

# The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta as Plantation Country

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“The Mississippi Delta,” wrote David Lewis Cohn, “begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg,”<sup>1</sup> Cohn’s depression-era account is past history. The shell of the Peabody is no longer a fit place for the planter aristocracy to mingle, and Catfish Row in Vicksburg is merely a memory of the black culture that once flourished in the Delta. In between these two cities that bound the Delta on the north and south, the four and one-half million acres of this great alluvial empire are still yielding the bumper crops that have kept the Delta among the richest agricultural regions of the nation for decades.

The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is plantation country, and it has been plantation country ever since the Choctaw cession of 1820 opened the lower end of the basin to settlement. In 1860, at the height of the prewar cotton prosperity, only nine of the 95 agricultural operators in Issaquena County, Mississippi, owned no slaves, compared with a state-wide average of approximately 50 percent nonslave owners.<sup>2</sup> Today’s Delta plantation is a far cry from the fabled antebellum estate, but it is hard to think of any region in the South where there are more self-proclaimed planters and fewer just plain farmers than in the Delta.

The continuity of the planter tradition was not a foregone conclusion. In fact, the largest landowners were not planters at all. Even the

biggest plantations were puny in size compared with the hundreds of thousands of acres held by railroad companies and by groups of land speculators. The story of how these lands came into and passed out of the possession of a handful of individuals begins and ends with the plantation, but beginning with the years of postwar Republican rule and continuing on through the first decade of this century, the State of Mississippi and, later, the Illinois Central Railroad, tried to promote an alternative via the encouragement of small farmers. It is a story of misunderstanding and false hopes of the sort that always seems to surround tales of railroads, money, politics, and land.

### THE ANTEBELLUM DELTA

Issaquena, Washington, and Yazoo counties, Mississippi, were opened for settlement after 1820. Another Choctaw cession in 1830 and the Chickasaw cession of 1832 opened up the rest of the Delta. The earliest plantations occupied the high ground of the natural levees, the only places that offered an even chance of staying dry when the Mississippi River went on its annual rampage. Planters came north from the long-established Natchez district, and they moved south from the western Tennessee and Kentucky districts. Birthplaces of the earliest Delta planters included all of the older cotton states, and a not inconsiderable number came from England and Scotland. The Alcorn family, Coahoma County planters, were from the Bluegrass of Kentucky. The five Worthington brothers were of Virginia stock, via Maryland and Kentucky.

These early planters bought and sold through factors in Memphis, Vicksburg, and New Orleans. They had easy access to these ports, and with one another, via the steamboats that called at dozens of landings on both sides of the river. The landings, and the little hamlets that grew up around them, kept shifting in constant adjustment to bank cavings along the main channel. Practically none of the antebellum town and transportation system remains today, having long since come to rest in the birdsfoot of that other Mississippi Delta—the one in the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>3</sup>

Planters owning fewer than 50 slaves outnumbered the large planters, although better than 95% of the cotton crop in Bolivar and Issaquena counties was produced by slaves in 1850 and 1860.<sup>4</sup> As the

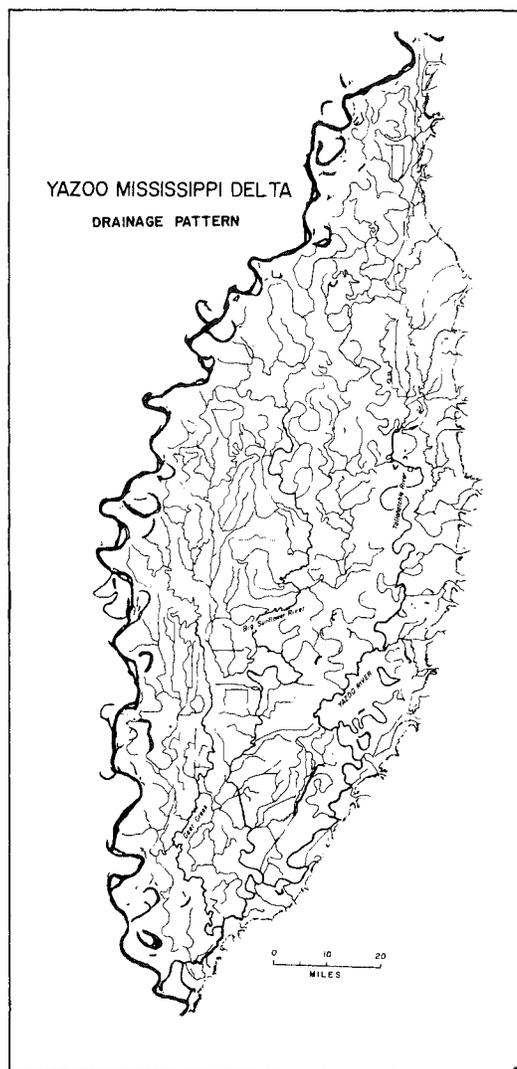


Fig. 1. Yazoo Mississippi Delta drainage pattern.

Delta's fame as cotton country spread, new plantations appeared along the Mississippi River and also along the rivers that drain the basin itself. Depending on the season and the draft of the vessel, river craft were able to reach up the Yazoo, the Sunflower, the Tallahatchie, and Deer Creek, into the heart of the alluvial valley (Fig. 1).

Settlements along the smaller streams followed the same pattern as those along the Mississippi: they were confined to the natural levees and to isolated patches of high ground that normally were above overflow. The backswamps away from the levees were unused.<sup>5</sup>

### THE LAND

Physical descriptions of the Yazoo Delta revolve around one central fact: the Mississippi River drops only 110 feet in the 185 miles a crow would have to fly to reach Vicksburg from Memphis. The gradient of 7 inches per mile produces the meanders that form in every trickle of water flowing across this nearly horizontal surface, as well as the meander scars that form the principal topography away from the water courses. Stream flow is seasonal—in direction, that is. When the Mississippi River floods, the waters back up into the Yazoo, then into its tributaries, and so on, in turn, into every bayou and creek in the Delta. The backswamps, lying midway between the major streams, are the ultimate reservoirs of the excess.

This physical geography of the Delta was known and recorded by the 1850s.<sup>6</sup> By 1880 there was a fair knowledge of soils and vegetation.<sup>7</sup> The best soils were thought to be the buckshot clays that graded away from the levees toward the backswamps. The buckshot lands were also subject to overflow, however, and they were among the first to be enclosed with artificial levees.

Vegetation was a hardwood mixture. Sweet gum and an undergrowth of dogwood dominated a narrow strip of land above overflow. A mixture of oak, hickory, and walnut occupied the forelands of the natural levees. In the lower lands behind the levees the sweet gum grew to great size, along with a variety of species of oak. Cypress fringed the wettest lands, growing where no other tree survived. Dense cane brakes formed an undergrowth between heavily forested patches (Fig. 2).

Despite soils which were richer in nutrients than any Department of the Interior scientists had ever studied, and despite a reputation as prime cotton country, in 1880 the Yazoo Delta's millions of undrained acres were mainly a hardwood forest swamp ruled by snakes and black bears.

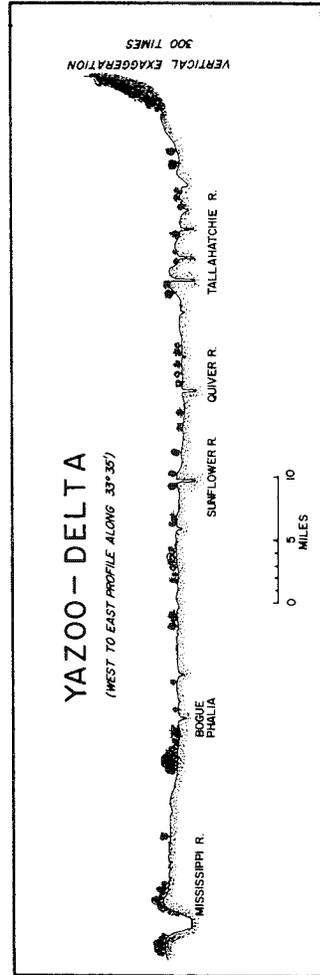


Fig. 2. Yazoo-Delta.

### MISSISSIPPI'S EFFORTS TO PROMOTE MIGRATION

There were 170,000 people living in the Delta in 1880. For all this population, there were but two towns between Memphis and Vicksburg that contained more than 1,000 people within their limits. There was but 30 miles of railroad track in the Delta, and that was narrow gauge. Levees built before the war lay in ruin. The forest had begun to creep back into the Indian old fields and into the clearings that had been made by antebellum planters for now-abandoned cotton fields.

The amount of land that was abandoned or reclaimed by the state for back taxes was in the millions of acres.

By 1878 the state auditor of Mississippi held 51 percent of all lands in the Delta. These lands were producing no tax revenue, creating an even heavier burden for the tax-paying citizens. The cause was not so much the direct effects of war as it was the product of postwar land speculation. Cheap Delta lands, selling often at a few cents an acre, were grabbed up by speculators who, in the time-honored fashion, assumed that they could turn them over at a profit. When they could not, the lands reverted to the state in lieu of unpaid taxes. With more than half the lands off the tax rolls, and with only one of every three acres of owned farmland improved, the Delta was ripe for development and cried out for the capital to make it happen.

The anticipated influx of yeoman farmers did not materialize, however. Hordes of European immigrants were already crossing the 95th meridian in the West, breaking lands markedly inferior to those in the Delta, but Mississippi was ignored. The number of aliens in the state of Mississippi actually decreased by a few thousand between 1870 and 1890—a period when immigration to the United States averaged around a quarter of a million new arrivals every year.<sup>8</sup>

The dismal record of attracting migrants was not for want of trying. The Radical legislature had ratified a new state constitution in 1868 that established a Commissioner of Immigration and Agriculture for the state. The office was patterned after those extant in the Middle West, but with a twist. The first incumbent of the office, Richard Griggs, a black from Issaquena County, openly discouraged European immigration and instead promoted direct migration from Africa as well as relocations to Mississippi of blacks living in the older cotton states. Griggs was speaking for the Radicals who had put him in office, and who feared that Mississippi blacks would be displaced by Europeans just as Chinese were then being brought to sugar plantations in Louisiana. A larger white vote was to be avoided.<sup>9</sup>

In 1874 the Adelbert Ames administration issued a “Guide to Mississippi” that urged prospective migrants to consider the state. The document itself illustrated the problem. Most of it consisted of a 114-page, fine-print list of tax delinquent lands that had been reclaimed by the state and were being offered for sale.<sup>10</sup>

Planters, merchants, and small farmers alike desired more immi-

gration, but there was considerable argument over just who those new immigrants should be. The planters were landlords, hence they desired tenants; they needed labor, not an expanded class of freeholders whose very presence suggested an alternative to the plantation. So planter interests favored an immigration of the most specialized sort, one that would benefit them.

Republican interests looked to the Middle West as a model. In 1874 the Radical legislature passed a law entitling each family head to 160 acres of land after two years of residence and payment of an \$8 fee. Immigration societies were encouraged, and agents were appointed to distribute literature in Bloomington, Illinois, Columbus, Ohio, and Indianapolis. Fifteen-hundred Northerners came to Mississippi on an excursion train in 1878 but, as would happen again in later years, a yellow fever epidemic turned the trip into a fiasco. Later efforts attempted to attract Germans, English, and Swedes, but those efforts ended in failure, also.<sup>11</sup>

Delta newspaper editors boomed their region, proclaiming a new prosperity. Notices on dozens of properties appeared in local advertising. Most of the holdings were several hundreds of acres each, divided about equally between deadenings and cleared fields, to be sold with house, gin, and "necessary cabins" intact. Newer properties were being developed, too. There was, indeed, a renaissance taking place on the plantation: "Instead of old dilapidated cabins in one little bunch on each plantation new and comfortable houses have sprung up in pleasant localities."<sup>12</sup>

The real ambivalence on the immigration issue came not from the planters' attitudes, but rather from the yoke of Reconstruction that hung around the necks of white Mississippians, a condition related directly to the presence of the Yankee and his ideas. This conflicted with "New South" ideology which was based firmly upon the notion of attracting Northern money. A corollary, which kept reappearing, but which was much less enthusiastically embraced, was that Northern farmers were needed to build up the South. The editor of the *Greenwood Times* speculated in print as to how this might be done:<sup>13</sup>

We can probably convince them that we have no K.K.'s in our whole country, and that we have men here from the north who helped to conquer us, and who are doing well, made money since the war, and have as many friends as anybody.

Perhaps the crow he was eating stuck in his throat, for he continued:

And we can say if you are not satisfied with what we say, . . . send a reliable man to report back, and if you are afraid he will be K.K.'d pick one whose life is worth very little, . . . have [his life] insured for four times its value and make money at the rate of four hundred percent on your investment.

If that was an invitation, it was little wonder that the farmers of Illinois and Indiana respectfully declined it.

### ENTRY OF THE ILLINOIS CENTRAL

The great bulk of the tax delinquent Yazoo Delta lands held by the state did not pass directly into the ownership of small farmers, nor even into the possession of the established planter class. Most of it went to two companies: The Delta and Pine Land Company and the Memphis and Vicksburg Railroad. The legal complexities of both deals, and the repercussions that resulted, were to play a central role in Mississippi's economy and politics for years thereafter.<sup>14</sup>

Delta and Pine Land was a Chicago-based syndicate speculating heavily in southern timber lands; most of their holdings were on the Yazoo-Tallahatchie side of the Delta. The Memphis and Vicksburg's holdings were on the Mississippi River side, consisting of a strip of land, after the fashion of federal land grants to railroads, stretching the length of the Delta.

These developments were watched carefully by the Illinois Central Railroad, the company that had pioneered the land-grant railroad concept of on-line colonization in central Illinois in the 1850s. The Illinois Central's system was extended south from Cairo, Illinois to New Orleans in 1873 through acquisition of two, smaller, financially troubled roads. The Chicago-New Orleans main line skirted to the east of the Delta, from Memphis to Jackson, Mississippi. Since Delta traffic had always moved to Memphis or New Orleans along the north-south trend of the drainage system, it was natural that the Illinois Central would look toward the possibilities that the Delta offered.

In the early 1880s the Illinois Central extended a branch line north from Jackson, reaching the Delta just below Yazoo City; the line was later extended north to Greenwood and Parsons. Construction and

operation of the branch were in the name of the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad which received a charter from the State of Mississippi to build through the heart of the Delta. The Illinois Central management thus felt that the field was theirs, although they did nothing about an extension to the north until competitors appeared.<sup>15</sup>

The Y&MV purchased 18,000 acres of state land north of Yazoo City. The road's purpose in this acquisition is not clear, although part of the reason was to acquire timber for ties and pilings. The possibility of inducing settlement along the line, as the company had done so successfully in Illinois, surely was another important reason for acquiring the lands. One thing certain is that no responsible official of the Illinois Central ever laid eyes on the land until after the purchase had been made.

Here begins another chapter in the history of the Delta plantation. This time it was the Illinois Central's turn to try changing the Delta into something other than plantation country. From the time he first turned attention to the new Delta lands, the Illinois Central's president pursued a policy of land sales to small holders. Stuyvesant Fish was a blue-blooded aristocrat of the Eastern moneyed class, a Wall Street capitalist in the best sense of the word who, along with his socially prominent wife, preferred to remain east of the Hudson River, often at his summer estate in Newport, and who was almost totally unschooled in the land and life of the Mississippi Delta. He kept in touch with operations through general headquarters in Chicago and via direct communication with officials scattered up and down the line.

Once the 18,000 acres of Y&MV land had been located on a map, Fish gave orders as to how the land should be used:<sup>16</sup>

What we want are settlers, especially small farmers. When it is known that we will not sell in Block, this desirable class of citizens will be tempted to inquire for our lands in small parcels—the smaller the better.

When company officials more familiar with the lands than Fish was suggested sale or lease in block to lumber companies, he was adamant. When the railroad's land commissioner suggested a compromise, retaining some lands in small parcels but selling the rest to large landowners, Fish stood firm:<sup>17</sup>

To bona fide settlers, who will cultivate the land, and especially

to heads of families who wish to buy small tracts, we can afford to make large concessions, but I do not favor making any concessions to speculators or syndicates.

Fish's instructions were that, as soon as possible, the field man in charge of the lands "devise a plan for the sale of those lands in small parcels to actual settlers, white or black."

The Y&MV superintendent in Jackson wanted to sell half the lands in a block to big lumbermen, charging a dollar an acre, just to get rid of the land. This was better than selling in small parcels "and have to deal and dicker with negroes and poor whites." He wrote:<sup>18</sup>

it is impracticable to sell these lands in small tracts as was done . . . [by our railroad] in Illinois where nearly all of the lands held by the Company were susceptible of cultivation.

Incongruous though it may seem today, it was not known then whether the lands were worth more with the timber intact or whether they would bring a higher price after clearing. If cleared first, then the parcels would be sold as improved land, which generally brought a higher price. Since the timber was the only thing of conceivable usefulness on the lands, however, cutting leases to lumber companies would thereby result in lands coming back to the railroad company stripped of their value.

The railroad had been plagued with timber theft on its Illinois lands, and it worried officials that the same might happen in Mississippi, especially if the lands lay idle for some period. Lumbermen wanted trees, not land, so they preferred leases. Planters wanted land, not lumber, so they preferred the same. Fish, in whom the final decision rested, wanted an Illinois-like yeomanry that would create a cotton belt that was more like the corn belt.<sup>19</sup>

The question was settled by sending a representative down to Mississippi to evaluate the lands. The report was not encouraging:<sup>20</sup>

Knowing the Yazoo Delta country was especially adapted to the growing of cotton and corn I had it fixed in my own mind—providing I found the lands all right—to recommend the advertising of that country among the cotton growers of Alabama, Georgia, and other cotton states and among the corn growers along the Miami Valley of Ohio and the Wabash Valley of Indiana—among the people who had been born and raised in the timber country which fifty years ago was very much like the

JOHN C. HUDSON

Delta country today. To my surprise, and much to my regret I found 95 per cent of the land belonging to this country north of Yazoo City what I consider absolutely worthless, and the other five percent—which is considered tillable land—in very small lots and oftentimes surrounded by bayous, goose ponds, and lakes that it is almost entirely worthless.

The water was so deep on some of the lands he could not locate them at all. Local informants suggested that the lands might be worth 25¢ an acre without the trees. The crowning blow came when he talked to the former Commissioner of Immigration for Mississippi, who had sold the lands to the railroad, and who stated flatly that only a very small percentage of the lands was tillable. The news was communicated to Fish, who wrote the railroad's solicitor:<sup>21</sup>

I fear we shall have to give up our cherished project of holding [Yazoo lands] for actual settlers. We can afford to forego profit for sentiment but hardly to incur loss.

Within a month the bulk of the overflow lands in the company's possession had gone to lumbermen who willingly paid \$1.25 per acre for tracts of several thousand acres each. Compared with the going price of 25¢ an acre cleared, this settled the question of whether the timber was more valuable than the land—at least when the land was under water.<sup>22</sup>

### THE RAILROAD BOOM

The Y&MV's 18,000 acres north of Yazoo City was nothing compared with the 774,000 acres granted to the Memphis and Vicksburg to support the construction of a railroad to run the length of the Delta. Although the Memphis and Vicksburg itself never laid a mile of track, their lands were an irresistible attraction to a group headed by railroad magnate Colis P. Huntington, who saw the level gradient across the Delta as a vital link in a Memphis-New Orleans railroad that was to be part of their transcontinental system. They purchased the moribund Memphis and Vicksburg and, with the aid of local subscriptions, began laying track through the river counties. The Memphis-New Orleans main line was completed in 1884.<sup>23</sup>

Huntington's road, called the Louisville, New Orleans, and Texas (LNO&T) was an instant success. Within two years they were turning

YAZOO-MISSISSIPPI DELTA AS PLANTATION COUNTRY

a net profit of \$1257 per mile on the single track line south through Clarksdale, Leland, and Vicksburg. Cotton traffic began to go by rail. Planters willingly granted right-of-way through their lands. The railroad usually established a small station, named by the planter, on each of the plantations. Loading facilities and gins began to spring up along the line.<sup>24</sup>

The railroad mania soon swept across the Delta. Where rails were laid in new country, plantations followed. The correlation between

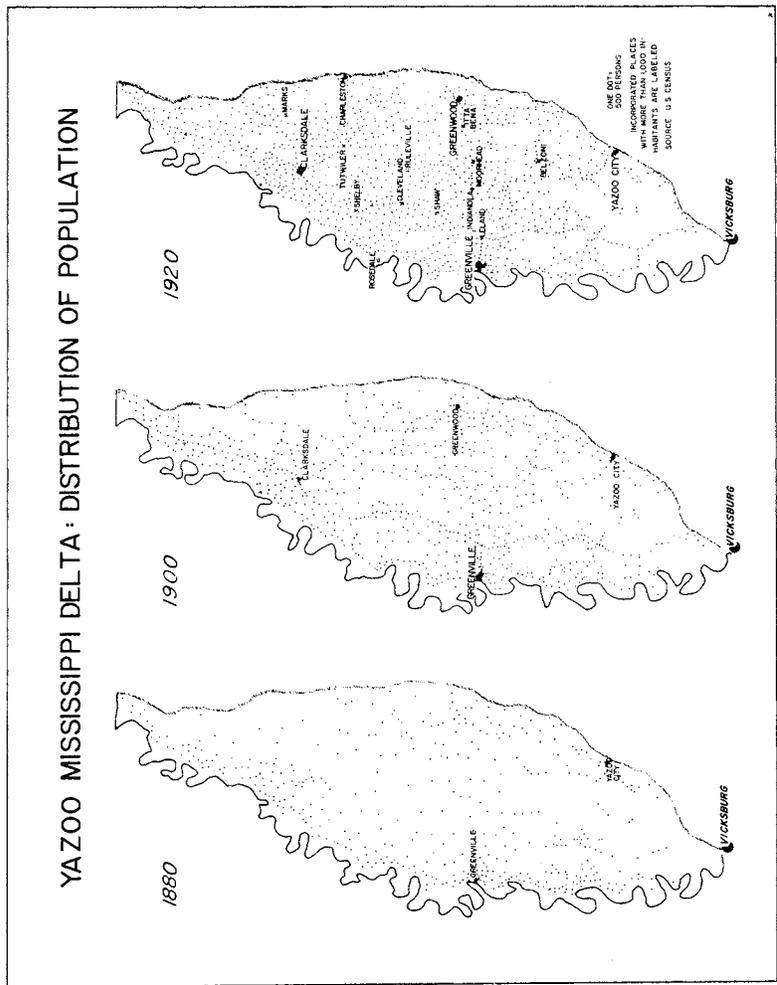


Fig. 3. Yazoo Mississippi Delta: Distribution of population.

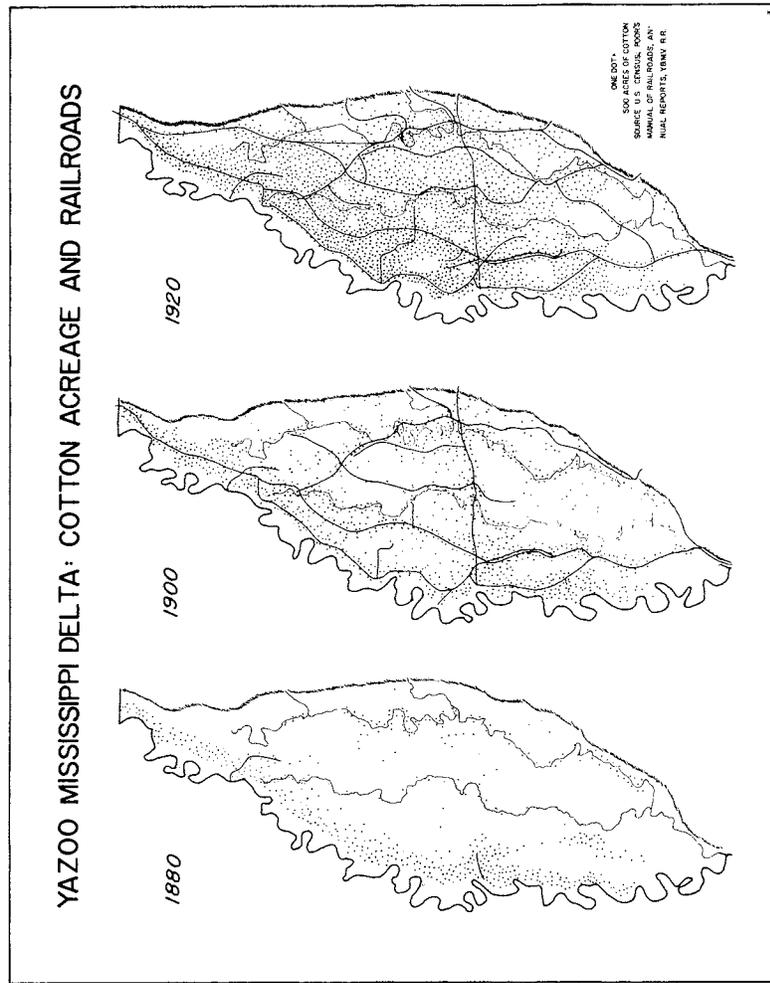


Fig. 4. Yazoo Mississippi Delta: Cotton acreage and railroads.

railroads, population growth, and prosperity was anticipated, and those who bet money on it did not regret it (Figs. 3 and 4). In 1883, before the railroad was built to Yazoo City, “nearly half the stores were unoccupied. Now a vacant house of any kind is an exception.”<sup>25</sup>

The familiar reasoning went that if one railroad line helped a community that much, then two, competing lines would be even better. Such talk was not music to the ears of Stuyvesant Fish who viewed any competition with the Illinois Central-Y&MV as an affront

to the mission of his company. Planters had subscribed money for several extensions of the LNO&T prior to 1892. The developments were watched carefully by the Illinois Central since some of these incursions were into lands which the Y&MV hoped would be their territory. The Georgia Pacific, a sometime subsidiary of the Southern Railway in Mississippi, built a line from Greenville west to Columbus, Mississippi, across the width of the Delta, and they also built several north-south branches to tap the adjacent country. Again, it was planters and merchants who subscribed money for construction. The city of Greenwood benefitted especially from the Georgia Pacific. Before the railroad was built, it took 24 hours for Greenwood's mail to reach Johnsonville on the Sunflower River. The railroad covered the distance from Greenwood to the Sunflower in just 25 miles.<sup>26</sup>

When Huntington's railroad empire fell on hard times, Fish shrewdly moved in. He had the Y&MV consolidate with the LNO&T, with a mortgage on the latter property secured with Illinois Central 4% gold bonds. The claim was that the LNO&T was an extension of the Y&MV, under terms of the 1873 charter from the State of Mississippi. As Fish told the stockholders in 1892:<sup>27</sup>

The purposes contemplated in the charter of the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Company can now be carried out without the waste of capital incident to duplicating existing railways in an agricultural country.

### THE ALLUVIAL EMPIRE

More than seven of every ten acres in the three-quarters of a million acre grant to the Memphis and Vicksburg came into the Illinois Central's possession when they absorbed the LNO&T in 1892. If the 18,000 acres had been a problem in 1888, the more than 546,000 acres posed an even more vexing concern to the Company in 1892. As owner of a landed estate that included better than one of every ten acres of land in the Delta, the Illinois Central was faced with a major marketing problem. All of this was in addition to another 150,000 acres that the railroad owned in the rest of Mississippi.

In November, 1893, E.P. Skene, the Illinois Central's land commissioner, breezed into Memphis on his way to the Delta, pro-

JOHN C. HUDSON

claiming “the people over the North and West are beginning to turn their eyes southward.” He said:<sup>28</sup>

The Illinois Central management is always striving to induce white immigration from the north. There is no reason why the blessings of the South to the laboring classes should be confined to the colored race exclusively. . . . It is only a question of a few years when every portion of the Mississippi Valley will be fairly teeming with life. Where virgin lands now stand, the plow will trace its furrow.

Such talk was cheap in the middle of the 1890s when banks all over the South were failing and general economic confidence nationwide was at a low ebb. Skene’s statement to the press reads as though the Illinois Central still cherished the idea of turning Delta lands into a home for the small farmer from the Middle West, but the lessons learned in 1888 had not been lost.

Rather than risk another failure in settlement promotion, the railroad turned to lumbermen. A party of lumber kings and other enterprising capitalists from the upper Middle West was brought down in the company of the Illinois Central’s vice-president to survey the timber lands in the river counties. Despite rumors that these men were going to purchase all of the timber lands the Company held, it soon became clear that the potential buyers were not interested.<sup>29</sup>

The railroad wished to avoid another year of taxes on the lands, especially in Sharkey and Issaquena counties where they owned 168,000 acres of timber land, most of it subject to overflow. As a last resort, railroad attorneys in Mississippi proposed “donation” of land back to the state or to local governments. Governor John M. Stone replied politely that if the lands were of little benefit to the railroad, they would be of little benefit to the state, either. Today, much of this tract is included in the Delta National Forest.<sup>30</sup>

At the end of 1894, the Y&MV lands were selling at the rate of between a quarter and a half section of land per month. At that rate it would have taken 210 years to sell off the rest of the Delta holdings, hardly an encouraging prospect. The depressed land market was partly a function of economic hard times, but it was also caused in part by the large amount of unimproved land that the planters themselves were holding. They had no need for more land when their own acreage was underused. Cotton acreage decreased in the older pro-

ducing Delta counties during the 1890s, a loss that was not quite offset by the expansion into newer lands of the central counties.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the hard times, the Illinois Central would not give up the dream of agricultural colonization on its lands. They tried to turn matters to their advantage by announcing:<sup>32</sup>

No other railroad now owns land in bodies large enough or of such quality as to answer the demands of people desiring to form a colony . . . One hundred or more families can be located, each on tracts of eight or more acres of land which join each other.

The Marquette Colonization Company, directed by Fr. Thomas Cashman of St. Jarlath's parish, Chicago, undertook to promote a settlement of Belgians near Merigold in Bolivar County. Through advertising literature that looked as though Pope Leo XIII himself endorsed the idea of making farms in Mississippi, the Marquette company proposed to settle the "Royal Domain of Two Kings: King Cotton and King Corn." The land prices quoted to prospective colonists were high when compared with the going rate for timber and cleared lands, but the advertising campaign produced positive results.<sup>33</sup>

With relief, the railroad's land commissioner reported to Fish, "After a great deal of hard work, fighting off the other railroad companies, I finally got the Catholic peoples committed." The amount of land they agreed to take far exceeded what the Illinois Central had been able to sell thus far. The contract called "for all the lands [held by the railroad] in Bolivar County, they to sell not less than 10,000 acres the first year, and to dispose of the whole lot inside of 3 years." The idea that a company with so shaky a basis as the Marquette group could succeed, where the Illinois Central itself had failed, was beyond belief.<sup>34</sup>

Father Cashman's promotion literature frankly acknowledged why Northerners had not come South. The Marquette colonization was to be a group settlement because "in this way the Northern man [can] avail himself of the rich lands of the South. By going in large colonies the principal objections which present themselves to the mind of the Northern man are removed." To help the Southerner get over the Civil War, the section needed "the help of the manly thrift of northern farmers" who would "make that land bloom like a rose."<sup>35</sup>

An outbreak of yellow fever occurred in 1897 and the Marquette

JOHN C. HUDSON

company soon went under. By this time, after a decade of trying to promote small farms in the Delta, the Illinois Central began to recognize that colonization plans that worked in one region would not necessarily work in another. The Delta was, indeed, plantation country. When cotton prosperity began to return in the late 1890s, economic conditions generally improved elsewhere, also. Timber tracts were developed by Northern lumber interests. The Y&MV began laying branch lines all over the Delta to reach the sawmills and the new cotton lands that were opening up in the clearings.<sup>36</sup>

In 1897, the Illinois Central's *Southern Home-Seekers Guide* was full of mouth-watering descriptions of the riches that awaited the Northern farmer who moved to Illinois Central lands in Kentucky and Tennessee. Produce farms with "40 acres, half in woods and pasture, produced peaches, pears, strawberries, plums, melons, and vegetables." No such tantalizing possibilities were suggested for the Delta. The brochure stressed the wisdom behind the postbellum plantation system; "There is really nothing new in it, but simply a rehash of the old slave system applied to free labor." The opinion expressed was that if the old plantation system "was in general use again this would be God's own country again, and riches and plenty would be the handmaids of all."<sup>37</sup>

By 1910, the railroad's description of the Delta contained not a hint of the vision for the region that Stuyvesant Fish once held. The railroad's promotion bulletin sounded as though it might have been written by a planter:<sup>38</sup>

Nowhere in Mississippi have ante-bellum conditions of land holding been so nearly preserved as in the Delta. The land is held in large plantations, several hundred to several thousand acres in extent, which are devoted almost entirely to cotton growing, and working entirely with negro labor.

If that was not enough, it was added for good measure:

The negro is naturally gregarious in instinct, and is never so happy as when massed together in large numbers, as on the Delta plantations.

Such rhetoric was fit accompaniment for the Vardaman years in the state of Mississippi. The fact was that the railroad was more than in-tune with the life and times of this state wherein it was the single, largest corporation. The Illinois Central was getting rich off the

Y&MV and the Y&MV, in turn, was getting rich from the Delta. Prosperity continued, and the railroad's position came into closer and closer harmony with that of the Delta planter. It was little wonder that Mississippians thought that the railroad was in league with the planter class. In a celebrated case, the railroad was taken to court for back taxes and the state won enough money to build a new state capitol building without having to float a bond issue.

### DRAINAGE

Cotton expansion came in the lower-lying Delta lands only after adequate levees were built and the land was drained. The direction of expansion was from west to east, from high ground to low. The sequence varied only slightly from place to place: lands were sold or leased to lumber companies, timber was hauled out via logging railroads, an average of fifteen or twenty miles, to sawmills which were located on already existing railroad lines. Sales of land to planters followed immediately on the departure of the lumbering phase. By 1920, more than forty percent of all Delta counties except Humphries, Issaquena, and Sharkey was in the improved farmland category.

Although levee developments came early, the organization of drainage enterprises was somewhat later. In 1920, about 85 percent of all drained land in Mississippi was in the Delta. For the state as a whole, eighty-four percent of the land in operating drainage enterprises was organized after 1910. Not all of the new lands went into cotton, but most of the cleared land went in to the larger holdings.<sup>39</sup>

### CONCLUSION

One-hundred years of white settlement in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, from 1820 to 1920, began and ended with the visions of cotton fields stretching from horizon to horizon that the group of men called planters carried in their heads. In 1820 it was only a dream, but by 1920 it was close to reality.

The first period of expansion ended with the Civil War, and with the ruinous land speculation and bankruptcy which followed. From the time the Radicals took over in 1868 until roughly 1900, the State

JOHN C. HUDSON

of Mississippi and, later, the Illinois Central Railroad tried to make the Delta a home for the frugal, hard-working small farmer from outside the South. Following the lead of western states and land-grant railroads, there was an attempt to rebuild the Delta following models that were distinctly alien to that section. The attempts failed.

The reasons for the persistence of the large plantation are many. High on any list would be the factor of increasing returns to scale that worked in favor of the large owner, whether in Mississippi or anywhere else. The weight of tradition is another. When eastern capitalists tried plantation-scale grain farming in the Red River Valley of the North in the 1870s and 1880s, the immediate results were spectacular, but eventually the bonanzas split up into small operating units. Part of the reason was social pressure from a surrounding population that felt that the bonanza farm did not offer an appropriate way of life for a rural community. The planter, who loomed as large in Delta folklore as the family farmer did in that of the Middle West, was accepted, though not necessarily admired, even by those over whom he was master. The social system of Mississippi, which has been observed to contain as much inertia as that of any state, undoubtedly was a factor in perpetuating a system that among other people in other places was unacceptable.<sup>40</sup>

Most important, probably, was the adaptability that the Delta planter showed to changing economic conditions and the fact that he could, year after year, produce the same crop on the same incredibly rich soils with little fear of exceeding the limits of the land. A wide variety of agricultural enterprises passed for being plantations; the label was a state of mind as much as anything. Through ups and downs, the constancy of the resource base allowed freedom to dream of better times ahead.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Cohn (1935). Other accounts of Delta life from among the rich store of Mississippi novels include: William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee*, Hodding Carter, *Where Main Street Meets the River*, Eudora Welty, *Delta Wedding*, and Cohn's *Where I Was Born and Raised*.

- <sup>2</sup>Weaver (1945). Weaver's pioneering study included two Delta counties, Bolivar and Issaquena, in a sample of twelve in the state.
- <sup>3</sup>Among many accounts of early settlement for the Delta are Brieger (n.d.), Gray (1923), Sillers (1948), and WPA county histories (n.d.).
- <sup>4</sup>Weaver (1945), pp. 101-105.
- <sup>5</sup>Poindexter (n.d.), and WPA county histories.
- <sup>6</sup>The most complete, early summary is Ellett (1852).
- <sup>7</sup>U.S. Census of 1880; Vol. V, *Cotton Production*, Part I; Vol. IX, *Forest Trees of North America*.
- <sup>8</sup>Historical Statistics of the United States (1960), Futtrell (1958), and Smith (1970).
- <sup>9</sup>Futtrell (1958) and Smith (1970).
- <sup>10</sup>Griggs (1874), copy in Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson.
- <sup>11</sup>Griggs (1874), Futtrell (1958), and Smith (1970).
- <sup>12</sup>*Greenwood [Miss.] Times*, July 5, 1873.
- <sup>13</sup>*Greenwood [Miss.] Times*, Aug. 9, 1873.
- <sup>14</sup>The standard source for this and other aspects of the economic history of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is the excellent study by Brandfon (1967).
- <sup>15</sup>G. Carlisle to J. G. Mann, June 13, 1889; J. G. Mann to E. S. Martin, April 9, 1888; Stuyvesant Fish to E. T. Jeffrey, June 12, 1888; J. G. Mann to E. T. Jeffrey, June 4, 1888, in Stuyvesant Fish letters, Illinois Central archives, Newberry Library, Chicago.
- <sup>16</sup>Stuyvesant Fish to J. G. Mann, Oct. 31, 1888 (Fish letters).
- <sup>17</sup>Stuyvesant Fish to J. G. Fentress, Oct. 31, 1888, Fish to L. P. Morehouse, Oct. 31, 1888, Nov. 8, 1888, Aug. 1, 1888; Fish to E. T. Jeffrey, Nov. 5, 1888 (Fish letters).
- <sup>18</sup>J. G. Mann to L. P. Morehouse, Nov. 21, 1888; E. T. Jeffery to Stuyvesant Fish, November 3, 1888 (Fish letters).
- <sup>19</sup>Stuyvesant Fish to L. P. Morehouse, January 28, 1889 (Fish letters).
- <sup>20</sup>J. F. Merry to A. H. Hanson, March 16, 1889 (Fish letters).
- <sup>21</sup>Stuyvesant Fish to J. C. Fentress, April 8, 1889.

JOHN C. HUDSON

- <sup>22</sup>Stuyvesant Fish to L.P. Morehouse, April 15, 1889, May 15, 1889 (Fish letters).
- <sup>23</sup>Brandfon (1967), pp. 70-73.
- <sup>24</sup>Y&MV Annual Reports and *Poor's Manual of Railroads*, various years; and J. C. Welling to Stuyvesant Fish, Dec. 10, 1895 (Fish letters).
- <sup>25</sup>*Yazoo City* [Miss.] *Herald*, Aug. 2, 1889.
- <sup>26</sup>*Greenwood* [Miss.] *Oriental*, February, 1877; *Greenwood Enterprise*, Oct. 1, 1880.
- <sup>27</sup>Stuyvesant Fish to J. C. Fentress, May 19, 1892; Fish, "Letter to Stockholders," June 3, 1892 (Fish letters).
- <sup>28</sup>E. P. Skene, quoted in *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, Nov. 28, 1893.
- <sup>29</sup>*Memphis Avalanche*, Dec. 6, 1894; *The Lumber Trade Journal*, Dec. 15, 1894; J. C. Welling to Stuyvesant Fish, Dec. 31, 1894 (Fish letters).
- <sup>30</sup>J. C. Welling to Stuyvesant Fish, Nov. 12, 1894; Yerger and Percy to Gov. John M. Stone, Dec. 11, 1894; Stone to Yerger and Percy, Dec. 16, 1894 (Fish letters).
- <sup>31</sup>Statement of Sales and Receipts, October-November, 1894, Illinois Central-Yazoo and Mississippi Valley land offices (Fish letters).
- <sup>32</sup>Illinois Central Railroad, *Railroad Lands for Sale*, Dec. 1, 1896.
- <sup>33</sup>*The Marquette Colonization Company* (brochure).
- <sup>34</sup>*ibid.*, and E. P. Skene to Stuyvesant Fish, Aug. 13, 1895 (Fish letters).
- <sup>35</sup>*The Marquette Colonization Company*, p. 15.
- <sup>36</sup>Y&MV Annual Reports; J. C. Welling to Stuyvesant Fish, April 1, 1895, Dec. 10, 1895, Jan. 28, 1897 (Fish letters).
- <sup>37</sup>Illinois Central Railroad, *Southern Homeseekers Guide*, 1897, supplement, p. 94, and *passim*; J. F. Merry to Stuyvesant Fish, July 23, 1897.
- <sup>38</sup>Illinois Central Railroad, Passenger Department, *Mississippi Is Calling You*, 1910, p.18.
- <sup>39</sup>Harrison (1951) and Kelley (1978). Kelley stresses the importance of drainage activities in maintaining the plantation character of the Delta. Since drainage was both necessary and expensive, the smaller farmers were at a disadvantage.
- <sup>40</sup>Drache (1964), pp. 289-310.

YAZOO-MISSISSIPPI DELTA AS PLANTATION COUNTRY

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