

Tennessee's Economy in the 19th century
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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 but only the wealthy men like John Sevier and William Blount were enslavers. 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.¹ 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.²

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.³ Many of the industries relied on the labor of enslaved people, though poor whites and immigrants also found

¹ Paul Bergeron, Stephen Ash and Jeanette Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 110.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 117.

employment. Immigrants were an especially important source of labor in the coal mines.

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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, 34 percent of West Tennessee's population was enslaved and in Fayette and Haywood counties enslaved people outnumbered whites.⁵ In Middle Tennessee, tobacco was grown in the northern counties and cotton in the southern counties. Some large plantations existed, like Wessington in Robertson County, but most farms were smaller and worked by the family and perhaps a few enslaved people. 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.

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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.⁷ Memphis, with its location on the Mississippi River, could easily trade with both New Orleans and Cincinnati. By contrast, few steamboats reached Chattanooga

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 117.

⁶ Ibid., 111-113.

⁷ Ibid., 113-117.

or Knoxville because of the obstacles in the Tennessee River, including Muscle Shoals in northern Alabama.⁸ A number of toll roads were constructed in the 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 considered building canals, but by the 1830s turned their attention to building railroads.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

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