

What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848

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The World That Cotton Made

The end of the War of 1812 precipitated one of the great migrations of American history. White settlers eagerly took advantage of Andrew Jackson's expropriation of 14 million acres from the Creeks.² Shortly after signing the Treaty of Fort Jackson, the general sent his topographical engineer to report on the condition of the Alabama River valley. Along his route, Major Howell Tatum could observe farms with all their improvements that had been abandoned by the dispossessed natives (many of whom, ironically, had been Jackson's allies in the war). The officer concluded in his report that the land was "capable of producing, in great abundance, every article necessary to the sustenance of man or beast." Jackson encouraged white [settlers] to move onto the lands immediately, without waiting for survey or legal authorization....

Jackson's victory at New Orleans and his subsequent invasion of Florida further encouraged migration to the Southwest³ by confirming the strategic security of American control. So did the additional cessions he extorted from the other tribes, beginning with the treaties of September 1816 with the Cherokee and Chickasaw, opening up vast areas adjacent to the Creek Cession. land-hungry thousands rushed into the Old Southwest, where the new states of Mississippi and Alabama were admitted to the union in 1817 and 1819 respectively. The migrants included rich and poor, speculators and squatters, slaveholders, slaves, and non-slaveholders, single men, very few single women, and families. The great majority came from upland areas of the nearby states of Georgia, Tennessee, and the Carolinas, but some from as far away as Europe; Scots-Irish seem to have been the most prominent ethnic group. Jackson himself purchased land in the area, and acting on his advice, members of his family made profitable investments in Pensacola real estate. Seldom in human history has so large a territory been settled so rapidly....

The situation on the ground was untidy.... [There were many conflicting land claims, some dating from times of British, or even Spanish rule.] Lawyers found plenty to keep them occupied on the frontier.

Not that everyone settled disputes by legal means. The Old Southwest was a violent society, even by American standards. Institutions of local government could not be set up fast enough to keep pace with needs. In the first few years of settlement, law and order might constitute more an aspiration than a reality. Men fought duels and did not always conduct them according to the

¹ Unless otherwise noted, your history teacher wrote the footnotes.

² An Indian tribe native to the Southeastern United States.

³ Howe isn't talking about Arizona and New Mexico here, as will be clear shortly.

conventions of gentlemanly honor; contemporary accounts emphasize brawls, fistfights, shootouts, and knife fights.⁴ Natchez and the Natchez Trace road linking it with Nashville had particularly rough reputations for the violence accompanying crime, gambling, drunkenness, and prostitution. The routine cruelty associated with slave discipline and the determination of the whites to maintain their racial supremacy over Indians and free Negroes⁵ legitimated other forms of violence, including lynchings....

What made migration into this hazardous environment so attractive was the high price of cotton. The difficulties in processing short-staple greenseed cotton into textiles had earlier been surmounted through a series of technological innovations culminating in the development of the “saw” cotton gin” (“gin” being short for “engine”). The contribution of the Connecticut Yankee Eli Whitney to this long process has been much exaggerated. But the Napoleonic Wars had inhibited international commerce and delayed the mass marketing of cotton for nearly a generation. Now, within a year of the end of hostilities in Europe and North America, the price of raw cotton doubled on the New Orleans market, reaching twenty-seven cents a pound. Wherever the soil was suitable and the farmer could count on two hundred frost-free days in the year, short-staple cotton suddenly became an economically attractive crop. The virgin earth of the New Southwest seemed ideal: While backcountry South Carolina yielded three hundred pounds of cotton per acre, the Alabama black belt could yield eight hundred or even a thousand pounds per acre. In response to an apparently insatiable world demand for textiles, U.S. cotton production soared from seventy-three thousand bales in 1800 to ten times that in 1820—the year the United States surpassed India, long the leading cotton producer. Cotton, fueling an expansion of transatlantic industrial capitalism, enormously enhanced the importance of the United States in the world economy. In 1801, 9 percent of the world’s cotton came from the USA and 60 percent from Asia. Half a century later, the United States provided 68 percent of a total world production three times as large. The American South was to be the most favored place for the production of a raw material of global significance, as the Caribbean sugar islands had been in the eighteenth century or as the oil-rich Middle East would become in the twentieth.

Cotton cultivation required labor-intensive application, but chattel slavery remained legal in the states where the climate was favorable to cotton. The new marketability of short-staple cotton prompted the expansion of slave-plantation agriculture far beyond the areas that would have sustained the traditional export crops, tobacco, rice, and indigo. The spread of cotton cultivation entailed not only the westward migration of free farmers but also the massive forced migration of enslaved workers into the newly acquired lands.... Because the importation of slaves from overseas had been illegal since 1808, the trader’s human merchandise could only come from the seaboard slave states. Contemporaries typically observed the transit of a slave coffle⁶ with disgust and shame: “a wretched cavalcade... marching half naked women, and men loaded with chains, without being charged with any crime but that of being black, from one section of the United States to another, hundreds of miles.” Such a procession could number anywhere from a dozen to over a hundred souls, who were expected to walk up to twenty-five

⁴ Just another day at SHS...

⁵ Mr. Howe is using the polite word that was current at the time he is describing. Today “Negro” is not usually considered polite. “Black” or “African America” are both acceptable.

⁶ A line of animals or slaves chained together.

miles a day and sleep on the ground. The long trek overland from Virginia to Mississippi or Louisiana would consume six to eight weeks and was usually undertaken in winter, when agricultural labor could best be spared. Coastal vessels, more expansive, absorbed some of the traffic when the great slave marketplace in New Orleans was the destination. Only later, after Kentucky and Tennessee acquired surpluses of slaves and began exporting them, did the phrase “sold down the river” come into common use. The slave traders favored people in the prime of life—late teens or early twenties—since they could withstand the rigors of the march and bring a good price as field hands and (in the case of the women) breeders. Small children accompanying their mothers were placed in the supply wagon. The interstate slave trade was big business; the Chesapeake Bay region alone exported 124,000 enslaved workers, mostly across the Appalachians, during the decade following 1810.

Westward migration meant different things to different people. For a white man eager to raise cotton, it could mean a welcome fresh start in life, and even a chance at quick wealth—to hang a crystal chandelier in his frontier log cabin,” as one historian put it.⁷ For white female participants, the move might be less attractive, which helps explain why fewer women than men made it. Women tended to regret the breakup of their accustomed networks of kinfolk and friends. Once living in an isolated frontier home, they might not have a chance to visit their previous companions, because women rarely traveled alone. Migrating slaves shared these regrets in even more acute form since they would probably never again even communicate with those they left behind, who could include spouse or child. For African Americans, the move across the mountains constituted a second giant disruption in the generation following the end of forced migration across the ocean. Accordingly, the historian Ira Berlin has called it a “Second Middle Passage.” Conditions of slave labor generally worsened in newly settled areas, where there was much backbreaking work to be done clearing the land and little of the paternalism that could soften the brutality of the “peculiar institution” among the planter aristocracy of more stable regions. The most unfortunate were those sent to the sugar plantations of southern Louisiana, where conditions resembled those on the infamous Caribbean islands. Under tight time pressures, sugar planters systematically overworked their slaves during the harvest and grinding season....

The rapid rise of “the Cotton Kingdom” wrought a momentous transformation. Cotton became a driving force in expanding and transforming the economy not only of the South but of the United States as a whole—indeed of the world. While the growing of cotton came to dominate economic life in the Lower South, the manufacture of cotton textiles was fueling the industrial revolution on both sides of the Atlantic. Most of the exported American cotton went to Britain, in particular to the port of Liverpool, convenient to the textile mills of Lancashire. During the immediate postwar years of 1816 to 1820, cotton constituted 39 percent of U.S. exports; twenty years later the proportion had increased to 59 percent, and the value of the cotton sold overseas in 1836 exceeded \$71 million. By giving the United States its leading export staple, the workers in the cotton fields enabled the country not only to buy manufactured goods from Europe but also to pay interest on its foreign debt and continue to import more capital to

⁷ Malcolm Rohrbough, *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier* (New York, 1978), 199. [Note in source.]

invest in transportation and industry. Much of Atlantic civilization in the nineteenth century was built on the back of the enslaved field hand.

II

“Whoever says industrial revolution says cotton,” observed the great economic historian Eric Hobsbawm. The same short-staple cotton that spread plantation agriculture all over the South gave rise to textile mills. In New England, the War of 1812 climaxed a series of interruptions playing havoc with the maritime trade and fishing that had been the mainstays of the regional economy. American commerce was driven from the seas. Watching their ships rot in port, Yankee investors hit upon a solution. As southern planters solved the problem of worn-out lands and low tobacco prices by shifting their workforce to the new cotton fields, New England merchants solved their own problem by shifting capital from shipping to manufacturing. What they started to manufacture was inexpensive cloth, made from local wool and southern cotton.

In 1813, Francis Cabot Lowell formed a business association with Patrick T. Jackson and Nathan Appleton, subsequently incorporated as the Boston Manufacturing Company with other investors. The purpose was to construct a water-power loom for the manufacture of cotton textiles. Lowell had recently returned from one of the most successful of all enterprises of industrial espionage, conceived even before the war began. He had spent two years in Britain, where he meticulously observed the textile mills of Manchester. The technology of the power loom invented by Edmund Cartwright remained a scrupulously guarded British national secret. When Lowell left Britain just before war broke out, customs officers searched his luggage twice. They did not realize that the sharp-eyed Lowell had carefully memorized the structure of the loom well enough to replicate it once he got back to the United States. By 1814, Lowell and his brilliant mechanic, Paul Moody, could proudly demonstrate to the company directors an operational water-powered loom in Waltham, Massachusetts.

Yankee merchants were famous for their resourcefulness and enterprise. Frederic Tudor had recently discovered that New England’s ice could be exported at a profit to tropical countries, turning a liability into an asset. Nathaniel Wyeth then discovered that the ice could be packed in sawdust, thereby finding a commercial use for this waste by-product of Maine lumber mills. By such practical imagination, New Englanders had overcome their region’s paucity of natural advantages. But the vision of Lowell, Jackson, and Appleton went beyond identifying another way to turn a profit; they undertook to create a new industrial order. Their three mills at Waltham having proved successful, the shareholders embarked in 1821 on a still more ambitious project, a custom-built mill town. Jackson and Appleton named it for Lowell, who had died in 1817.

The town of Lowell was created at a point where the Merrimack River drops thirty feet. Irish immigrant laborers dug a canal, and Moody designed a thirty-foot waterwheel to take full advantage of the power. Once their own mill was operational, the associates sold mill sites and water power through the Locks and Canals Company. They had subdued nature to human purposes. For a labor supply, the owners turned to the young women of rural New England. Unlike most parts of the United States, New England had a surplus of women over men because

so many of the males had migrated west, while the region received at that time few immigrants from overseas.

Farm women had long supplemented the family income by weaving woolen yarn and cloth, using spinning wheels and hand looms at home. Now cotton from the South provided raw material much more plentiful than local sheep. So young women left home, recruited by company-owned boardinghouses in Lowell. There they put in long hours under unhealthy conditions and contracted not to leave until they had worked at least a year. But twelve to fourteen dollars a month was a good wage, and the new town had attractive shops, social activities, churches, lending libraries, and evening lectures. The “mill girls,” as they called themselves, wrote and published a magazine, the *Lowell Offering*. Americans had feared industrialization, lest it create an oppressed, depraved, and turbulent proletariat. But because these women typically worked for only a few years prior to marriage, and did so in a morally protected environment, they did not seem to constitute a permanent separate working class. To observers, the community looked like an industrial utopia, more successful than the Scottish models that Francis Lowell and Nathan Appleton had toured years before. Lowell, Massachusetts, boasted the largest concentration of industry in the United States before the Civil War.

Lowell was a stunning innovation in many respects: in its technology, in its labor relations, in the amount of capital raised for it (\$8 million), and in the consolidation of all stages of production from raw cotton to finished cloth. Eventually the Lowell capitalists even took over the distribution of their products for sale. Their Locks and Canals Company returned profits on its real estate development average 24 percent per annum for twenty years, an even higher rate of return than the manufacturing operations showed. The owners had good reasons to make the mill town a stable environment for the workers. They wanted Lowell to be a secure investment, less speculative than ocean commerce, one that would return a reliable income to the investors who had pooled their capital. They delegated the day-to-day running of the mills to capable managers like Kirk Boott so that they themselves could turn their attention to traditional upper-class activities like politics, charity, and high culture. These innovative northern capitalists retained some traditional and paternalistic values, just as the southern plantation aristocracy did.

The Waltham-Lowell system presented the most dramatic but by no means the only way that industrialization came to the North. Investment in textile mills, like enthusiasm for the cloths they produced, was widespread. Small capitalists raising money locally could start up mills; they did not need to mobilize large amounts of capital through corporations. These small entrepreneurs would group their activities wherever they found waterpower, at sites either urban or rural. At first these small entrepreneurs might not be much different from master craftsmen. Many of them had immigrated from England or Scotland, trading on the skills they had acquired in the advanced textile industry of their native land. As time went by, consolidation would occur among the businesses, producing a growing differentiation between employers and employees. Smaller textile enterprises often continued “putting out” some of their processes to workers at home. This kind of industrialization did not produce the sharp discontinuities that made Lowell so conspicuous.

For their workers on site, some mills followed the practice of Samuel Slater. Back in 1789, Slater had brought the secrets of Sir Richard Arkwright's spinning frame to America, a transatlantic shift in technological know-how comparable to the one Lowell achieved. Slater contracted with entire farm families to work in and around his mills. Like the proprietors of Lowell, Slater took a paternalistic interest in his workers' morality and religion; unlike them, he enlisted the authority of the husband/father to keep the other members in line. Under his labor system, daughters did not achieve the degree of personal independence that they got by living away from home and receiving their own wages.

Though its origins and methods of doing business varied, the textile industry proved central to industrialization in America, as in Europe. And large size became characteristic of the industry even if mills did not necessarily start out that way. Enterprises that began with a few local investors could attract more distant capital if and when they proved themselves. In 1832, textile companies comprised 88 of the 106 largest corporations in the United States.