CHAPTER I

Mississippi's Search for a Staple Crop

Introduction of Eli Whitney's newly invented cotton gin into the Natchez region and the signing of the Treaty of San Lorenzo made the year 1795 a major turning point in the political and economic development of early Mississippi. Both events were far-reaching in their consequences. The Treaty of San Lorenzo transferred title of the Natchez District of the old province of West Florida from Spain to the United States by locating the boundary line separating the territories of these two countries at the thirty-first parallel. What is even more important, Whitney's gin placed the inhabited area of Mississippi upon a much sounder economic footing than it had ever before enjoyed, for it reduced costs of raising cotton to the point where the white staple soon became the standard crop of that section of the Old Southwest.

The Natchez District of West Florida experienced little of either peace or prosperity before 1795. Within the span of a single generation, flags of three major European powers floated over its seat of government. France, the original owner, after an occupancy of more than half a century, was forced to cede that region to Great Britain in 1763 as a result of defeat in the Seven Year's War, and Britain in turn lost it to Spain during the War for American Independence. Under political conditions as disturbed as these, there was small opportunity for a young frontier colony to grow and prosper.

During the long period of French domination, almost nothing was done toward occupying the rich lands along the lower east bank of the Mississippi River. True, between 1716 and 1729 a few hundred farmers with their families were settled in the vi-
cinity of Fort Rosalie, the present site of the city of Natchez. Yet these immigrants were either killed or driven away during an Indian uprising in 1729. The French quelled that insurrection but made no further efforts to bring in settlers interested in farming. With their main endeavor focused upon the Indian fur trade, the French devoted so little attention to agriculture during the remainder of their stay in the Lower Mississippi Valley that the British found few signs of their earlier presence upon their arrival at Fort Rosalie. Except for the ruins of the fort itself and a few clearings hard by, no man could have told that white settlers had ever dwelt there.¹

The first permanent agricultural settlements in the territory included within the present state of Mississippi were made by Englishmen. After securing West Florida from the French, the ministry in London adopted a policy of encouraging a flow of immigration into this border region. It made generous land grants to war veterans and to political friends of the regime. When the area previously cleared of Indians by the French proved to be insufficient to satisfy the demand, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs in 1777 bought from the Choctaws a strip of territory running north along the Mississippi River from Loftus Heights to the mouth of the Yazoo, a distance slightly in excess of one hundred miles.²

In spite of the British government’s friendly attitude toward prospective settlers in West Florida and notwithstanding the availability of fabulously rich alluvial soils along the lower Mississippi River and its tributaries, comparatively few persons were attracted to the Natchez District during the period of British domination. Like Virginia nearly two centuries earlier, West Florida did not thrive until its settlers began to shift their labors away from subsistence farming and to cultivate, instead, crops that could be exported to European markets. This step was not taken under the British flag. Nevertheless, the population of the Natchez District did grow steadily, albeit slowly, after 1770.³ During the American Revolution an influx of American loyalists temporarily speeded the slow expansion of the colony. As many of these newcomers were persons of wealth and energy, they added materially to the prosperity of the Natchez District.⁴
Although the residents of West Florida attempted to remain neutral during the American Revolution, they were not able to avoid being drawn into the conflict. The Natchez District first was raided by American irregulars in 1778 and then occupied permanently by troops from Spanish Louisiana in the following year. The British garrisons stationed in widely scattered posts were so small and weak that they stood almost as an invitation to a resolute enemy to invade the colony. Don Bernardo de Galvez, the Governor-General of Louisiana, was not a man to allow such a prize to slip between his fingers through lack of initiative. Gathering together a formidable body of troops, Galvez opened hostilities against British Florida in 1779. By seizing the forts at Natchez, Manchac and Baton Rouge he obtained possession of all English territory along the Mississippi River between the mouth of the Yazoo and the city of New Orleans. The Gulf Coast forts fell into Spanish hands almost as easily as had those along the river. Mobile capitulated in 1780, followed in 1781 by Pensacola, the principal British stronghold in Florida. By the end of the War of American Independence, all of Florida was under the flag of Spain, and Spanish troops were distributed in fortified positions throughout the colony from Walnut Hills, just south of the outlet of the Yazoo, to the Atlantic seaboard.5

Notwithstanding Spain's wartime conquest and occupation of West Florida, Great Britain managed to make use of that province during the diplomatic maneuverings that ended the conflict. In order to cause future difficulties between the United States and Spain, the British negotiators in 1783 led each of these two powers to believe that it was acquiring the territory situated between the thirty-first parallel and a line running through the mouth of the Yazoo River. In the case of Spain, her claim to these lands arising from her interpretation of the Treaty of Paris was re-enforced both by the right of military conquest and by actual occupation of the area in dispute. The United States, in contrast, had no more than a shadowy claim based solely upon a supposed cession by Great Britain of territory which that country did not occupy at the time of the peace negotiations. This claim derived some legal substance from the fact that the British Crown, in a commission to the governor of Georgia in 1764, de-
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efined Georgia's southern boundary as the thirty-first parallel from the Mississippi to the Chattahoochee (and thence down the Chattahoochee to a line drawn from the St. Mary's). The United States over the next twelve years continued to insist that Spain surrender her holdings north of the thirty-first parallel and east of the Mississippi River. After doggedly resisting American diplomatic pressure, Spain finally acquiesced to the repeated American demands in 1795, agreeing in the Treaty of San Lorenzo to accept the thirty-first parallel as the northernmost boundary of her province of West Florida. As the District of Natchez was within the region affected by the treaty, that part of Mississippi thus ceased to be a pawn in the game of European power politics, although final transfer of authority from Spain to the United States was not accomplished until 1798, three years after approval of the treaty.⁸

Undeniably, the uneasy political situation prevailing in the Lower Mississippi Valley during the eighteenth century had made a climate unfavorable for development of the Natchez District. Yet that region had received some tangible benefits from each successive change of ownership. The French in their war with the Natchez tribe in 1729 took the first step toward establishing a colony by driving the original Indian inhabitants out of a considerable expanse of territory; but the France of that era had neither the interest in agriculture nor the surplus population required to set up a permanent self-supporting colony upon the soils thus summarily opened up to white settlement. England, on the other hand, was able to furnish the people needed for colonization when she acquired possession of the region around Fort Rosalie. She, however, could not provide her colonists with a nearby market for their produce. New Orleans by then was in the hands of Spain and closed to trade with British subjects. Consequently, immigrants coming into West Florida from the British Isles and the eastern American colonies were forced to depend mainly upon subsistence farming for their livelihood, exporting to Great Britain and the islands of the West Indies only very limited quantities of such products as cotton, corn, indigo, tobacco and barrel staves.⁷

When the District of Natchez passed into the possession of
Spain in 1779, its economic situation changed temporarily for the better. Natchez produce was admitted freely into the New Orleans market, and the Madrid government took pains to foster the economic well-being—and therefore the loyalty—of His Catholic Majesty's newly acquired English-speaking subjects.

Considerations of grand strategy were responsible for the Spanish government's unusually conciliatory attitude toward the non-Catholic population of the Natchez District. While the province of West Florida then possessed little economic value, its geographic position made it an important link in a chain of defenses guarding New Orleans, Louisiana and Mexico. The authorities in Madrid wished to establish a buffer zone between Louisiana and the Americans in Georgia and Tennessee. They believed that the gravest peril threatening the security of New Spain was the westward expansion of the United States. The Spaniards planned to safeguard the overland route into the Lower Mississippi Valley by welding the Choctaw, Creek and Chickasaw tribes into fighting forces sufficiently strong to resist American penetration into their respective territories. The northern river approach to the city of New Orleans they would defend by a prosperous, populous and loyal colony to be constructed out of the old Natchez District of West Florida.⁸

In carrying out the latter project, the Spaniards in Louisiana were hampered seriously by the fact that neither Old nor New Spain could provide settlers for Natchez in sizable numbers. If the population of that colony were to be enlarged as planned, it would be necessary to admit persons of nationalities other than Spanish and of religions other than Catholic, a step that was inconsistent with Spain's traditional colonial policy. Nevertheless, a high level decision was made in 1788 to welcome immigration into Louisiana and West Florida from the protestant republican United States.⁹ In accordance with this revolutionary approach to the colonial problem, newcomers to the Natchez District were granted lands on more liberal terms than the British had given. They were exempted both from imperial taxation and from all obligations involving military service, and they were allowed to preserve their own religion provided that non-Catholic services should be held only in private homes.¹⁰
In the Natchez District this novel policy of conciliation was carried to even greater extremes than in the remainder of Spanish Louisiana. In that district most governmental offices were filled by local citizens who were usually of British descent. No attempt was made by the Crown to interfere with the property, language or customs of the inhabitants. Moreover, the Governor-General took upon himself the task of strengthening the economic position of the Natchez farmers by purchasing their tobacco at prices higher than those offered in the open market. This program of government aid tended to destroy the region's self-sufficiency by encouraging dependence upon a single staple crop.\textsuperscript{11}

For a time the new colonial policy produced the very results in Natchez that the Spanish government hoped for. Numerous settlers, attracted by high tobacco prices, moved into the District, and many of the older inhabitants expanded the amount of land they cultivated. Between 1787 and 1792, the white population of the District increased from 1,926 persons to 4,300, the Negro population trebled, and the annual production of tobacco climbed to an estimated half a million pounds.\textsuperscript{12}

In the Natchez region this period of prosperity and expansion was of brief duration. The Spanish government in 1790 was compelled to abandon its expensive price support program by new strategic considerations. Planning to split the American West off from the remainder of the United States by intrigue, and hoping to bind the farmers of that vast frontier section to New Spain with economic ties, the Spaniards in that year threw open the market at New Orleans to western produce—including tobacco—allowing it to enter Spanish territory subject to only a nominal duty.\textsuperscript{13} Simultaneously, the government warehouses ceased to purchase Natchez tobacco at the old premium price. As the government thus was no longer buying largely on the open market, prices of all commodities except cotton dropped in 1792 to levels less than half those of 1788.\textsuperscript{14}

This collapse of the New Orleans tobacco market was a major disaster to Natchez farmers. The government's price-fixing policy had encouraged heavy borrowing by the planters for expansion of tobacco growing, and as a class they were not prepared to face a sudden loss of their crop subsidy.\textsuperscript{15} The plight of even the
largest planters soon became so desperate that Estevan Miro, Governor-General of Louisiana, was compelled to intervene for them in order to prevent seizure of their property by New Orleans merchants. Nevertheless, the stay law issued by Miro in Louisiana and approved by the authorities in Madrid served only to postpone the day of reckoning; for it gave the ruined farmers an eight-year period of grace in which to pay their creditors. It did nothing to resolve their fundamental difficulty—lack of a market for their only staple crop, tobacco. On this point the Spanish government was adamant: it would no longer undertake to sustain the unprofitable Natchez colony by purchasing its tobacco at artificially inflated prices.

Discontinuing the raising of tobacco for other than domestic use, farmers of the Natchez region in 1793 and 1794 concentrated their attention upon developing indigo into a crop that could take the place of tobacco as the mainstay of the region’s economy. After a promising beginning, this second attempt at finding a staple also ended in failure. In 1794 insects damaged the Mississippi indigo crop so severely that it was not planted again. With this last fiasco the economic future of the debt-ridden Natchez region seemed dark indeed.

The people of early Mississippi finally discovered a solution for their persistent economic problems through chance rather than design. Recent experiments with tobacco and indigo had brought the entire District close to the brink of financial disaster. The only cash crop available to them was cotton, inasmuch as Mississippi pork, beef and corn had been virtually driven out of the New Orleans market by produce from Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee. Thus, because they saw no other course open to them, farmers of Mississippi turned in 1795 to the cultivation of an upland variety of long staple black seed cotton as their principal money crop.

If extensive cultivation of cotton had been attempted even as late as 1794, the experiment doubtless would have ended in failure. Their experience with raising cotton in limited quantities over a period of many years had demonstrated conclusively to farmers that the staple was not suited to conditions then existing in the Lower Mississippi Valley. It was too expensive to culti-
vate, to gather and to prepare for market, even at the price level prevailing during the 1790s, high though that price might have seemed to later growers in the 1800s. In 1795, however, the situation changed. The cost of preparing the cotton for market was sharply reduced by introduction of a new technological discovery into Southern agriculture, Eli Whitney's famous cotton engine, or gin. The rotating saws of the machine Whitney patented in 1794 could separate cotton fiber from the seeds cheaply and easily. With it, citizens of the Natchez District found they could grow cotton with assured profits.

Cleaning cotton for market had been a slow, tedious and costly process before the invention of Whitney's gin. In the Lower Mississippi Valley, seed had been removed from the lint either by hand or by means of a primitive roller gin modeled after a device employed in India for many centuries. Machines of this type used in eighteenth century Mississippi had been quite simple in principle and construction, but very inefficient in operation. Two small wooden cylinders set closely together within a framework mounted upon a bench were revolved in opposite directions by means of a hand crank or foot treadle. When seed cotton was brought into contact with these rotating cylinders, lint was wrenched from the seeds, which were too large to pass through the narrow aperture, and drawn by friction between the rollers, emerging free of seed on the opposite side of the machine. Two persons were required to keep a friction or roller gin in continuous motion. One fed raw cotton into the rollers, the other turned the crank and received the ejected lint. The daily output of hand operated roller gins was discouragingly small. Under ideal working conditions one machine could clean at most seventy-five pounds of fiber a day, a rate that made the cost of preparing cotton for market almost prohibitive.21

When the first machine built upon Whitney's principle was given a trial in Mississippi in the fall of 1795, it demonstrated that it could clean the long staple black seed cotton of the Lower Mississippi Valley fully as well as the short staple green seed variety of Georgia for which it had been designed. On the black seed cotton the saw gin was vastly more efficient than the roller gins then in use. It could clean five hundred pounds of lint daily
with no more labor than the roller gin required to produce a
tenth as much.\textsuperscript{22}

The importance of a gin of this remarkable degree of effi-
ciency to Southwestern farmers could hardly be over-estimated.
Cleaned cotton at the time was selling for twenty-five dollars a
hundred pounds, while seed cotton brought no more than four
dollars a hundred. Thus ginning at least doubled the value of
raw cotton.\textsuperscript{23} The Whitney saw gin, in fact, was to farmers of
Mississippi what the fabled philosopher's stone had been to
medieval alchemists—a catalyst transforming base metal into gold.

Whitney's gin was a radical departure in principle from all
of its predecessors. Where the latter had employed friction rol-
lers to separate lint from seed, the former made use of rotating
wire fingers to draw fiber through slits too narrow to permit the
passage of even the very small seeds of Georgia upland cotton.
The lint, after passing through the grate, as the removable slitted
side of the hopper was called, was swept from the wires by
brushes mounted upon a rapidly revolving flywheel. The wind
created by this fan-like device blew the fiber into an almost
airtight compartment provided for its reception. The seeds which
had been trapped on the other side of the grate dropped to the
bottom of the hopper containing the unginned cotton and from
there fell to the ground through a spout.\textsuperscript{24}

The saw gin which Whitney demonstrated in Georgia as a
working model in 1793 and as a full-sized machine in 1795 was
so simple in construction that it could be duplicated by a
competent workman using only hand tools to be found on all
plantations in the Old Southwest. Power for operating Whitney
saw gins could be obtained from any source supplying rotary
motion. At different times hand cranks, "horsepowers" of various
kinds, water wheels and steam engines were used with satisfactory
results.\textsuperscript{25}

Mississippi's first saw gin was constructed in violation of
Whitney's patent rights during the summer of 1795 and put into
operation in September.\textsuperscript{26} Daniel Clark, Sr., a wealthy planter of
Wilkinson County, designed this famous machine after exam-
ing drawings made by a traveler who had seen one of Whitney's
gins while on a trip to Georgia.\textsuperscript{27} Clark's gin was constructed by
local mechanics working under his supervision on his Sligo plantation situated near Fort Adams. Although witnesses years after the event differed as to the identities of the workmen Clark employed, it appears likely that much of the work was done by James Bolls, Jr., son of a Scottish plantation owner of the same name, with the aid of Barclay, a skilled Negro slave belonging to Clark, and a local blacksmith named Hughes. Clark, being unable to obtain satisfactory iron wire of the type used by Whitney, was forced to substitute circular iron saws cut by hand from hoe blades and filed into shape. After tests, this innovation proved to be so successful that Clark's saws rather than Whitney's wires were adopted as standard for all gins constructed subsequently in Mississippi, though not in other states.

Clark's gin at Sligo attracted a great deal of attention from planters of the Natchez area even while it was in the process of construction, and many of them travelled to Fort Adams from considerable distances in order to be present at some of the early tests. When these trials clearly demonstrated that saw gins were vastly superior to the best of roller gins, several other planters of the wealthier class had saw gins of the Clark variety built upon their plantations. Among the earliest to take this step were William Dunbar, a Scottish scientist and correspondent of Thomas Jefferson; Colonel Anthony Hutchins, a retired officer of the British army; and William Voursdan, son-in-law to Hutchins and the first planter to ship cotton directly to England.

Because the demand for saw gins became very great during the next few years a number of local mechanics embarked upon careers as professional ginwrights. The first of these to become well-known in Mississippi was James Bolls, Jr., who had gained experience at this new trade by working on the Sligo gin. After completing his work for Clark, Bolls next was employed by William Voursdan to construct a gin for his plantation, "Cotton Fields," situated between Natchez and the town of Washington, and after that by the merchant Robert Mason to erect a public toll gin in the city of Natchez. Among several other gins built before 1800 was one set up by Bolls upon the plantation of his father, James Bolls, Sr. David Greenleaf, who settled in Natchez in 1795, was another mechanic who gained a reputation in Mis-
Mississippi as a pioneer manufacturer of saw gins and other machines used upon Southwestern cotton plantations. He built the state's first public gin in 1796 upon land belonging to Richard Curtiss, near Selsertown. After making a number of other gins for private use, he built one in 1798 to be operated as a commercial enterprise by himself in partnership with two Scottish merchants, David Ferguson and Melling Worthy. In addition to his work with early gins, Greenleaf also appears to have originated the practice of packing cotton in a press equipped with screws turned by hand. It is certain that he constructed the first model of this type of machine to be used in Mississippi before 1799.

Eleazer Carver was the most successful of the early ginwrights. After entering the business at Washington in 1807, he made the first important improvement in the design of Southwestern gins since Clark replaced Whitney's wires with circular cotton saws. Carver improved the grates by changing their shape and thus reduced their tendency to become clogged with lint while the machine was in operation. Carver's improved gins became very popular with planters of the Old Southwest, and his business grew to such dimensions that he was compelled to erect Mississippi's first saw mill in order to assure himself of an adequate supply of lumber. In later years Carver transferred his operations from Mississippi to Bridgewater, Massachusetts, to take advantage of New England's superior supply of skilled workmen and its recent improvements in the design and manufacture of machine tools. The Carver company prospered in its new location and by the 1850s had become one of the largest producers of cotton gins in the United States.

Many of the new type of cotton gins were manufactured and put into use in the Natchez District in the period between 1795 and 1800. By the latter date one could be found upon almost every large plantation. These machines were all constructed in the same manner and upon the same principle, but they differed from one another in their means of motive power and in their size and rate of production. The metal parts of all of them were fabricated in local blacksmith shops. As there were neither forges nor foundries in that region as yet, the saws and other
metal parts were cut from sheet iron or bar stock with hand tools and then hammered and filed into shape.\textsuperscript{37} Cotton saws made in this fashion were particularly expensive, ordinarily costing as much as five dollars each.\textsuperscript{38} The woodwork of the ginstands was erected on the spot by carpenters who used imported lumber or hand-sawed boards because there were no saw mills in the District before 1810. Some few of these early gins were driven by water power, but the high cost of building dams and the difficulty in keeping them in good condition in this region of rock-free soils caused a vast majority of gin owners to resort to the use of horses and mules for driving their machinery.\textsuperscript{39} Daily output of these Mississippi gins at the turn of the century averaged between five hundred and fifteen hundred pounds of cotton lint.\textsuperscript{40}

Small farmers who were unable to afford gins of their own transported their seed cotton to commercial establishments or to plantations of wealthier neighbors. There it was cleaned for them at a toll, usually amounting to ten percent of the cotton deposited at the gin.\textsuperscript{41} As roads were almost non-existent and carts and wagons were rare, seed cotton from the interior was often packed in bags and carried on horseback to the gin over distances sometimes as great as twenty miles.\textsuperscript{42}

Cotton production in Mississippi increased very rapidly during the last five years of the eighteenth century, and gins in the Natchez region were unable to cope with the demands made upon their services. Many privately owned machines on plantations were pressed into public service along with the ones belonging to commercial enterprises. Even then the facilities could not process all the crop in a year's time. Consequently, farmers often had to wait many months after leaving their cotton at a gin before obtaining delivery of their lint. As this delay became more pronounced, the practice of selling cotton while it was still in the possession of the ginner became the general rule in the District. Ginters' cotton receipts were accepted freely by merchants in payment for debts at a standard rate of five cents a pound for unginned cotton, and these negotiable certificates for a time assumed the aspect of a circulating medium of exchange.\textsuperscript{44} Their use as local currency became so common during the early 1800s that they were recognized as legal tender by the
territorial government of Mississippi and regulated as such by law.45

Large scale cultivation of cotton for export to foreign markets by 1799 had passed beyond the experimental stage and was generally recognized as the principal basis of agriculture by farmers cultivating the rich lands along the lower Mississippi River.46 Experience had demonstrated that it could be cultivated with slave labor as easily as tobacco and much more easily than indigo. In all ways, according to William Dunbar, a planter who shipped more than one hundred bales (averaging three hundred and thirty pounds each) to Liverpool in 1800, cotton was an unqualified boon to the region. This view he expressed to his partner, John Ross of Philadelphia, in a letter dated May 23, 1799, in the following words:

It is by far the most profitable crop we have ever undertaken in this country. The climate and soil suit it exactly, and I am of opinion that the fibre, already of so fine in [sic] quality, will be still better when our lands are well cleared and the soil properly triturated. The introduction of the rag-wheel gin was fortunate indeed for this district. I have reason to think that the new gin has been greatly improved here. Our latest and best make, injure the staple little more than cards.47

In Dunbar's opinion cotton had proved itself to be the ideal staple crop for the Mississippi Territory, and his belief was shared in all respects by a multitude of planters and farmers who had taken up the cultivation of cotton as their major crop.

With the fertile lands of the old Natchez District producing average yields of fifteen hundred to two thousand pounds of seed cotton to the acre and approximately eight hundred pounds to the farm worker at prices ranging between twenty and twenty-five cents a pound for the fiber, this new staple crop was unquestionably returning handsome profits to those engaged in its cultivation. In 1801 the cotton crop alone earned some seven
hundred thousand dollars for farmers of the District, a sum that represented an average income in excess of seven hundred dollars for each of the region's nine thousand inhabitants. Thus cotton finally brought a most unaccustomed prosperity to the people of the new Territory of Mississippi, and put an end to their long search for a farm product profitable enough to render their part of the country economically self-supporting.