

Spring 5-31-2021

Into the Depths of Economic Extraction: Louisiana Lumber's Rise and Fall

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Into the Depths of Economic Extraction: Louisiana Lumber's Rise and Fall

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in History

by

John Curtis Creed

B.A. Centenary College of LA, 2019

May 2021

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Abstract

Throughout Louisiana's history, from the Louisiana Purchase to present day, the state has well benefited from its economic location. From the Port of New Orleans to Union Pacific railyard, all along the state, Louisiana has possessed its natural resources of the lumber commerce. Beginning in the 1880s to a peak in the 1910s, Louisiana represented a state-wide economic development. This paper argues that Louisiana advancement post-Reconstruction and into this new period of newly commercialized railroad systems made the biggest economic impact on Southwestern Louisiana with one essential economic, lumber. From 1880 to 1925, the lumber industry in Vernon Parish, Louisiana, grew from a small local lumber system to growing resources and shipping all around the country.

Keywords: Lumber, Vernon, Louisiana, Railroads, Industrialization, Depressions

Introduction

Even as the railroad tracks were laid, lumber mills, big and small, sprouted overnight along the main line. From this trunk line, branch lines quickly ran far into the forest interior to reach the trees and still other mills. From the turn of the century until the late 1920s, Vernon Parish forests echoed with the sounds of chopping axes, shouting men, crashing trees, braying mules, and snorting steam engines.¹

At the end of the Civil War and with the start of Reconstruction, the Industrial Revolution expanded in cities as Boston, New York, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Pittsburg, and for the first time America's job market experienced significant growth. From a new wave of immigrants coming from Russia, Italy, and Ireland to provide for their families back home, first generation Americans sought sustainable and equitable job opportunities. However, South's professional industrial career opportunity during this time was very limited. No historian can ever estimate the price of total destruction in many parts of the South because much of the loss was of the highly potential human capital.² The war left sections of the country heavily damaged with very limited possibilities for incoming immigrants.

Vernon Parish is an example of economic development that had a short-term boom during a period of industrial lumber development but declined once the natural resource had been exploited. The conclusion will end that Louisiana had eradicated its lumber production and was left with no alternatives until reforestation occurred. Also, that the environmental concerns had a repelling effect on Louisiana farm system.

Beginning of the 19th century The United States of American evolved from a semi-rural nation into a turn of the century industrial power. Reconstruction occurred, Americans moved westward into new lands, and Americans created new forms of resourceful economics. Industrial involvement was

¹ Smith, Steven D. *A Good Home for a Poor Man: Fort Polk and Vernon Parish, 1800-1940*. United States: Southeast Archeological Center, 1999.

² Clark, Thomas D. "The Post-Civil War Economy in the South." *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (1966): 424 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23873283>.

processing, and railroads became a direct result of this evolution. According to the Library of Congress, prior to 1871 approximately 45,000 miles of track had been laid. Between 1871 and 1900, another 170,000 miles was added.³ The transcontinental railroad connected eastern states with the Pacific Ocean. Western states needed railroads, and St. Louis residents visualized a line all the way to the Pacific Ocean starting from in their city.⁴ For the first time, Congress funded independent railroad companies and a new transportation era began.

Louisiana was one of the pioneer railroad systems in the country shortly with New Orleans. The Missouri Pacific Railroad (MPC) originated from several lines stretching across Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana. Later in the 1870s, Jay Gould purchased several small railroads: the Kansas Pacific, the Denver Pacific, and the Central Pacific. But, fearing the Missouri Pacific might take his capital and growth, Gould took control of Missouri Pacific and became its new president.

Jay Gould was one of the chief railroad executives, developer, and most importantly financier. He used unorthodox and sometimes controversial methods to increase his wealth with the railroad system by selecting key acres to plant tracks. However, the Gould empire did not last long. In 1884 America went through a deep economic depression. After the depression, the Gulf Coast Lines combined with the M.P.C (Missouri Pacific Company) and soon in 1892 came the death of Jay Gould.⁵ In Gould tenure, one area explored during this time was Southwest Louisiana.

Before the Civil War Louisiana had been a mostly rural environment, with few economic resources. In the aftermath of the war, serious impediments to railroad construction were apparent. Lack of capital, political instability, revelations of fraud in the promotion and construction of railroads, and

³ Railroads in the Late 19th Century - American Memory Timeline- Classroom Presentation | Teacher Resources.” Planning D-Day (April 2003), Library of Congress Information Bulletin.

⁴ Missouri Pacific Railroad.” *Union Pacific: Missouri Pacific Railroad*.

⁵ Warner, B. *History of the Missouri Pacific Railroad*, Missouri Pacific Lines, 2002.

the financial panic of 1873 all militated against railroad building.⁶ Louisiana needed a new economic recovery plan.

Louisiana after the Civil War remained a challenge. The southwest and eastern regions of Louisiana with Lake Charles, Port Hudson, and Clinton and Vernon Parish, emerged as an industrial and economic capital network with the resources constructed to the South and with one central main export, lumber. Louisiana used its natural resources as a means to kickstart a renewal in state-wide economic development. The main industries are from Central-Southwest Louisiana's cotton, sugar, and lumber. With this Louisiana was able to produce high volume job opportunities for families moving back to Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and several other states. It was the landscape that influenced the region's settlement, culture, wealth, poverty, and industry. Subsistence and market farmers started to establish backwoods communities, evidenced by new schools, churches, and hamlets at the beginning of the twentieth century. The population increased, and, as a consequence, the new parish of Vernon.⁷ Louisiana grew its natural resources exportation along with the growth of the railroad transportation system and improved post-Civil War job patterns.

⁶ Donald J. Millet. "Southwest Louisiana Enters the Railroad Age: 1880-1900." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 24, no. 2 (1983): 165-83.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230882>.

⁷ Steven D. Smith, *A Good Home for a Poor Man: Fort Polk and Vernon Parish, 1800-1940*. National Park Service Southeast Archaeological Center. (1999) 12

Literature Review

Many authors and historians have shared Vernon Parish and its long-standing relation with the lumber industry. As the leading historian in this field, Donald Millet of McNeese State University emphasize the economic development including lumber and transportation system in Northwest Louisiana. Millet directs the reader to the main source of lumber in Calcasieu and Vernon parish.

“It was no accident that Lake Charles became a center for the production and marketing of pine lumber in the period following the Civil War. Advantageously located on the lake from which the town gets its name, and through which flows the Calcasieu River with its many tributaries extending far into the pine belt and to the Gulf of Mexico, Lake Charles early developed into a sawmill focus. Logs were brought down the Calcasieu River and rafted in the lake preparatory to being converted into lumber from the fall of the Civil War.”

Millet chronicles the work done by parish representatives and politicians to continue to promote lumber as a key economic. With the great demand for lumber to rebuild the war-torn areas of the South following the Civil War and the industrial boom in the North at the same time, high prices made it possible for millowners to apply the latest developments in sawmill technology. Millet primary research makes him the essential author for this topic and continues to write for economical-developed Louisiana.⁸ Along with Millet, other such authors include Steven Smith.

Steven D. Smith a leading historian of The University of South Carolina details the improvements and challenges that are with Fort Polk and Vernon Parish. Smith gives the reader a full detailed text of the evolution of Vernon Parish and how it would become a surging location in Louisiana post-Civil War.

Despite poor farmland, the region did have one asset of immense value to an emerging twentieth-century America and a South recovering from the Civil War. This asset was longleaf pine. The

⁸ Donald J. Millet. "The Lumber Industry of "Imperial" Calcasieu: 1865-1900." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 7, no. 1 (1966): 51-69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230882>.

following is a history of the men and women who made this pineland their home from the days of the first pioneers to 1940.⁹ Steven Smith text with figures, maps, and annotations make his text the leading research base for Vernon Parish and the lumber industry.

George Alvin Stokes Sr a New Orleans resident also writes of the lumber boom in southwest Louisiana. This study is an inquiry into the nature, origin, and permanence of cultural forms and patterns peculiar to lumbering in southwest Louisiana. The area covered, one of major forest districts of the state, was originally clothed in longleaf pine. It extends from Many southward to Lake Charles, and its eastern and western boundaries are set by the bottom lands of the Calcasieu and Sabine rivers. Here, as elsewhere in Louisiana, lumbering reached its peak in the early twentieth century. This intensive phase is geographically significant and merits close examination, since culture traits associated with lumbering were then being introduced. One such factor was the demand for southern timber. Southern forest resources remained comparatively untouched until forests in the north were exhausted. Before 1880, for the most part, southern forest tracts had been required to fill only local demands. Relatively small quantities of lumber had been shipped outside the region. However, when the forests of the northern states were gone, emphasis shifted southward, and lumbering here entered its most spectacular and destructive phase.¹⁰ Stokes's text, maps, and first bibliography give the reader the best context of the Lake Charles Southwest Louisiana regions.

Along with these authors William Theodore Block Jr, is the leading author for Leesville during the twentieth century. Mr. Block was a dedicated historian, publishing 9 books of East Texas history, many

⁹ Smith, Steven D. *A Good Home for a Poor Man: Fort Polk and Vernon Parish, 1800-1940*. United States: Southeast Archeological Center, 1999. Pg. 9

¹⁰ Alvin George Stokes "Lumbering in Southwest Louisiana: A Study of the Industry As a Culture-Geographic Factor" May 1954

academic articles in historical journals, and he was a guest columnist for Beaumont Enterprise for many years. Block presents the reader the later years of Leesville, using the term ‘gateway to the pineys’ between the years of 1905 and 1908. However, the most interesting text Block goes into is the Great Panic of 1907 and surprisingly how depressed economy Leesville had. A newspaper article of September 1907 observed that throughout the financial panic of 1907, the Nona Mills Company kept its mill and woods crews at work at reduced hours, for the relief of both its white and black employees. Luckily, railroad and export orders kept the firm in business when the domestic retail market was stagnant, and prices were low. All improvements were in place by 1907, including the new Wilson gang saw and the 1,000 horsepower Corliss engine, and the powerhouse was fire- proofed with brick masonry all around.¹¹ Leesville was economically reliable in the Great Panic of 1907.

These collections of authors have provided a foundation of sources and research that provide a vivid image of the life and times of Vernon Parish in their renewal. With no video and low amounts of photography these historians have been able to display to readers that Leesville, Fort Polk, and Vernon Parish were the heartbeat of this agriculture expansion. These collections of historians offer all points of view of Vernon Parish including how the town developed, the railroad improvement and tracks that had been laid.

¹¹ W.T. Block, *Gateway to the Pineys: A Glimpse of Leesville, Louisiana, Between 1905 and 1908*, <http://usgwarchives.net/la/calcasieu/block/leesville.htm>.

Vernon Parish

Vernon Parish geographically is in North-Central Louisiana in the midst of the lumber industries of North Louisiana. Despite the early establishment of sawmills along the lower Sabine and Calcasieu rivers, Vernon Parish's vast timber resources were, for all practical purposes, untouched as of 1890. The sawmills established up to this point served mostly local needs and were just beginning to have a national impact.

Prior to 1880, timber production in Louisiana met local needs. Mills and logging are confined to areas along waterways. By contrast in the second phase of lumbering, the industrial phase, increased output. "These were the days of giant trees, giant mills, and giant lumbermen." National resources in Louisiana had been largely 'untouched' but were now in high demand. The main reasons for this 'lumber boom' was that with the availability of large tracts of timberland at low prices. Demand for lumber and the exhaustion of sources in the Northeast and the Midwest, and the arrival of railroads. Technological improvements in removing lumber from the forests and swamps. Predominately a large rural state, more innovation needed to be surfaced and lumber came as a growing industrial solvent.

Large sections of the state, in a relatively short period of time, became vast "stumpscares" of barren cutover land as rapacious mill owners moved on to yet another stand of virgin timber elsewhere in the country. 4.3 million acres of Louisiana virgin timber. New components added to the state's landscape – most notably, huge industrial plants with a sawmill at the center and scores of purpose-built company towns. Most of this growth and industrialization centered in isolated areas of the state. One prime example of small-town industrial growth is Vernon Parish Louisiana. Railroad companies continued to venture into Vernon Parish. The Gulf Lumber Company, which built a mill and town just south of Leesville. As the timber around this area was being depleted, the company reached deeper into the forests, building the town of Fullerton. Up to the 1920s, The United States was slow carrying

resources across state borders and trying to work with neighboring companies over the same natural resources. With what Kansas City Southern Railroad and Nona Mills did for Vernon Parish was set the example of what states needed to model for having a sustainable synergy between the two partners.

The impact of industrial lumbering on the Louisiana landscape was staggering. In addition to the incalculable loss of vast virgin tracts of timber. Whole new towns – company towns built by lumber companies – mushroomed on the landscape. The purpose of these towns was to produce lumber, and around this town improvements came more churches, schools, hospitals. As George Alvin Stokes chronicles Vernon Parish’s town development: “Babies were born in company hospitals, housewives bought their groceries at a company store, and families lived in houses built and owned by the company. Few towns ever existed in Louisiana with a greater singleness of function than those devoted to lumbering.”¹²

Nona Mills located in Leesville, Louisiana in 1870s had been primarily rural with little economic resource and searching for a financial opportunity to grow their natural resource, the answer was with Nona Mills Lumber Company. Before 1875, Leesville had been a sleepy rural community, with a couple of stores, to serve a large area of surrounding farms and plantations. Its economic position was principally that of cotton factor, destined to buy up the cotton, produce, and hides accumulated by the farmers. In 1871, the town also became the local seat of justice for the newly created Vernon Parish, but it would be another quarter-century before Leesville became an incorporated city. By 1900, Leesville could boast of a "brand new" parish courthouse, ten general stores, "four drug stores, seven lawyers, seven doctors," and various other business houses and tradesmen.¹³ From a small urban town to by the

¹² Donna Fricker, *Historical Context*, “The Louisiana Lumber Boom, c. 1880-1925” Fricker Historical Preservation Services LLC. (2007) 10

¹³ E. W. Wise, “Tall Pines II: A History of Vernon Parish and Its People” (Sulphur: 1988), pp. 4-5, 13-21.

end of the decade to service a new lumber industry.

When the Kansas City Southern Railroad reached Leesville in 1897, it brought a highly favored economic stability to the area. Lumber barons around the country saw the opportunity and bought acres of land covered with prime virgin pine. The Nona Mills Lumber Company, organized in 1898 in Nona, Texas, established its Leesville mill in 1899. Rather than build their own town as did most lumber companies moving to the area, Nona Mills built homes for their employees near the already existing town and made improvements. The young city of Leesville immediately began expanding, and by 1900 the small town had ten general stores, four drug stores, at least four hotels, several doctors and lawyers, and a host of other businesses.¹⁴

Pickering Hills were headquartered out of state, in Kansas City. In Louisiana, PCM purchased 130,847 acres in Sabine and Vernon Parishes, much of which was within what is now the Fort Polk area. Pickering also owned more than 100,000 acres in Texas, as well as holdings in Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. The Pickering Company had a reputation both in Texas and Western Louisiana for its detrimental “cut out and get out” business practices. The mill at Pickering was quoted for 150,000 board feet daily, but around 1904 it was rated at as much as 200,000 feet per day. It could cut boards as long as thirty-six feet, and the mill employed around 500 workers. Even though outsourced to Kansas City, the Pickering Company understood the resources and industry in Vernon, business practices made lumber available to other key lumber territories.

Lutcher and Moore’s Operation- Henry Lutcher and G. Bedell Moore came to Texas’s southern coast from Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Lutcher and Moore expanded into Louisiana in the late

¹⁴ W.T. Block, *Gateway to the Pines: A Glimpse of Leesville, Louisiana, Between 1905 and 1908*, <http://usgwarchives.net/la/calcasieu/block/leesville.htm>.

1870s, purchased some 60,000 acres and owned 120,800 acres in the western part of the state. Coming relatively early to the state, Henry Lutcher and G. Bedell Moore were the first to make large-scale cut logs in Vernon Parish and float them downstream to Niblett's Bluff in Beauregard Parish, a practice that continued as late as 1910. Lutcher used river channels to store all its logs in order to expand to the Caribbean and Mexican markets.

With the expansion of transportation and railyard construction, through North-West Louisiana most notably Lake Charles, the process to cart this lumber was extensive and thorough. In pine timber operations, lumber timber was cut and hauled it on cables to a train traveling on a temporary rail line. Cut trees were hauled to the dummy line via steam-powered winches on a device known as a skidder. The workman then loaded the logs onto special flat cars via a steam-powered log loader that go to the sawmill, workers off-loaded the logs into a mill pond. The mill pond formed the center of operations for virtually all pine timber industrial plants.¹⁵

During the "Lumber Boom" period, the traditional, slow means of transporting logs by oxen and river disappeared. Each of the larger mills had its own network of trams (railways) that covered most of the parish, and almost every machine that moved and processed the lumber used steam. Power log workers pulled to the tracks by a skidder, a vehicle specific for hauling lumber, where a loader transferred them to flatcars that pulled by a train engine to the mill. Once there, the logs dumped onto the mil pound for a very brief storage period before carted to the saws inside the mill.¹⁶

¹⁵ Donna Fricker, Historical Context, "The Louisiana Lumber Boom, c. 1880-1925" Fricker Historical Preservation Services LLC. (2007) 9

¹⁶ Brintern. "Logging in Vernon Parish." *Vernon Parish*, Louisiana Legend Country: Adventures of Vernon, 24 Apr. 2020, www.vernonparish.org/about-us/history/logging-vernon-parish.

A. J. Perkins, of the firm of Moore, Perkins & Company, built the Calcasieu and Vernon railroad in 1882--the first railroad built in the area to exploit the timber resources. Starting from White Bluff on Hickory Branch Creek, the railroad eventually reached Leesville, parish seat of Vernon Parish. By 1886, four narrow-gauge railroads totaling thirty miles penetrated the yellow-pine forests in various directions. After the period following 1880, rail transportation supplemented rather than supplanted water transportation. In 1881 large quantities of lumber was shipped to the Mexican ports of Tampico and Tuxpan, and Calcasieu lumbermen were thinking of opening trade with the five Central American republics.¹⁷

At the end of the 1920s into the 1930s, the majority of lumber resources from Vernon Parish was primarily scarce. The effect of this total harvest on Vernon Parish landscape was devastating. A 1943 Department of Agriculture publication noted that only three percent of Louisiana's longleaf pine forest supported uncut old growth forest. At the beginning of the 1930s the lumber barons and laborers migrated west. The locals were left to return to their former undeveloped job occupations. With a decade long economic depression on the horizon, the timing could not have been worse. Much of the land had lost its only value—its timber. Looking to unburden their finances of this useless property, the lumber company owners sold their land to the federal government. This executive decision led the decline of the town growth, commerce, and innovation as Vernon turned on its key natural resource and presented its traditional rural economics back from previous time.

The effect on the economy and people was significant as it brought a swift end to mass progress. With the lumber industry's rise, people prospered from employment and corporate taxation.

¹⁷ Donald J. Millet. "The Lumber Industry of "Imperial" Calcasieu: 1865-1900." "Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association 7, no. 1 (1966): Pg. 66
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230882>.

But the economy's sharp rise had an equally sharp fall when mills closed, and companies left. The value of Vernon Parish land dropped from \$40 million to \$6 million as the timber declined, and 70 percent of the land eradicated. ¹⁸The decrease of production brought a multitude of problems for the parish.

¹⁸ Smith, Steven D. *A Good Home for a Poor Man: Fort Polk and Vernon Parish, 1800-1940*. United States: Southeast Archeological Center, 1999.

Rail transportation

With the beginning of a new age of transportation, the Kansas City Southern Railway was one of the main pioneers in the lumber-transportation industry. Railroads created an opportunity and means for a farming community to move crops to state and national markets. Beginning in 1940, railroads brought thousands of men to Fort Polk, Louisiana and sent them away as soldiers. At the same time, rails brought the world's goods and services to Vernon Parish's rustic citizens. Through its original period from 1897 to 1940, the Kansas City Southern (KCS) line was the main freight and passenger route through Vernon parish. The KCS remained control of the company throughout the early twentieth century. A large Missouri-based corporation, the KCS owned or controlled numerous railway subsidiaries, such as the Texarkana and Fort Smith and the Arkansas Western.

The KCS route through Vernon Parish drew people, development, and industry like a magnet. Many of Vernon Parish's lumber companies built their mills along its long north-south line.¹⁹ Kansas City Southern Railroad had a direct result on both the economical and transportation business of Louisiana. Still in operation today KCS stretched far into Louisiana territory.

The western Louisiana parishes of Vernon and Beauregard had few rivals in the state for the sheer intensity of sawmill activity. Most of the area had strong ties to Kansas City, Missouri. Within a few short years, out-of-state capital transformed these out-of-the-way agrarian parishes into industrial giants.

²⁰Along with the Kansas City Southern Railroad, the lumber-transportation system and future railroads

¹⁹ Smith, Steven D. *A Good Home for a Poor Man: Fort Polk and Vernon Parish, 1800-1940*. United States: Southeast Archeological Center, 1999.

²⁰ Donald J. Millet. "The Lumber Industry of "Imperial" Calcasieu: 1865-1900." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 7, no. 1 (1966): 53. 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230882>.

moved beyond Vernon Parish. The lumber companies had to transport out of the pinelands and transport their products to national markets. To accomplish this, lumber companies and railroads linked under the control of the industrial giants, who put up the capital to build the railroads and bought the land to cut the timber. Once the lumber companies began operations, and the lumber operations constructed, the parish government received increased revenues through taxation. With this taxation, Vernon assembled new roads and maintain the old. A highly complex economic system returned taxes to small towns economics, which created more jobs and increased prosperity in small sections of Louisiana.

Vernon Parish benefited from small improvements along this transportation system. Besides cars and buggies, railroads were the only other major form of transportation. The railroads indubitably opened Vernon Parish to the world and vice versa. Railroads allowed the lumber companies to move into the parish, cut the timber, and send it to national and world markets. Rails created an opportunity and means for the farming community to move their crops to state and national markets. With these transportation lines being forged in with Vernon's natural resource, Vernon was quickly becoming an economic center with one main city, Leesville.

Leesville, at the parish's geographical center, had become not only the center of commerce, industry, and government, but the center of Vernon Parish's transportation web as well. Evident when looking at the 1930 parish highway map, which is probably the most accurate map for this time frame.²¹

²¹ Smith, Steven D. *A Good Home for a Poor Man: Fort Polk and Vernon Parish, 1800-1940*. United States: Southeast Archeological Center, 1999. Pg. 160

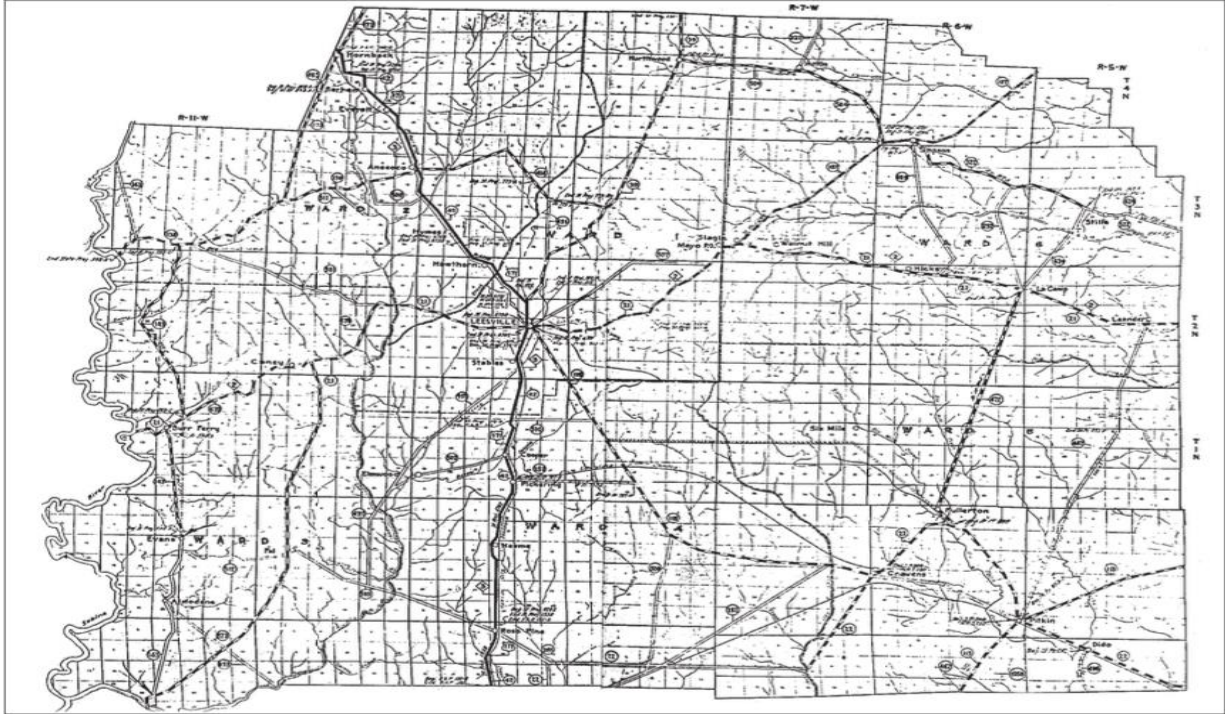


Figure 40 — Vernon Parish map, 1930 (Louisiana Highway Commission 1930).

The Great Depression Impact

With a rise of employment, and this temporary short term lumber boom, the decline was just as effective as the rise. The economic decline effectively ended Vernon lumber industry and brought an end to Louisiana short time lumber growth. Exactly how bad the situation was in Vernon Parish during the Great Depression is difficult to measure. Many people who had been employed in the lumber industry were out of jobs by the 1930s. Census data indicate that tenancy did not rise as sharply as in other parishes. So many Vernon Parish farmers retained their land. But many others had to get loans to keep going. A 1935 Vernon Parish Relief Fund report provides an insight into the extent of local distress. The fund assisted mothers without resources, the blind, aged, infirm, and families without support. When the fund began, applications flooded in and the organization had to hire additional personnel to process.²²

As a mostly agricultural state in the Deep South, Louisiana had a deep slumping economy, especially as farm prices declined to unheard-of lows. Although the vast majority of the rural population already lived in grinding poverty, the worsening conditions of the Depression pushed even these people to extremes. After exploiting their most accessible stands of timber, many lumber companies prepared to migrate across the country. For some firms, however, relocation was not an option because the Great Depression forced them to suspend operations. Immense tracts of cutover timber land bounded in tax proceedings. The companies that survived frequently found themselves with heavily mortgaged lands and equipment. As a result, logging companies attempted to generate as much production as possible from their land, their equipment, and their workers.

²² Smith, Steven D. *A Good Home for a Poor Man: Fort Polk and Vernon Parish, 1800-1940*. United States: Southeast Archeological Center, 1999.

Vernon Parish and Leesville increases had been reduced with now serious problems on the lumber industry. Other business faded out of existence by the economic conditions of the Great Depression. Still others remained in the South and maintained a precarious existence, heavily burdened with debt, taxation, and the diminished value of their denuded lands. Of those firms that remained, a few pioneering companies and foresters realized the regenerative potential of the Southern timberlands.²³ Along with these ramifications came all the expenses Louisiana had to endure. The depression brought a sharp decline in the demand for forest products. With the decline in production and the scarcity of raw materials, liquidation of Great Southern Lumber Company was inevitable.²⁴

There were several years of decreases in materials, work force, and natural resources had been depleted. How Louisiana was able to erase this deficit was with land grants and military training facilities cutting through natural forest in Vernon Parish. The Depression ultimately ended as a result of world events far removed from western Louisiana. As the United States prepared for global war in 1940, the U.S. Army sought land to practice maneuvering large numbers of men and materials. Despite the hard work of the Forest Service and the CCC, large tracts in Vernon Parish were still relatively open, rolling, submarginal, cutover land with little occupation.

Through the spring and summer of 1940, military vehicles and green-clad soldiers were seen more and more frequently marching and conveying up and down western Louisiana's formerly quiet dusty roads. No part of the parish was spared the army's invasion as the entire parish was within its planned

²³ Fickle, James E. "Comfortable and Happy"? Louisiana and Mississippi Lumber Workers, 1900-1950." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 40, no. 4 (1999): 407-32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4233613>.

²⁴ Curtis, Michael. "Early Development and Operations of the Great Southern Lumber Company." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 14, no. 4 (1973): 347-68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4231349>.

maneuver area. But, most activity focused on modern-day Fort Polk where the army engineers arrived to prepare for battle maneuvers. Vernon Parish continued to move forward with military expansions and lumber productions making it a key location for wartime with Japan and Germany did come in 1945. Improvements for job performance in The Great Depression but very small steps for Louisiana's short-term economic solutions.

General Development Rise and Fall of Vernon Parish

With this growth of innovation and job employment, soon the population and town growth of Vernon Parish changed drastically most specifically in Leesville. Lumber towns sprang up overnight. From 1900 to 1920, Louisiana top three lumber-producing states. The lumber companies-built communities next to house their labor force. These houses settlements were relocated when the nearby lumber was exhausted.

Fisher in Sabine Parish one such example conveys the early twentieth century. Owned by Louisiana Long Leaf Lumber Company, Founded by John B. White and Oliver W. Fisher from Missouri, who purchased 75,000-acres of virgin timberland, the latter's name was given to the town they built in 1899. The town was laid out on a grid plan, a quick and convenient way to lay out a town, here with approximately 130 houses. Typical of company towns of that era, employees were segregated by class and race. Though Fisher's streets originally were unpaved, the town had wooden sidewalks.²⁵ Grocery stores, hospital, schools, all at the center of this town growth along with employment and production.

Even as these boom lumbers town are being developed and created, there is even more of an abandonment after the fall of these industries. As you go through sections of Northwest Louisiana with Leesville in present day you see the ruins of what has been left behind of a now extinct industry. The railroad tracks no longer in commission, the lumber mills and forestation now beyond time. Unemployment and poverty now the central components to Vernon Parish. Louisiana has not been able to renew this sense of development and now this industry is all but extinct. As time has shown Louisiana had been able to attach to the oil and gas industry and grow in that resource and been able

²⁵ Kingsley, Karen "When Lumber Was King, A Architectural History ," *63 Parishes* , n.d.

to create more capital.

Replanting the Forest

As quickly as the depression was felt on Louisiana and the whole country, there was a urgency to further develop the acres that had been existing. The speed with which the land was cut over between the late 1890s and 1929 was partially due to the fact that investors and industrialists bonded heavily. To meet interest payments on their land and mills, they increased cutting and production despite current market rates. Created a lumber glut, which decreased profits, which led to the need to again increase production, thus completing a dangerous cycle. Along with this development came the creation of the Kisatchie National Forest.

Creation of the Kisatchie National Forest, with 84,825 acres was used by Fort Polk for training, was a long and complex process that began in the 1920s and continued through the 1930s. The story begins with a local Kisatchie schoolteacher named Caroline Dormon. Her indefatigable efforts in protecting the pineland are legendary. One of FDR's Civil Work project that repaired states natural resources and at the same time gave jobs and financial capital back to the state's infrastructure.

With citizens now being able to return to work, President Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps and Vernon Parish was able to reemploy lumber workers back to their mills. The Depression hit the lumber industry as hard as many other industries throughout the country. Many people lost their land to taxes or cut their trees to raise money. Lumber mill production dipped to 567 million board feet, the lowest it had been since 1889. However, as a result of Roosevelt's attempts to put the country to work, forestry and forests grew nationwide. While the Forest Service was able to acquire and create the National Forests, the goal of reforestation adapted through a combination of Forest Service leadership and the hard work of young men who joined the Civilian Conservation Corps.

There were several policies and procedure needing to be completed and the first taken with Roosevelt was the creation of the New Deal. This youth-oriented work program took thousands of men aged 18 to 25 off the streets and put them into the nation's forests where they constructed roads, bridges, and firebreaks; planted trees; and controlled mosquitoes, among other tasks. By 1941, when World War II suddenly produced thousands of new jobs, the CCC had employed 2.7 million men. As Roosevelt continued to develop farming and agriculture in Louisiana, these jobs gave the towns of Leesville much more stability after The Great Depression.

Over the course of the CCC's existence in Louisiana, as many as fifty-three camps opened, and the youths constructed 3,000 bridges, 2,000 miles of telephone lines, 3,000 miles of truck trails, 3,000 miles of fire breaks, and eighteen fire towers. They also improved highways, built recreational and picnic areas, created Valentine Lake, fought forest fires, and raised 220 miles of fencing, enclosing 80,000 acres of pinelands. Burns adds that the CCC built levees, constructed state parks, surveyed the forest and state waterfowl, and helped construct air and army bases, including Camp Polk.²⁶ With the CCC, Louisiana was able to bring back components of what made them profitable in this time period of 1895-1910.

Along with repairing the cities, Vernon Parish was able to replant their natural resource and bring the lumber industry back in small scales. The history of the 5405th indicates that the company made a great contribution to the forest and the local community. By 1937, with the Winnfield camp's assistance, some nine million trees had been planted. Wise indicates that the CCC reforested 31,000 acres in Vernon Parish. As Vernon Parish restarted after the depression, it was becoming vibrant again and

²⁶ Smith, Steven D. A Good Home for a Poor Man: Fort Polk and Vernon Parish, 1800-1940. United States: Southeast Archeological Center, 1999. Pg. 133

rotated to WWII as the next opportunity to grow their small section of Louisiana. This was so critical in a time like this as Louisiana had suffered for almost fifteen years, rural areas could now return to work and find ways to work in Louisiana much important resources with sugar, cotton, and lumber. Just as there was a massive amount of home front preparations for WWII, Vernon Parish and Louisiana were also contributing.

Forest Fires Impact

Along with the ongoing economic crisis of the US economy in the Great Depression, there was now another severe environmental concern with Vernon Parish. No history of Vernon Parish or discussion of Louisiana forestry can be complete without reference to the problem of forest fires. Fire control was and continues to be one of the U.S. Forest Service's prime responsibilities, and in Vernon Parish it was a big job. Fires in the upland pinelands are accounted for every year. A report of fires in 1927 in the Forest Service's Vernon Parish Protection Area provides a glimpse of the problem during the early twentieth century. A report map plots the general locations of fires in the protected area, which included all of southeast Vernon Parish—Fort Polk, from Slagle south to Rosepine, and from west of Leesville east to Six Mile. In this area of 175,466 acres, some two hundred fires accounted for averaging fifty-one acres in size.

As lumber was marked and transported across to shipping markets, the remains were a heavy source of pollution and fuel for fires. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the basic essentials needed for lumber fire control was not what it is today. With the chemical imbalance and hazardous conditions, Vernon Parish had a heavy amount of natural forest fires. To put it all into perspective, the Forest Service eventually recognized in 1943 that controlled-burning was beneficial, having

experimented with it as early as 1915.²⁷ If not for local-environmental restrictions in Vernon Parish, the effect would persist too today.

As Louisiana History has shown, the importance of using our resources to market to other states outside of Louisiana has been our economic solutions. The railroad movement occurred, Louisiana was able to expand beyond the borders to deliver lumber, sugar, and cotton. In return this development brought jobs, stability, and economics to some of Louisiana most rural, run-down communities. When Vernon Parish lumber resources were eliminated, Louisiana had to find more resolutions and compromises to continue to give economic stability to small towns. At the turn of the century, Vernon Parish had rotated from a pioneer community to a more modern general-farm community. This modernization brought increased opportunities for social and political organization. It would not be until the middle of the twentieth century Louisiana would find their long-term economic stability in the oil fields. With those innovations, Louisiana has been able to restore some sense of continuity of what Vernon Parish was in the late nineteenth century. Huey P. Long continued this progress from what Vernon Parish was able to do for the majority of the 1890s with the Lumber Industry.

²⁷ Smith, Steven D. A Good Home for a Poor Man: Fort Polk and Vernon Parish, 1800-1940. United States: Southeast Archeological Center, 1999. Pg. 199-224

Conclusion

Vernon Parish's adaptability to the growing industrialization of the country was crucial for Louisiana economics. Louisiana was not able to sustain a long-term economic component like Pittsburgh had with steel production and Boston with textile manufactures. Louisiana and Vernon Parish were able to develop their natural resources with lumber, sugar, cotton.

Louisiana was able to attract outsiders to bring business to small parishes including Curtis Billeaud Breaux (my great grandfather) farming a sugar plantation in Broussard, Louisiana. With this sugar plantation, Breaux brought jobs and stability to a small number of relatives and was able to keep his family in Louisiana. He worked till his death in 1983 and gave his family a foundation of growing businesses in rural Louisiana while also giving back to communities in dire need of stability. Breaux's is one of thousands of Louisiana families that migrated to Louisiana in need of enterprise in business.

The story of western Louisiana, Fort Polk, and Vernon Parish is the story of the transformation of its piney woods landscape. Today, across the same landscape, one can see new buildings, structures built in the early twentieth century, and historic structures from the nineteenth century. In the ground are the remains of thousands of years of human occupation, resting layer upon layer. The land itself has been changed as virgin forests eradicated and then replanted; fields were opened, worked, and then left fallow; roads were opened and then abandoned. A study of the landscape can tell us much about our past.²⁸ Short term solutions leading to economic stability in Louisiana.

²⁸ Smith, Steven D. A Good Home for a Poor Man: Fort Polk and Vernon Parish, 1800-1940. United States: Southeast Archeological Center, 1999. Pg. 199-224

Photo Source Collection



Taken in 1940, Vernon Parish was now in a state of renewal from the New Deal job opportunities from FDR and as you can see in the background, Vernon Parish has started to cut more lumber in the years then what has occurred in The Great Depression. During this time period the cutting technology was improved significantly from what was available at the beginning of the twentieth century.

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