

Spring 5-31-2021

The Perils of an Extraction Economy: Vernon Parish, Louisiana, 1870-1940

John C. Creed Jr
jccreed@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

Recommended Citation

Creed, John C. Jr, "The Perils of an Extraction Economy: Vernon Parish, Louisiana, 1870-1940" (2021).
University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations. 2898.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/2898>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

The Perils of an Extraction Economy: Vernon Parish, Louisiana, 1870-1940

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

Table of Contents

Abstract -----	iv
Introduction -----	1
Literature Review -----	4
Vernon Parish -----	8
Rail Transportation -----	15
The Great Depression Impact -----	17
Replanting the Forest -----	20
Forest Fires Impact -----	22
Conclusion -----	24
Bibliography -----	27
Vita -----	28

List of Figures

Figure 1 (Vernon Parish Map 1930)-----	17
Figure 2 (Vernon Sawmill) -----	25

Abstract

From the Louisiana Purchase to present day, Louisiana has prospered from its strategic and commercial location. Nodes of commerce like The Port of New Orleans and Union Pacific railyard, among other locations, and the state's abundant natural resources gave it the potential to become an economic powerhouse. Among the state's natural resources, lumber provided a boom to industry in the 1880s, which peaked in the 1910s and provided Louisiana with state-wide economic development. This paper argues that Louisiana's lumber industry post-Reconstruction and a new period of commercialized railroad had a major economic impact on southwestern Louisiana, especially Vernon Parish. This formerly peripheral region of Louisiana grew from a small local region to become center of lumber production for the rest of the country. However, the precipitous decline of the lumber industry in the 1920s serves as a cautionary tale for the perils of the extraction industry.

Keywords: Lumber, Vernon, Extraction Railroads, Industrialization, The Great Depression

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 the start of Reconstruction, mass industrialization expanded throughout the northeast and midwest United States in cities such as Boston, New York, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. America's job market experienced significant growth as a new wave of immigrants coming primarily from southern and eastern Europe to provide for their families back home, these first-generation Americans sought sustainable and equitable job opportunities. Lack of industry and economic development, however, limited economic possibilities in the South. Both economic and environmental destruction the Civil War wrought left sections of the country heavily damaged, and few possibilities remained for its residents as well as potential immigrants.² The 13th amendment abolished slavery leaving many land-owners unprepared for the future economy. In Louisiana landowners turned from plantation production to other means of producing sugar and cotton.

Vernon Parish in Louisiana is an example of a locality that experienced a short-term economic boom followed by a precipitous decline once an extraction industry depleted a natural resource. This paper will conclude that the depletion of lumber left Vernon Parish, and much of Louisiana with few alternatives until reforestation and that environmental damage affected the region's agriculture. As an alternative to this deep decline and limited lumber quantities

¹ Steven D. Smith, *A Good Home for a Poor Man: Fort Polk and Vernon Parish, 1800-1940* (United States: Southeast Archeological Center, 1999) 2.

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

Leesville and Pine Bluff turned to building military bases and training facilities for the US Army. From the 1870s through the 1940s Vernon was always adapting to the circumstances in local urban development.

At the outset of the nineteenth century, the United States evolved from a semi-rural, agrarian nation into a turn-of-the-century industrial power. During Reconstruction, Americans moved westward into new lands and engaged in extraction industries. Railroads resulted directly from this migration and industry. According to the Library of Congress, Americans had laid approximately 45,000 miles of track prior to 1871. Between 1871 and 1900, they added another 170,000 miles.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 with a terminus in their city.⁴ For the first time, Congress funded independent railroad companies promoting a new era of transportation.

New Orleans was an early adopter of railroad transportation connections. Beginning in the 1830s, a line connected the city to a port facility to Lake Pontchartrain. The geography of the city was not favorable to railroad construction. New Orleans was surrounded by swamps, rivers, and bays off the Gulf of Mexico. But the city's commercial importance nonetheless attracted substantial railroad connections that facilitated the shipment of cotton and sugar both to other southern states and the national markets beyond.

With New Orleans as a terminus, Louisiana became a leader in railroad transportation. The Missouri Pacific Railroad (MPC) originated from several lines stretching across Missouri in

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*, - https://www.up.com/aboutup/special_trains/heritage/mopac/index.htm.

the central Gulf Region, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana. Later in the 1870s, financier Jay Gould purchased several small railroads: the Kansas Pacific, the Denver Pacific, and the Central Pacific. Gould was one of the chief railroad executives, developers, and most importantly financiers. Fearing the rival Missouri Pacific might affect his profits, Gould took control of that railroad and became its new president. A classical “robber baron,” he employed unorthodox and sometimes controversial methods to increase his profits and eliminate competition by selecting key acres to lay tracks. One such area was southwest Louisiana. However, the Gould empire declined, however, during the Panic of 1884 and after his death in 1892. When the depression ended in 1885, Gulf Coast Lines, a railroad system with three main lines from New Orleans to Houston, combined with the Missouri Pacific Company (M.P.C.).⁵

Further railroad growth came from the unlikely regions of southwest and eastern Louisiana. Lake Charles, Port Hudson, and Clinton--as well as Vernon Parish--emerged as previously unused natural resources became a means to kickstart a renewal in state-wide economic development. Central and southwest Louisiana’s cotton, sugar, and lumber produced high-volume job opportunities for newcomers from Mississippi and Arkansas as well as families moving back into the state. Subsistence and market farmers established new communities in what had once been the backwoods. New schools, churches, and hamlets appeared as the population increased at the beginning of the twentieth century. The growth of the railroads and improved post-Civil War job patterns led to the development of Vernon Parish.⁶ This thesis provides a case study describing Vernon and lumber.

The development did not last, unfortunately, for the long term. Louisiana’s lumber resource

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

⁶ Steven D. Smith, *A Good Home for a Poor Man*, 12.

was eventually eradicated. Depletion of this resource left Louisiana with limited opportunity and local disappointment. This thesis provides a case study describing Vernon parish and its lumber operations. Eventually the disappointment of Vernon and of the decline of the lumber industry, leaves the parish behind and in the 20th century the pattern is repeated with petroleum in many areas of the state.

Literature Review

Louisiana initial prosperity began in agriculture, from the 1700s to 1800s with the biggest component in cotton. Geographically lining up with the Mississippi and connecting railroad lines to Texas, St. Louis and along the south, Louisiana has always been a state of economic opportunity if somewhat limited.

With the end of slavery, many historians write about the economic issues in the South. Paul M. Gaston, former professor at the University of Virginia describes the direction of the New South post-slavery as it sought economic opportunities in his book, *The New South Creed*. Along with economic difficulties, Gaston presents a “myth” the South would emerge after the Civil War and Reconstruction as a new economic power with education reform and prosperity while still holding on to its antebellum mindset. Gaston cites articles in *DeBow’s Review* that called for the region to industrialize, diversify its staple-crop agricultural system, seek immigrants and capital from the North and Europe, and infuse the region with a critical new spirit of business

enterprise. Gaston also writes that those like Edwin DeLeon, an author, diplomat, and ex-Confederate propagandist, focused on the South's development the late 1880s. DeLeon believed that increasing numbers of southerners realized that a New South program of industrial progress, diversified agriculture, and cooperation with the North was the only hope for the region.⁷ The Northern resources and industrialization became major elements in South's rural territories. With territories such as Boston, New York, and Pittsburgh creating factories for steel and textiles production, partnership with the North was essential to be economically viable. During this same time period the south pivoted to a more industrial platform with having a key partner in the north.

Where Gaston focuses on myth, George B. Tindall emphasizes the chronology and history of development in the post-Civil War South. With southern transition from agriculture into industry, *The Emergence of the New South* provides an in-depth narrative of the south and highlights the numerous challenges southerners faced between 1913-1945 industry brought train transportation. Like Gaston, Tindall's focus is with South's transitioning into a primarily agricultural and urban environment to one of industrialization and modernization. Tindall provides the reader an image of the many social, political, and economical changes that are presented with the south. He describes social issues including the creation of the Ku Klux Klan, the Age of Segregation, and the Emergence of Public Services. With images, tables, and annotations this is an ideal narrative to guide the reader of the life and times of the South in the early twentieth century.⁸

Vernon Parish and its long-standing relation with the lumber industry serves as the focus

⁷ Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking*. United States: NewSouth Books, 2011.

⁸ George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South*, Louisiana State University Press, (1967).

of Donald Millet of McNeese State University. His essay, “The Lumber Industry of ‘Imperial’ Calcasieu: 1865-1900,” emphasizes the economic development Louisiana with a focus on lumber and transportation.

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.⁹

Millet chronicles the work done by parish representatives and politicians to promote lumber as a lynchpin of the economy. With a great demand for lumber to rebuild war-torn areas of the South and an 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’s research makes him an essential author for this topic. Millet is not alone in his study of economics in Vernon Parish.

Due to the research limitations and traveling constraints with the Coronavirus pandemic, Stephen D Smith’s book *A Good Home for a Poor Man* was the leading research text for this thesis. Along with showing the lumber industry, it connected all items of research with Vernon Parish and the lumber industry. Steven D. Smith, of the University of South Carolina, details the improvements and challenges for both Fort Polk and Vernon Parish. *A Good Home for a Poor Man* is an extensive study of Vernon Parish, chronicles its development, and examines its emergence as an economic engine in post-Civil War Louisiana. Figures, maps, and exhaustive research making Smith’s book one of the leading studies of Vernon Parish and the lumber

⁹ 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>.

industry. The lack of adequate farmland in the region existed because there existed an asset of immense value to emerging twentieth-century America—longleaf pine. Smith’s study illuminates the history of the men and women who made this pineland their home from the days of the first pioneers to 1940.¹⁰

George Alvin Stokes Sr., a New Orleans resident, also writes of the lumber boom in southwest Louisiana. His 1954 dissertation “Lumbering in Southwest Louisiana: A Study of the Industry as a Culture-Geographic Factor” is an inquiry into the nature, origin, and permanence of cultural forms and patterns peculiar to lumbering in southwest Louisiana. Vernon Parish sits in one of the major forest districts in the state, which extends southward from the town of Many to Lake Charles, with its eastern and western boundaries the bottom lands of the Calcasieu and Sabine rivers. Here, as elsewhere in Louisiana, lumbering reached its peak in the early twentieth century. This merits close examination because the demand for southern timber created a cultural change. The lumber industry did not touch Southern forest reserves until it exhausted the forests of the north. Prior to 1880, southern forests tracts filled only local demands with only small quantities of lumber shipped out of the region. Once the lumber industry moved southward, lumbering in Louisiana entered its most lucrative but also destructive phase.¹¹ Stokes’s text provides numerous maps and a complete bibliography to give the reader the best perspective on the Lake Charles/ Southwest Louisiana regions.

As the parish seat of Vernon Parish, Leesville and its development warrant close examination. A leading historian of Leesville, William Theodore Block Jr., published nine books on East Texas history, several academic articles in historical journals, and was a guest columnist

¹⁰ Steven D. Smith, *A Good Home for a Poor Man*, 9.

¹¹ George A. Stokes, "Lumbering in Southwest Louisiana: A Study of the Industry as a Culterio - Geographic Factor." (1954), *LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses*, 8079. https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/8079

for the *Beaumont Enterprise* for that Texas city. Block focuses on the latter half of Vernon-1905 to 1908. His most compelling study is how Leesville fared during the Great Panic of 1907. Railroad and export orders kept the firm in business despite a stagnant domestic retail market and low prices. The mill introduced improvements such as the new Wilson gang saw and the 1,000 horsepower Corliss engine. The company also fire-proofed the powerhouse with brick masonry.¹² Despite problems throughout the rest of the state and nation, Leesville remained economically stable.

These authors have provided sources and research that provide a vivid image of the life and times of Vernon Parish in their renewal. These historians presented a compelling argument that Leesville, Fort Polk, and Vernon Parish were the heartbeat of an agricultural and industrial expansion. Each author offers unique perspectives on how Vernon Parish developed industrially and socially.

Vernon Parish

Prior to 1880, timber production in Louisiana met local needs while millers and loggers confined their activities to areas along waterways. As the lumber industry expanded, though, output increased as “These were the days of giant trees, giant mills, and giant lumbermen.”¹³ Untouched national resources were now in high demand. This lumber ‘boom’ was the result of a growing demand for lumber, the depletion of lumber sources in the Northeast and the Midwest,

¹² W.T. Block, *Gateway to the Pineys: A Glimpse of Leesville, Louisiana, Between 1905 and 1908*, <http://usgwarchives.net/la/calcasieu/block/leesville.htm>.

¹³ Anna C. Burns, “Frank B. Williams: Cypress Lumber King,” *Journal of Forest History*, July 1980.

large tracts of timberland at low prices, and technological improvement in removing lumber from the forest and swamps.

Before the Civil War Louisiana had been a mostly rural environment, with few economic resources. The state's landscape and natural resources influenced the region's settlement, culture, wealth, poverty, and industry. After the Civil War, the state needed an economic plan. Railroad construction encountered numerous obstacles such as lack of capital, political instability, and corruption. The financial panic of 1873 further hindered railroad construction.¹⁴

Vernon Parish sits in west-central Louisiana in the midst of the expansive forests. 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 local needs and were just beginning to have a national impact. The parish was founded in 1871 as a result of this lumber production which did not happen until later and was used for the purpose of business commerce.

The extension of railroads into rural areas of the state gave access to the lumber sources. Soon, large sections of the state became vast "stumpscapes" in a short amount of time. Rapacious mill owners left barren, cutover land as they moved on to yet another stand of virgin timber elsewhere in the country, and Vernon Parish possessed 4.3 million acres of Louisiana virgin timber. The parish's landscape transformed as an isolated area now featured huge, industrial plants with a sawmill at the center and scores of purpose-built company towns. Accessing the mills and their towns were the ever-expanding railroads.

Industrial lumbering had a major impact on Vernon Parish. In addition to the incalculable loss of vast virgin tracts of timber, whole new towns – company towns built by lumber

¹⁴ Donald J. Millet, "Southwest Louisiana Enters the Railroad Age: 1880-1900," 165.

companies – spring up across the landscape. With these towns came churches, schools, and hospitals. George Alvin Stokes writes: “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 existed in Louisiana with a greater singleness of function than those devoted to lumbering.”¹⁵ What follows are examples of the mills, numerous businesses or mills immersed as part of the lumber boom.

These sawmills along with bringing business to Vernon Parish constructed small town centers that served as grocery stores, hospitals, and Vernon became a capital for Louisiana urban development. Among the businesses active during the lumber boom, Nona Mills in Leesville provided a possible answer in the 1870s. A sleepy, rural town with few economic resources and searching for financial opportunities, Leesville served a large area of surrounding farms and plantations and possessed only a few mercantile businesses that served as cotton and produce factors from the farmers. In 1871, Leesville became parish seat for the newly created Vernon Parish, but it would be another quarter-century before Leesville incorporated itself as a city. When the Kansas City Southern Railroad reached Leesville in 1897, it brought a highly sought economic stability to the area. Lumber barons around the country saw the opportunity and bought acres of land covered with prime virgin pine. 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 town expanded and by 1900, Leesville boasted of a “brand new” parish courthouse, ten general stores, “four drug stores, seven

¹⁵ 1880-1925, Fricker Historical Preservation Services LLC, (2007) 10, https://www.crt.state.la.us/Assets/OCD/hp/nationalregister/historic_contexts/The_Louisiana_Lumber_Boom_c1880-1925.pdf.

lawyers, seven doctors,” and various other business houses and tradesmen.¹⁶

A second lumbering operation, Pickering Hills of Kansas City, purchased 130,847 acres in Sabine and Vernon Parishes, much of which was within what is now the Fort Polk military facility. Even though headquartered out of state, Pickering understood the resources and industrial potential of Vernon. With a reputation in Texas and western Louisiana for its destructive “cut out and get out” business practices, Pickering owned more than 100,000 acres in Texas and had holding in Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma.¹⁷ The mill at Pickering initially rated at 150,000 board feet daily, but around 1904 it increased to as much as 200,000 feet per day. Employing more than around 500 workers, it could cut boards as long as thirty-six feet.

A third operation, run by Henry Lutcher and G. Bedell Moore, came to Texas’s southern coast from Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Lutcher and Moore expanded into Louisiana in the late 1870s, purchased some 60,000 acres and owned eventually 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.

A fourth operation, Gulf Lumber, built a mill and town just south of Leesville in the small, abandoned town of Stables. As the company depleted the timber, the company reached deeper into the forests and built the town of Fullerton. Until the 1920s, the United States was slow in carrying resources across state borders and trying to work with neighboring companies over the same natural resources. The Kansas City Southern Railroad and Nona Mills in Vernon Parish set

¹⁶ E. W. Wise, “Tall Pines II: A History of Vernon Parish and Its People”, (Sulphur: 1988), 4-5, 13-21.

¹⁷ Donna Fricker, Historical Context, “The Louisiana Lumber Boom, c. 1880-1925”, Fricker Historical Preservation Services LLC, (2007) 9.

the example of what states needed to have for a sustainable synergy between the two partners.

All four of these mills brought outside investment to Vernon, which during that period had hardly occurred in urban Louisiana. Along with outside business, these mills built local town infrastructure with hospitals, schools, grocery stores now becoming a center for business. This community construction though, was eventually abandoned when towns such as Leesville declined after the fall of the industry.

The expansion of transportation and railyard construction in southwest Louisiana, most notably in and around Lake Charles, facilitated an extensive and thorough transport of lumber. In pine timber operations, workers cut timber hauled it on cables to a train traveling on a temporary rail line. Cut trees were then 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 then went to the sawmill. At the mill, workers off-loaded the logs into a mill pond, which formed the center of operations for virtually all pine timber industrial plants.

During the “Lumber Boom,” 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 steam powered almost every machine that moved and processed the lumber. A skidder, a vehicle specific for hauling lumber, pulled logs onto tracks where a loader transferred them to flatcars connected to a train engine that would take the logs to the mill. Once there, workers dumped the logs into the mill pound for a very brief storage period before they carried them to the saws inside the mill. Even as these boom lumber towns are being developed and created, there is even more of an abandonment after the fall of these industries.

Typical of company towns of that era, employees were segregated by class and race. As James R. Green labels the lumberjacks of western Louisiana were “redbones,” a people of

fighting stock with a violent history, who were part Negro, part Indian and part Caucasian. White timber workers could move to the nearby farms of relatives and friends during strikes and layoffs, but black workers lacked the sustaining power of an extended family. They were peons and convicts on lease who were forced to toil in the forest and mills to work off their 'debts'. Jobs in the lumber industry, especially the sawmills, forced men who were used to the irregular pace of farm chores into a highly disciplined work routine. The sawmill workers (largely black and accounted for 70% of the work force) faced difficult, disciplined and very dangerous working conditions.¹⁸

Green describes the lumber towns of the Sabine region in a manner that recalls descriptions of cotton textile factory villages, including dangerous working conditions in sawmill environments. Saw machines and the mills operations produced conditions that resulted in injuries and fatalities. In 1919, even after state safety regulations had been passed, 125 deaths and 16,950 accidents were reported in the Southern lumber industry.¹⁹ Even with these circumstances, operations were able to produce lumber in an efficient (if dangerous) manner.

After 1880, rail transportation supplemented rather than supplanted water transportation. 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, and four narrow-gauge railroads totaling thirty miles branched in various directions into the yellow-pine forests. By 1881 the large quantities of lumber made their way to the Mexican ports of Tampico and Tuxpan. Calcasieu lumbermen were thinking of opening trade with the five Central American republics.²⁰

With the lumber industry's rise, people prospered from employment and corporate taxation. But the economy's sharp rise had an equally sharp fall when mills closed, and

¹⁸ James R. Green, "The Brotherhood of Timber Workers 1910-1913: A Radical Response to Industrial Capitalism in the Southern U. S. A.," *Past & Present*, no. 60 (1973): 161-200. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650194>.

¹⁹ James R. Green, "The Brotherhood of Timber Workers 1910-1913, 167.

²⁰ Donald J. Millet, "Southwest Louisiana Enters the Railroad Age: 1880-1900."

companies left. Seventy percent of the land lost its forests, and the effects were devastating.²¹ Such a decrease of production visited numerous problems on the parish. By the late 1920s and the early 1930s, lumber resourced from Vernon Parish dwindled. Lumber barons and laborer's migrated west, leaving locals with few avenues of employment. With a decade-long economic depression afflicting the country, the timing could not have been worse.

More than a decade later, a 1943 Department of Agriculture publication noted that only three percent of Louisiana's longleaf pine forest supported uncut old growth forest. The value of Vernon Parish land dropped from \$40 million to \$6 million.²² Lumber company owners unburdened themselves of their now-useless lands and sold them to the federal government. The effect on the economy and people was swift and devastating. Town growth stagnated, commerce ground to a halt, and innovation was cast aside as Vernon Parish reverted to pre-lumber economics.

As quickly as "boom towns" created excitement and promise, a sense of abandonment followed when the companies departed. Ruins of the extinct industry now dot the area around Leesville. The wilderness has crept over long-unused railroads tracks and old the lumber mills, and unemployment and poverty have become central components as Vernon Parish has been unable to renew the sense of lumber development in the days of the lumber industry. Over time, Louisiana has moved on to the oil and gas industry and created more capital investment but Vernon Parish still languishes.

²¹ Donna Fricker, Historical Context "The Louisiana Lumber Boom."

²² Steven D. Smith, *A Good Home for a Poor Man*. 114.

Rail Transportation

With the surplus of lumber in Louisiana, out-of-state train transportation companies were financial motivated to bring their business to Louisiana. Vernon lay just along the railroad lines running South of Shreveport and made connections with St. Louis, making Vernon a perfect destination for 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. 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.²³ 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.²⁴ Along with the Kansas City Southern Railroad, the lumber-transportation

²³ Steven D. Smith, *A Good Home for a Poor Man*, 107.

²⁴ Donald J. Millet, "The Lumber Industry of "Imperial" Calcasieu,"53

system and future railroads 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 lumber operations constructed the parish while the government received increased revenues through taxation. With this taxation, Vernon assembled new roads and maintained 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.²⁵ 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.

²⁵ Steven D. Smith, *A Good Home for a Poor Man*, 160.

Figure 1

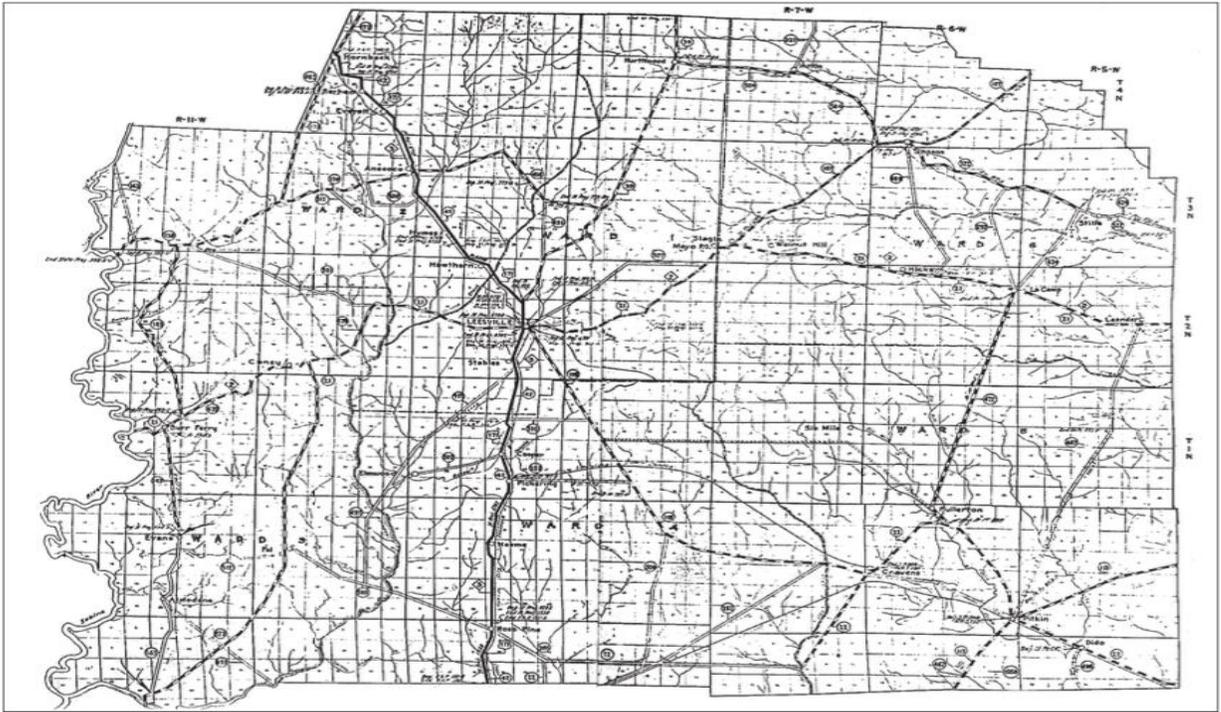


Figure 40 — Vernon Parish map, 1930 (Louisiana Highway Commission 1930).

The Great Depression Impact

With a rise of employment, and the deforestation with the lumber boom, the epic decline was just as precipitous as the rise. The economic decline effectively ended the Vernon lumber industry and brought an end to Louisiana's short time lumber boom. 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. 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.²⁶

As a mostly agricultural state in the Deep South, Louisiana experienced a deep downturn in the 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 altogether. 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. Vernon Parish and Leesville the prosperity of had been reduced with now serious problems in the lumber industry. The lumber operations removed the major resource leaving just blank acres of land and few alternatives for production and commerce.

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.²⁷

Along with these ramifications came all the hardship Louisiana had to endure. The depression brought a sharp decline in the demand for forest products. Along with a decline in

²⁶ Steven D. Smith, David G. Anderson, Mary Beth, Reed, Joseph W, Joseph, *Archaeology, History, and Predictive Modeling*, "Research at Fort Polk, 1972-2002," United States: University of Alabama Press, 2003, 476.

²⁷ James E. Fickle, "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>.

production of raw materials, and a collapse of employment and income.²⁸

During the Depression, there were several years of decreases in materials, work force and more because natural resources had been depleted. How Louisiana was able to counter this decline was with land proposals 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 of Vernon Parish were still in demand.

Through the spring and summer of 1940, military vehicles and green-clad soldiers were seen more and more frequently marching and convoing 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 maneuver area. 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 war with Japan and Germany that arrived in 1941. The demands of the military mitigated effects of the Great Depression but resulted in very small improvements for Louisiana's economic conditions.

²⁸ Michael Curtis, "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>.

Replanting the Forest

As quickly as the depression was felt on Louisiana and the whole country, there was an 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. This 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 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. As the first female employee of the United States Forestry Service and a native of north Louisiana Natchitoches Parish, her work as a conservationist was paramount to lumber production. With 84,825 acres used by Fort Polk for training one of FDR's Civil Work project this repaired states natural resources and provided jobs and financial capital back to the state's infrastructure.²⁹

With citizens now being able to return to work, President Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and Vernon Parish was able to reemploy a limited number of 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

²⁹ Steven D. Smith, David G. Anderson, Mary Beth, Reed, Joseph, W Joseph, *Archaeology, History, and Predictive Modeling*, 449-451.

1889. However, because 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. 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.³⁰ With the CCC, Louisiana was able to bring back components of what made them profitable in this time period of 1895-1910.

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.

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

³⁰ Steven D. Smith, *A Good Home for a Poor Man*, 133.

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.³¹ As Vernon Parish restarted after the depression, it was becoming vibrant again and 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

The continuous economic crisis of The Great Depression presented Vernon with another difficult environmental concern. No history of Vernon Parish or discussion of Louisiana forestry can be complete without reference to forest fires. Fire control 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 occur 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 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.

³¹ Steven D. Smith, *A Good Home for a Poor Man*, 136.

Lumber was being 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 essentials required for lumber fire control was not adequate for modern time. 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 1915.³² If not for local-environmental restrictions in Vernon Parish the effect would persist to this day.

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. Our transfer 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 petroleum. With those innovations, Louisiana has been able to restore some sense of continuity Vernon Parish 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.

³² Steven D. Smith, *A Good Home for a Poor Man*, 199-224.

Conclusion

As one travels through sections of Northwest Louisiana and Leesville in present day one sees the ruins of what has been left behind of a now extinct industry. The railroad tracks are no longer in commission, the lumber mills and forestation now beyond time. Unemployment and poverty are 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 substitute the oil and gas industry and grow with that resource and been able to create more jobs.

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.³³ This was all just a temporary boom, not a long-term economic solution that left Louisiana without alternatives. Fortunately, some sections of the state found their solution in the petroleum industry.

Figure 2



This photo 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

³³ Steven D. Smith, *A Good Home for a Poor Man*, 199-224.

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.

Bibliography

- Block, W.T. *Gateway to the Pineys: A Glimpse of Leesville, Louisiana, Between 1905 and 1908*. <http://usgwararchives.net/la/calcasieu/block/leesville.htm>.
- 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.
- Clark, Thomas D. "The Post-Civil War Economy in the South." *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (1966). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23873283>.
- 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). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4231349>.
- 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). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4233613>.
- Fricker, Donna *Historical Context*. "The Louisiana Lumber Boom, c. 1880-1925" Fricker Historical Preservation Services LLC. (2007). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4230882>.
- Green, James R. "The Brotherhood of Timber Workers 1910-1913: A Radical Response to Industrial Capitalism in the Southern U. S. A." *Past & Present*, no. 60 (1973). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650194>.
- Kingsley, Karen. "When Lumber Was King, A Architectural History." *63 Parishes*. n.d.
- Missouri Pacific Railroad." *Union Pacific: Missouri Pacific Railroad*. https://www.up.com/aboutup/special_trains/heritage/mopac/index.htm.
- Railroads in the Late 19th Century - American Memory Timeline- Classroom Presentation | Teacher Resources." Planning D-Day (April 2003). Library of Congress Information Bulletin.
- Smith, Steven D. *A Good Home for a Poor Man: Fort Polk and Vernon Parish, 1800-1940*. United States: Southeast Archeological Center. 1999.
- Stokes, Louisiana State University, Alvin George Stokes "Lumbering in Southwest Louisiana: A Study of the Industry As a Culture-Geographic Factor" May 1954
- Warner, B. *History of the Missouri Pacific Railroad*, Missouri Pacific Lines, 2002.
- Wise, E.W. "Tall Pines II: A History of Vernon Parish and Its People" (Sulphur: 1988).

Vita

John Curtis Creed

John Creed was born and raised from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Received a Bachelor of Arts in History with a minor in political science from Centenary College of Louisiana in 2019. He was employed as a Graduate Assistant Coach for The University of New Orleans Men's Basketball program as of May of 2019. He has previously researched and wrote of railroad expansion during his time at Centenary.