March, 1922): 321-324.

prosperity as to devote a small portion of money to works of internal improvements...”<sup>29</sup> In 1836 the river counties were successful in scuttling the charter, but by 1837 western Mississippi, most notably Natchez, had succumbed to outside pressure, and finally voted in support of the railroad.<sup>30</sup>

Why after nearly two decades of sectional animosity did the Old Natchez District finally concede to eastern pressure for internal improvements? One assumption suggests that the river communities succumbed to the growing population and political influence of Jackson, finally realizing the futility of their resistance. The elite planters and merchants of Natchez, who controlled the commerce and trade in the state for decades, could either continue their intransigence and risk losing everything, or compromise and settle for a piece of Mississippi’s economic pie.

Evidence suggests that all Mississippians, including those living in the five river counties, enjoyed growing prosperity, and looked forward to “Flush Times.” In 1835 John A Quitman wrote, “Land, negroes, and every description of property had [sic] become very valuable here.”<sup>31</sup> Growing land sales and liberal credit accommodations by the Planter’s Bank gave further cause to believe in Mississippi’s promise. It is possible that the overall economic health of Mississippi gave the planters and financiers of Natchez reason to believe their interest were safe, regardless of developing markets to the east. And this may be true, but there are other perspectives and events worth consideration.

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<sup>29</sup> Natchez *Natchez Courier*, December 20, 1833.

<sup>30</sup> Cottrill, “The Beginnings of Railroads in the Southwest”, 321-324.

<sup>31</sup> Miles, *Jacksonian Democracy in Mississippi*, 117.

## SLAVERY

Economic matters defined Andrew Jackson's two terms as president. Questions concerning the national bank and internal improvements dominated debates in Congress, cementing fierce loyalties within the Democratic, National Republican, and Whig parties, and ushering in the nation's first modern era of politics. Vociferous battles raged over the course and development of nation's transportation networks, the suitability of a monopolistic national bank in a presumed age of egalitarianism, and later—once Jackson's veto sent Biddle's Bank asunder—which banks might receive the withdrawn federal deposits, not to mention, how to appropriate the country's first national surplus.<sup>1</sup>

Politically, questions regarding economics revealed the striking disparities and confounding similarities between “Jackson Men” and those aligned with Henry Clay. Furthermore, the advancement of universal male suffrage determined the political strategy of all parties, resulting in national and state campaigning, fomenting a deeply polarized political party system.<sup>2</sup> With so much attention paid to national economic policies and the unrestrained, often entertaining, political exchanges of the time, it comes as no surprise that the greatest moral dilemma of antebellum society lay below the immediate vision of statesman and the polity.

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<sup>1</sup> For internal improvements and banking during the Jacksonians era see, John L. Larson, *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular government in the Early United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), Carter Goodrich, *Government Promotion of Canals and Railroads, 1800-1890* (New York, 1960), Bray Hammond, *Banks and Politics in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (Princeton, 1957), and Robert Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Bank War* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1967)

<sup>2</sup> The Jacksonian era has attracted a legion of scholars, primarily because most agree that the period represents the first glimpse of a modern American society. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century industrialization, the transportation revolution, the emergence of the second-party system, and the Second Great Awakening, embodied the widespread changes affecting the daily lives of Americans. Most scholars concur that Jacksonian America was a time of change and conflict, but here the consensus ends. Arthur Schlesinger's *The Age of Jackson* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1945) remains the enduring interpretation of the Jacksonian era and continues to inspire discussion after a half century since its publication. Other important works, all responding to Schlesinger in one way or another include, Richard Hofstadter's, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1948), Marvin Meyers *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, 1957), Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill, 1966), Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, 1961)

To say the country's concerns over the institution of slavery completely receded into the background of western expansion and finance during the presidencies of John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson is a miscalculation. In fact, slavery always aroused contentious debate, but it may be accurate to claim the late 1820s represents a lull in the public discussion of slavery. The Missouri Compromise of 1820, in affect, temporarily quelled the troublesome problem of western expansion and the addition of slave and non-slave states. As long as new territories were not added to the Union, the question of slavery remained relatively contained within the geographic boundaries of Clay's compromise.<sup>3</sup>

But even with compromise, politicians, journalists, clergyman, philanthropists, and planters always demonstrated uneasiness with the present state and future of slavery. However, debates in the 1820s pale in comparison to the debates that ensued in the following decades. And while the lucid writings of Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, and John C. Calhoun reveal their prescience, the country as whole failed to anticipate the scale and fury of the slavery dilemma.

The many political and social changes caused by the market revolution help to explain why economic concerns, on the surface, overshadowed the issue of slavery during the Jacksonian period. But increased attention and scrutiny to the effects of economic and social change in the antebellum South reveal a complex interconnection between the market revolution and slavery.

Determining how slavery influenced the South's reaction to the market revolution in America is *the* focal point of Harry Watson's essay "*Slavery and Development in a Dual Economy: The South and the Market Revolution.*" Watson notes the intensifying defensive posture of southern planters and politicians by the 1830s, and suggests this defensiveness further

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991).

motivated reform minded planters to do away with the South's dual economy by supporting the construction of internal improvements in remote corners of the region. As a result, independent farmers might begin to produce staple crops and participate in the market. Ultimately, reformers believed, staple crop production and market involvement might result in greater slave ownership among independent farmers, and consequently, a much broader commitment to the institution throughout the South.<sup>4</sup>

As discussed earlier the wealthiest Mississippians, those who owned the majority of slaves, resisted all attempts to finance the construction of internal improvements in central Mississippi. However, by 1836 the five river counties conceded to the mounting protests of their eastern neighbors and finally granted their support to the Nashville Railroad running directly through the middle of the state. Determining whether or not "defensiveness" over slavery influenced western planters' long overdue acquiescence is the focus of *this* chapter.

Unfamiliar surroundings, frontier living conditions, and the back braking labor synonymous with cotton planting all contributed to the daily hardships of Mississippi slaves during the 1830s. Two decades later Frederick Law Olmsted noted the plight of slaves working in the old Southwest when he wrote, "They are constantly and steadily driven up to their work, and the stupid, plodding, machine-like manner in which they labor, is painful to witness."<sup>5</sup>

While Mississippi's frontier surroundings shaped the difficult circumstances in which slaves labored, it also tempted slaves to escape the plantation and vanish into unexplored forests and swamps. If a slave managed to escape into the wilderness it was unlikely a planter ever saw

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<sup>4</sup> Harry Watson, "Slavery and Development in a Dual Economy: The South and the Market Revolution," in *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800-1880*, Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway, ed. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. (The Modern Library, 1984), 285-286.

that slave again. This reality only intensified planter's demand for vigilant overseers and disciplined slaves. Still, even the *most* determined overseer could not prevent the occasional runaway.

In 1834 an overseer by the name of Staunton discovered a starving fugitive slave who evaded his return to the plantation for several weeks. Staunton recounts bringing the slave back to his home and providing him with food and provisions. After the fugitive recovered his strength, Staunton arranged to make a trip to Natchez, where he might return the slave to his master, no doubt for a handsome reward. While preparing for the trip the slave managed to create a diversion by asking Staunton's wife for additional food. Seizing on the opportunity the slave then "made off" with Staunton's pistols. Upon discovering the slave's plot, Mrs. Staunton called to her husband in a panic. Unfortunately, for Staunton, it was too late; the slave fired a single shot into his chest leaving him dead. The fugitive fled the violent scene, never to be heard from again.<sup>6</sup>

Fortunately for the local slave population the event received no public attention. As a result no threat of retribution ever materialized. How could such an event go unnoticed? Mississippi scholar James Libby suggests: "This event can be explained in part as an indication of the generally violent social atmosphere in Mississippi. Yet the absence of hysteria or outrage over this crime indicates the confidence among white Mississippians that their control over society as firm and not in question."<sup>7</sup>

When plantation discipline failed, Mississippi's courts regularly intervened in cases involving fugitive slaves. White Mississippians demonstrated tremendous confidence in their legal system when it came to upholding the peace and restraining conflict. Trust in the legal

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<sup>6</sup> David J. Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi: 1720-1835* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004), 79.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 79.



system became paramount as Mississippians demanded the return of fugitive slaves without incident and swift punishment for offences, violent or otherwise, against white citizens. For the good of white society all threats of organized or spontaneous slave insurrections required the most severe response.<sup>8</sup>

The confidence Mississippians exhibited in their systems of control is notable, considering well publicized threats of slave insurrections in Virginia, South Carolina, even in Mississippi. Nat Turner, who successfully organized the slaughter of several dozen white citizens in Virginia in 1831, is perhaps the best known account. Despite the horrifying details of Turner's revolt Mississippians remained composed and blamed the violent incident on a "flaw in Virginia's legal or racial codes, and perhaps the existence of a large free black population."<sup>9</sup>

An important intellectual step in how southerners, especially southern statesman, thought about slavery further fortified Mississippians' faith. Many southern statesmen confessed throughout the 1820s that slavery represented a great evil to the nation. But a myriad of national and local events transformed how southerners viewed slavery and by the end of the decade public statements reflected such changes. Writing to his family in Maine, Mississippi senator Sargent S. Prentiss expressed precisely how southerners felt when he wrote "slavery was a great evil," but "a necessary evil."<sup>10</sup>

Historian William Freehling writes that, "A society reveals its deepest anxieties when it responds hysterically to a harmless attack."<sup>11</sup> By the 1830s the South began to show signs of

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 99.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 99.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>11</sup> William W. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina 1816-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 49. I have relied heavily on Professor Freehling's seminal study of South Carolina during Nullification, specifically because his book demonstrates how the current and future status of slavery became entangled in disparate political battles over national tariffs. It is my estimation that Freehling's position on slavery and Nullification shares some similarities to Watson's theory that reform minded planters and

anxiety over the present and future state of slavery. Nullification, highly publicized slave uprisings, and nascent abolitionist movements all contributed to the South's increasingly defensive posture. Still, Mississippians remained confident in their systems of control even as abolitionists cried, "Maintain that no compensation should be given...SLAVERY IS A CRIME..."<sup>12</sup>

Despite slavery's growing number of outspoken detractors, Freehling says, "It must be emphasized again that most Americans—including most southerners—paid little heed to these nagging controversies."<sup>13</sup> Whether planters living in Adams or Wilkinson County considered Staunton's murder a "nagging controversy" is difficult to judge, but no evidence indicates that retaliation against a single slave ever transpired. Even so, the confidence and restraint of the great river planters was soon tested again.

In the spring of 1835 disturbing reports of a rape and murder committed by fugitive slaves in southwestern Alabama sparked a fury of concern reaching all the way to local newspapers in Mississippi. While Mississippians were not directly affected by the horror, the implications of slave attacks on whites—especially white children—surely concerned neighboring residents. The gruesome details of the case appeared in Wilkinson County's *Woodville Republican* on June 6, 1835 nearly a month after the crimes were committed in Baldwin County, Alabama. In a statement issued from the Baldwin County Circuit Court, the

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politicians advocated the development of expansive transportation networks as a means of promoting the growth of the cotton market and prolonging—if not—guaranteeing the future of slavery in the South.. What Freehling and Watson seem to agree on is that few economic and political decisions in the South were made without considering the effect those decisions might have on the overall health and stability of slavery. William Cooper's *The South and the Politics of Slavery: 1828-1856* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) illustrates this point from a political perspective. Professor Cooper disagrees "fundamentally with historians who make the politics of the Jacksonian South a politics defined by economics and finance." Freehling's and Watson's interpretation of events in the Carolinas support this position. Still, it is unclear whether or not concerns over slavery dictated agreement of the Natchez District to support the construction of a railroad system in central Mississippi.

<sup>12</sup> Boston *The Liberator*, December 14, 1833.

<sup>13</sup> Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War*, 51.

undersigned members of the grand jury claimed the offence represented, “one of the most horrible crimes ever perpetrated.”<sup>14</sup>

It began with the disappearance of an orphaned sister and her brother, ages twelve and nine. Suspicions arose when the children failed to return home after departing from their school late one afternoon. Thereafter a search party spent several days searching for clues to the mysterious disappearance of the two siblings, and for four weeks the whereabouts of the missing children remained an enigma to local authorities. Fortunately, a seemingly unrelated separate case soon revealed clues to the missing children and the dark events which surrounded their misfortune on that faithful afternoon.<sup>15</sup>

Weeks after initial reports of the children’s disappearance two unsuspecting young women on horseback encountered two black men, presumably runaway slaves, who accosted the women with obvious malice on their minds. As the slaves “sprang” from a nearby thicket, one of the women lost her mount temporarily, only to reclaim it before her pursuers were able to react; the second managed to avoid harm altogether. The circumstances of this incident mirrored those of the missing children, at least in the opinion of local authorities. Certainly the details of both cases could hardly be ignored; two unsuspecting and vulnerable travelers seized upon without any apparent cause or motive. How could anyone dispute the, “Suspicions...fixed on those two slaves?”<sup>16</sup>

In the course of formal examinations both slaves confessed, separately, to the earlier murder of the two children. In an extract from the circuit court of Baldwin County the gruesome details of the crime were laid bare for all to read, including readers of the *Woodville Republican*.

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<sup>14</sup> Woodville *The Woodville Republican*, June 6 1835.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

The attackers seized the twelve year old girls first, attempting to rape her, but because of the girls “tender years” the slaves were unable to “accomplish the infernal deed, without the aid of a knife.” After taking turns raping the screaming child the slaves then attempted to decapitate her after “piteous attempts to spare her life.” While one held her head the other “cut her throat and neck to the bone” and then continued to “violate” the desecrated body. The slaves then disposed of the tortured and mutilated remains, tying it down with bricks and sinking it in a nearby pond. The nine year old boy received a more immediate yet brutal death, as the slaves crushed his skull with pieces of brick and then disposed of his body in the same bloody, watery grave which held his sister. The slaves then returned to their hideaway and remained unsuspected until their encounter with the two young women on horseback four weeks later.<sup>17</sup>

Following a guilty verdict the court “pronounced a sentence known to the law,” that is before “a smothered flame burst forth” and the citizens of Baldwin imposed their own brand of justice. The court admitted the lack of severity in its final verdict, but “no adequate punishment” existed and, “Human foresight could not conceive such a crime could be committed...it was a case above and beyond all law...God and man.” Following their day in court the slaves were taken hold of by an outraged mob and burned alive within sight of the quiet pond which served as a final resting place to the young victims.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the terrifying details captured in the *Woodville Republican* no public demonstration ensued in Mississippi. Much like the Staunton affair, the violent murders in near by Baldwin County failed to provoke public outrage among the state’s slaveholders. However, reports of a widespread slave insurrection within the borders of the state represented *the* test to Mississippians confidence in their systems of control.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

In 1835 citizens of Madison County, located north of Jackson, reported a conspiracy to incite a slave insurrection in the Yazoo and Pearl River region. By 1834 Madison County's black slaves dominated its population, and visitors commented that "immense bodies of rich land are all being converted into cotton fields, and negro quarters—leaving so sparse a white population." Most of the owners of the great plantations lived in other counties, even other states, leaving the day to day operations to overseers. Historian Edwin Miles notes that, "Reports of a slave insurrection naturally would hold great terror for the white population of this community..."<sup>19</sup>

First reports indicated a conspiracy on a regional level, stretching throughout the South. One account estimated that one thousand men, both slave and non-slave, planned to incite a widespread insurrection on Christmas Day 1835. Most southern states were implicated including Mississippi. Weeks after the publication of the first report, a second pamphlet circulated throughout towns on the Yazoo River and several white citizens claimed to have overheard slaves discussing preparations for an uprising sometime in late June of 1835. By June 30 a number of Livingston's white citizens interrogated several black slaves implicated in the plot. Each slave understood the severity of the situation and confessed to a revolt planned on Independence Day. Faced with "torture by the lash" the slaves willingly cooperated with Livingston's aroused citizenry and provided names of both black and white suspects. Despite their cooperation, the slaves were seized by an angry mob and hanged. Shortly after local white leaders chose a committee of "thirteen of the most respectable citizens of the county"—primarily wealthy planters—and granted them "with ample authority, to devise means of

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<sup>19</sup> This brief sketch of the 1835 conspiracy is taken from Edwin A. Miles, "The Mississippi Slave Insurrection Scare of 1835," *The Journal of Negro History*, 42 (January 1957): 48-60.

defence, to try, acquit, condemn, and punish white or black, who should be charged before them.”<sup>20</sup>

On August 1, 1835 the *National Intelligencer* reported, “A large meeting of the citizens of Madison County was held, to deliberate upon the momentous crisis which had arisen at which it was unanimously resolved that a committee of investigation should be immediately organized, in the name and upon the responsibility of the whole body of citizens, to use all the necessary means for ferreting out this nefarious plot, and bringing the offenders to speedy justice. This committee, thus organized, composed of thirteen of the most respectable citizens of the county, men of elevated standing in the community for moral worth, integrity, and discretion, preceded, as soon as possible, to the task at hand.”<sup>21</sup>

Word of a suspected slave revolt spread throughout the neighboring counties of the interior. In Hinds County, located just south of Madison, citizens reported, “A dreadful alarm exists, particularly amongst females”<sup>22</sup> What made the events of 1835 so explosive was the barrage of anti-slavery literature circulated by northern abolitionists during the 1830s. Mississippi slave-owners were not only sensitive to these attacks, but feared that a relationship existed between anti-slavery propaganda and the insurrection plot in Madison County. Throughout the South, state legislators and governors denounced abolitionists “who seem anxious to involve us in all the horrors of servile war.”<sup>23</sup>

On July 14, 1835, ten days after the alleged slave plot, a public meeting in Wilkinson County discussed the necessary actions to, “guard against any improper movements or disorders

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 48-49.

<sup>21</sup> Washington D.C., *National Intelligencer*, August 1, 1835, cited in Davidson Burns Mckibben’s “Negro Slavery Insurrections in Mississippi, 1800-1865,” *The Journal of Negro History*, 34 (January, 1949), 77.

<sup>22</sup> Mckibben, “Negro Slavery Insurrection in Mississippi, 1800-1865”, 53.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 57-58.

among the slaves.” In little over a week word of the alleged plot spread from counties north of Jackson to the extreme southwestern counties along the Mississippi River, prompting white civic leaders of one river county to advise all citizens “to be on alert, and adopt such measures, by appointing suitable patrols or committees of vigilance in their respective neighborhoods, as may be deemed best calculated to insure safety and good order among the slaves.”<sup>24</sup>

While some prepared for the worst, others thought the plot greatly exaggerated. Future Southern Rights vice-presidential nominee John A. Quitman reflected “the excitement that existed in the upper part of this state last summer, like most other excitements about negro insurrections, was more that of indignation than fear.”<sup>25</sup> One month after the Madison County scare the *Jackson Mississippian* reported, “Much more, in one humble opinion, has been said in the newspapers about a contemplated insurrection amongst the negroes in Mississippi, than necessary.”<sup>26</sup>

It should be recalled that by 1834 preliminary plans to construct a railroad system to connect the Gulf region with Nashville, Tennessee were already underway. Approval for the project proceeded rapidly, except in Mississippi, where river county leaders strongly opposed bringing internal improvements to the interior of the state. But by the summer of 1835, the river counties began to speak out on the many virtues of internal improvements, and the need to modernize the state’s rail system.

On July 18, 1835 Preston W. Farrar, a candidate for the legislature made a public announcement to the “CITIZENS OF WILKINSON COUNTY” in the *Woodville Republican* declaring, “Opposed at all times myself to internal improvements by the general government as a

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<sup>24</sup> Woodville *The Woodville Republican* July 18, 1835.

<sup>25</sup> Mckibben, “Negro Slavery Insurrections in Mississippi, 1800-1865”, 78.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

national right, I believe it to be the policy of every state to provide well for itself upon this subject.” Farrar went on to say, “While upon this subject I will remark that the contemplated rail road passing from New Orleans to Nashville, Ten, through the center of this state meets my hearty concurrence, believing it will be of vast public utility, and enhance the value of real estate.”<sup>27</sup>

Earlier in June of the same summer similar opinions appeared in the press stressing the importance and virtues of the Nashville railroad. One citizen pondered, “Can nothing be done to rouse our citizens to action in regard to an improvement which offers such a valuable retreat to us during the summer, and which would double the number of our visitors during winter?”<sup>28</sup> While a representative for public office stated, “The contemplated Rail Road from New Orleans to Nashville, Tennessee, would receive my undivided support.”<sup>29</sup>

Did a relationship exist between the Madison County plot and the river counties’ acquiescence to finally finance internal improvements in the interior, after a decade of staunch resistance? The timing is certainly suggestive, yet one necessary ingredient is lacking. Going back to Watson, *some* reform minded planters in North Carolina considered internal improvements as the key to modernizing the southern economy, integrating subsistence farmers into the staple crop market, eradicating the dual economy, and promoting the future of slavery.<sup>30</sup>

In comparing events in North Carolina to events in Mississippi one must consider motivating factors. Watson notes the “defensiveness” certain North Carolina reformers evinced as they stressed the pressing need to modernize and promote slavery in all corners of the South. The same factors existed in Mississippi, still, the river county planters discouraged internal

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<sup>27</sup> Woodville *The Woodville Republican* July 18, 1835.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Woodville *The Woodville Republican* June 20, 1835



improvements, at least until 1835, while modest farmers living to the east longed for the many advantages navigable rivers and railroads might bring. The *motivation* of the river counties is in question.

In 1836, a year after the Madison insurrection scare, the editor of the *Woodville Republican* reported on the progress of the proposed charter for the Nashville railroad stating, “The members from the river counties are almost unanimous in pressing its passage,” and “the eastern members...are enlisted also from the obvious advantage it would prove to their section of the country.” The *Woodville* editor went on to say, “The criminal breaches of the law in the river counties has almost subverted the order and government of society,” therefore “Every measure ...to restore order, shall have my support.”<sup>31</sup>

Madison County may have felt the restless spirit of Nat Turner rising, and it is probable river county planters feared the slave plot in Madison might instigate plots among their own. Whether or not their concerns motivated others to support the Nashville railroad is uncertain, probably unlikely. Even after Madison County, Mississippian’s never demonstrated collective “hysteria” or “outrage,” despite what *some* editors wrote.<sup>32</sup> One or two pronouncements cannot explain the actions of a whole community.

An explanation as to why the river counties finally granted their support to internal improvements in central Mississippi, after a decade of intransigence, is not germane to this study. However, Bradley Bond, a scholar of nineteenth century Mississippi, suggests, “The southern social ethic, after all, required that free men submit to neither political nor economic slavery, and railroads represented access to markets and thus to liberty.” Bond goes on to write, “Southerners understood the connection between railroad construction and regional economic

<sup>31</sup> *Woodville Republican*, February 13, 1836.

<sup>32</sup> David J. Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi*, 79.

independence. They also believed that railroads, by extending the market economy into places previously isolated from it, instilled in white residents a deeper affections for the social ethic and the white cultural homogeneity it bred.”<sup>33</sup> But the unequivocal “defensiveness” over slavery, demonstrated in Watson’s study of North Carolina, never surfaced during a decade long struggle over internal improvements in Mississippi.

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<sup>33</sup> Bradley Bond, *Political Culture in The Nineteenth-Century South: Mississippi 183-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 111.

## CONCLUSION

While the ideas expressed in Watson's essay may not apply to Jacksonian Mississippi, there are other aspects of his study that *do*. Watson writes addresses most of the major historiographic themes scholars continue to debate. As mentioned in the introduction to the first chapter, the political and economic struggle between the river counties and interior regions of Mississippi represents a microcosm of southern historiography, touching on capitalism, sectionalism, and slave agency in the antebellum South. This study offers no final judgment, yet *some* conclusions regarding Mississippi during the 1830s are implied.

In contrast to Watson's study, the wealthiest Mississippians living throughout the five river counties opposed the funding of internal improvements at almost every turn, while those living in less developed regions actively pursued the clearing of rivers and railroad construction. Obviously, river county planters discouraged internal improvements, at least until 1835. Why those planters and political representatives suddenly decided to endorse the Nashville Railroad is not certain, but "defensiveness" over slavery in Mississippi, specifically those counties to the east of Natchez, did not impact any final decision.

Initially, it seemed the conspicuous timing of the Madison slave conspiracy and the river counties approval of the Nashville Railroad presented an opportunity to demonstrate the applicability of Watson's ideas in Mississippi. Furthermore, if one event had anything to do with the next, then a plausible argument in support of the existence and efficacy of slave's agency—and its impact on political and economic decisions—might work. Clearly, neither applies in this case. However, this does not diminish the virtues of Watson's work.

The suggestiveness of Watson's essay is also its burden. Grand theories afford professional scholars and students alike, numerous topics of debate. Like the market revolution, Watson's essay covers so much historiographic ground that it is left in an intellectually vulnerable position. Even still, historians relish grand theories—it gives them something to talk about.

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