

## Tennessee's Economy in the 19th century

*Essential Question: How did Tennessee's economy change in the nineteenth century?*

During the frontier era, most Tennesseans lived on scattered farms in East Tennessee. There were no cities and few towns in the modern sense of the word. Most families farmed and only frontier elites like John Sevier and William Blount owned slaves. The nineteenth century brought many changes to Tennessee, including a redistribution of its population. Middle Tennessee became the most populous region, followed by newly settled West Tennessee. Middle Tennessee boasted the city of Nashville as well as the towns of Clarksville, Columbia and Murfreesboro. Memphis, with its location on the Mississippi River grew by leaps and bounds and brought West Tennessee into contact with New Orleans and the Deep South.

Industry played only a small role in Tennessee's economy in the nineteenth century. Iron production, mostly along the Western Highland Rim, was the most important industry followed by textile manufacturing, tobacco processing, coal and copper mining and production of machinery and rail cars. Many of the industries relied on the labor of enslaved people, though poor whites and immigrants also found employment. Immigrants were an especially important source of labor in the coal mines.

By contrast, the majority of Tennesseans were involved in some form of agriculture. In West Tennessee, cotton was the main cash crop. As cotton production increased in the region, so did the number of enslaved people. By 1860, thirty-four percent of West Tennessee's population was enslaved and in Fayette and Haywood counties enslaved people outnumbered whites. In Middle Tennessee, tobacco was grown in the northern counties and cotton in the southern counties. Some large plantations existed, like Wessyngton in Robertson County, but most farms were smaller and worked by the family and perhaps a few slaves. The region's most important export was livestock. Middle Tennessee supplied hogs, mules, horses and sheep used throughout the South. In East Tennessee, most people lived on small farms that produced wheat, corn, and livestock for local markets without the use of enslaved labor.

Lack of access to transportation was the main reason that East Tennessee's economy remained local, unlike Middle and West Tennessee which exported products to the Deep South. Beginning in 1819, steamboats regularly carried cargo to and from Nashville. Memphis, with its location on the Mississippi River could easily trade with both New Orleans and Cincinnati. By

contrast, few steamboats reached Chattanooga or Knoxville because of the obstacles in the Tennessee River, including Muscle Shoals in northern Alabama. A number of toll roads were constructed early 1800s, but these did little to help East Tennessee. The roads helped solidify Nashville's position as a center of trade but shipping cargo by wagon remained expensive and time consuming. Tennesseans flirted with the idea of building canals, but by the 1830s turned their attention to building railroads. East Tennesseans in particular saw railroads as the answer to their transportation problems. The state issued bonds to help fund the railroads, but the Panic of 1837 caused most of the early railroads companies to fail. By the 1850s, the economy had improved and hundreds of miles of track were built in Tennessee. However, because the railroads ran mostly north/south the state's economy remained disjointed. Businessmen in Memphis were much more likely to do business in New Orleans than in Knoxville.

Compared to agriculture, industry played only a small role in Tennessee's economy. Iron production, mostly along the Western Highland Rim, was the most important industry followed by textile manufacturing, tobacco processing, coal and copper mining and production of machinery and rail cars. Many of the industries relied on the labor of enslaved people.

Middle and West Tennessee's economic and cultural connections with the Deep South helped to solidify and reinforce attitudes towards slavery. During the frontier era, most enslaved people worked alongside their masters and could hope for and sometimes received their freedom upon their master's death. As plantation agriculture grew in Middle and West Tennessee, attitudes towards slavery changed. Increasingly, free African Americans were seen as a threat to the system of slavery. It was believed that free people as well as Northerner agitators encouraged disobedience or outright rebellion. In 1835, Amos Dresser, a Bible salesman from Ohio, was publicly whipped and expelled from Nashville after he was found with antislavery literature. This came just one year after the best efforts of Tennessee's antislavery societies failed to have an amendment in favor of gradual emancipation added to the new state constitution. Tennessee's antislavery societies, which were mostly based in East Tennessee, faded away after the defeat. Some leaders, like Benjamin Lundy and John Rankin moved north to continue their work. Others, like the Quaker inhabitants of Friendsville, secretly assisted enslaved people who ran away seeking freedom in the north.

Source: Paul Bergeron, Stephen Ash and Jeanette Keith. *Tennesseans and Their History*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999.

## Student Activity

*Summarize key ideas about agriculture, industry, transportation and slavery for each of Tennessee's Grand Division in the nineteenth century using the graphic organizer below.*

West	Middle	East