

Natchez in 1920: On the Threshold of Modernity

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The 1920 decennial census was a landmark enumeration that documented for the first time in its history the United States was more urban (51.2%) than rural (48.8%).¹ The percentages are close and affirm the struggle between agrarianism and industrialism that had begun in the 1880s. It was a long painful decline of the pre-eminence of agriculture in American life, but was nonetheless, irreversible. The dichotomy between urban and rural was very pronounced, and there was little if any suburban or ex-urban development except perhaps in the very largest cities, and so a town at the crossroads had a pivotal role in the life of the surrounding area.

Boosterism played an important part in the influence of these urban areas. Town advocates worked to capitalize on every local advantage, no matter how small, to entice and encourage economic development and increase industry and urbanization. In Mississippi, the most rural state in the nation, boosters faced quite a challenge. The state did not reflect the new demographics, with 86.6% of its population living in rural areas and only 13.4% in cities.² Nonetheless, the booster spirit was present in

¹ Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970, Part 1* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), 12.

² Bureau of the Census, *Urban and Rural Population: 1900 to 1930*, (October 1995), <http://www.census.gov/population/censusdata/urpop0090.txt>. North Dakota was a close second with 86.4% rural and 13.6% urban, yet North Dakota became a state in 1889 while Mississippi had been a state since 1817. Mississippi's population in 1920 was almost three times that of North Dakota.

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municipalities throughout the state. Most certainly this was the case in Natchez, where its business leaders believed the city had an abundance of advantages that when combined and promoted would create a thriving metropolitan hub. City was the keyword that was synonymous with progress, and town promoters wanted to fashion Natchez into one of “the most progressive, go-a-head cities of our ‘Sunny Southern Southland’.”³ They aimed high by ignoring Jackson and dreamed of rivalling New Orleans, but their efforts were frustrated and ultimately failed, and Natchez remained a small backwater town until the Great Depression, when straitened circumstances and unlikely elements combined in an ironic twist to spark the growth the boosters had so long pursued.

Antoine Crozat founded a trading post at the site of Natchez and in 1716 the French built Fort Rosalie, providing the nucleus for the establishment of the city. It grew by fits and starts for its first eighty years, but by the time the United States acquired the territory from Spain in 1795 in the Treaty of San Lorenzo the town had begun to blossom.⁴ Its heritage was ethnically rich and diverse. Natchez mirrored the rest of the nation with a predominance of Irish and German immigrants, but there were also French, Spanish, Africans, English, Italians, and Jews.⁵ From almost the beginning of its history the town had the elements that would define it for years to come—large landowners and traders. With the introduction of short staple cotton and slavery, the holdings and lifestyles of these landowners became even grander. In the twenty years before the Civil War, Natchez was a small but bustling river port and cotton market. For some, like the landed gentry, it was lush times with “beturbaned colored retainers” waiting in service.⁶ It was not unusual for planters to own several plantations on the Louisiana side of the Mississippi River but reside in Natchez in opulent mansions. The town was often in the competition to claim the most resident millionaires in the country.⁷

³ Julie Sass, “Chronology of Natchez” in Noel Polk, ed., *Natchez Before 1830* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 3; *Natchez Democrat*, January 22 and March 18, 1920. Excited at the prospect of an existing company expanding its store to cover an entire city block, the *Democrat* exclaimed, “Does not that give us the metropolitan settings?”

⁴ D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 5-30.

⁵ Herbert Weaver, “Foreigners In Ante-Bellum Mississippi,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 16 (July 1954), 151-52.

⁶ Edith Wyatt Moore File, Armstrong Public Library, Natchez, Miss., n.d.

⁷ David L. Cohn, *The Life and Times of King Cotton* (New York: Oxford University



Farm cultivation, circa 1900. All images used in this article are from the Thomas H. and Joan W. Gandy Photograph Collection, Mss. 3778, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. The collection documents one hundred years (1851-1951) of history in and around Natchez and contains approximately 20,000 images. Brothers Henry and M.J. Gurney established a daguerreotype studio in Natchez in 1851 and began recording the lives of their fellow citizens using the latest in photographic technology. In 1870, Henry Gurney hired a new employee, Henry Norman, and by 1876 Norman had opened his own studio, buying out Gurney's studio to do so. Henry Norman became the best-known photographer in the region. When Norman died in 1913, his son Earl inherited the studio. Earl, like his father, became widely known for his photographic skills and left images spanning nearly forty years.

The prosperity came to an abrupt halt with the Civil War, but the town's charm and beauty, mildly pro-Union stance, and relative military unimportance meant it survived the war virtually unharmed. Nonetheless, fortunes were lost and in the ensuing decades Natchez struggled to regain its former economic prestige and position⁸. The town experienced a burst of growth in the 1880s, but relapsed into a backwater with the

Press, 1956), 109. Half of these millionaires were of the merchant class. James, *Antebellum Natchez*, 159.

⁸ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 536: "In the rich cotton region surrounding Natchez, over 150 planters had forfeited all or part of their land by 1875 for debt or nonpayment of taxes."

Depression of 1893. Its stately homes were nearly all that remained of the town's grandeur, although individuals fascinated by "moonlight and magnolias" were drawn to the town even in its diminished condition. The town was not as scrubbed and meticulously landscaped as it is today, but there was a sepia-toned romance about it that charmed visitors and brought recognition in architectural and historical circles. Natchez businessmen sought to capitalize on the town's heritage to expand its influence and make it the prosperous city they desired.

The organization usually associated with boosterism was the chamber of commerce. Like its counterparts nationwide, the Natchez chamber of commerce believed it had "natural, social, and commercial" advantages that if properly aligned could only result in success.⁹ The chamber had many committees that researched anything and everything that might affect the town's prospects and then presented their findings in reports at monthly meetings. The organization exchanged voluminous correspondence with prospective corporations and other towns. They also filed official complaints and lawsuits with federal agencies against what they believed were discriminatory actions on the part of corporations.

The boosters were haunted by the loss of power and prestige of the opulent antebellum era that had created in them a sense of entitlement. They were stung when Polk's *City Directory* dropped them in their publishing service in the 1890s.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the growth in the 1880s convinced many that the town could rise from the ashes, and this time it would be even more spectacular and lasting. The chamber members wanted no "knockers"—the booster term for anyone who opposed their goals.¹¹

The president of the Natchez chamber of commerce in 1920 was Theodore Wensel, a cotton factor and co-owner of Rumble & Wensel, a wholesale firm that specialized in fulfilling the needs of planters. The chamber was hindered by a lack of money, and it would be difficult to woo a corporation if city leaders could not treat the representatives in a manner that suggested Natchez was worth their consideration. Writing

⁹ *Natchez Democrat*, September 3, 1920.

¹⁰ *Natchez Democrat*, January 22, 1920. That the town was not accorded a city directory was symbolic of everything they did not want: "old Natchez seemed to be in a rut out of which she could not get out apparently, but out of which she did get."

¹¹ *Natchez Democrat*, July 18, 1920: "It does not make any difference how strongly he waves the American flag, we believe that the fellow who knocks his home town is a darn poor American."



Kress storefront and parked cars, circa 1925.

letters inviting a prospective industry or business to look Natchez over needed to be followed by a campaign to win them over, so Wensel offered to give \$1,000 of his own money each year for the next three years to create a war chest if others would do the same. If money was tight then Wensel suggested that chamber members contribute land that might be used to attract new businesses.¹² In their zeal to attract industry, chamber leaders sometimes used unethical or even illegal methods. A minor scandal occurred when Wensel allegedly used his position as president of the chamber of commerce to influence a state legislator to vote for the establishment of a new county to be created from portions of Amite, Franklin, and Wilkinson counties because he believed the project would spur new business.¹³ Wensel claimed he acted in an unofficial capacity, and it appears he was innocent, but the incident shows that the Natchez boosters could be aggressive. Also, there seemed to be some internal dissension as an editorial in the local newspaper, the *Natchez*

¹² *Natchez Democrat*, May 29 and January 14, 1920.

¹³ *Natchez Democrat*, April 9, 1920.

Democrat, suggested leaders put aside any differences and work together for the betterment of the town. There were 233 members of the Natchez chamber. Some owned several businesses, and under the bylaws those members were entitled to multiple votes. This provision suggests that there were members who had inordinate power that others resented. That trouble was resolved when the charter was amended to allow only one vote per member.¹⁴

If Theodore Wensel was the captain of the team, then James K. Lambert was its head cheerleader. In his study of the urban South in the 1920s, Blaine Brownwell cites a 1927 work that claimed in every booster organization there was always “a wild-eyed secretary whooping it up.”¹⁵ Lambert was publisher and editor of the *Natchez Democrat* and an enthusiastic and tireless promoter of his town’s virtues. He used his newspaper to further the chamber’s goals and cheer them on:

If you believe in Natchez, if you wish to see Natchez grow and prosper, if you want to see it a real, active, thriving, hustling city, you will prove it by the amount of co-operation you are willing to render the commercial body.¹⁶

At the beginning of 1920 the *Democrat* led a campaign of cheery optimism. An editorial recounted the successes of 1919 and proclaimed that “Natchez is headed straight for prosperity;” 1920 would be known as “The Year of Progress!” Ads encouraged young men to stay in town and “Grow Up With the Town!” Two words were found repeatedly and seemed to be intertwined: “progress” and “city.” Physical growth was essential and reflected progress, and the *Democrat* suggested that “Natchez might with benefit adopt the slogan: build bigger and build better.”¹⁷

The chamber of commerce held an “enthusiastic” meeting in January to kick off the new year. First ward lieutenant Howard Phillips spoke ardently “urging the citizens of Natchez to wake up and secure new industries, build new houses, [and] modern office buildings.” His remarks received “hearty applause.” Items on the organization’s wish list included a county fair, improved roads, a cotton oil mill, natural

¹⁴ *Natchez Democrat*, March 17, April 2, and June 9, 1920.

¹⁵ Blaine A. Brownell, *The Urban Ethos in the South, 1920-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975) cites William J. Robertson, *The Changing South* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927), 281.

¹⁶ *Natchez Democrat*, May 29, 1920.

¹⁷ *Natchez Democrat*, January 1, 2, 3, and April 2, 1920.



Roy Scott's Grocery, circa 1925.

gas connection, large manufacturing companies, and an oil refinery.¹⁸ But what the chamber wanted most was a bridge across the Mississippi River—something city leaders had wanted since 1890.¹⁹ The chamber wanted a great deal, but almost none of its wishes were realized in the 1920s.²⁰

In many ways Natchez was well positioned to grow and thrive. The town was established and had an infrastructure that needed only to be expanded. Its status and potential were obviously better than a new town with only blueprints and vacant lots to entice industries. Baton Rouge and Vicksburg were each about seventy miles away; Jackson was 105 miles to the northeast; and Shreveport and New Orleans were both about 150 miles away. In 1920 the Mississippi River was still a vital transportation route, especially with the contentious relationship the town had with railroads. Natchez was also the seat of Adams County and that was convenient for customers and prospective businesses and industries alike. If citizens had any government business, whether it

¹⁸ The chamber of commerce invited President-elect Warren G. Harding to visit Natchez on his triumphal tour after his election. Harding wired that he would not be able to come. *Natchez Democrat*, November 5 and 6, 1920 and *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 5, 1920.

¹⁹ Thomas J. Reed, "Natchez Bridge To Be Opened Sept. 26," *Mississippi Highways*, September 1940, 9.

²⁰ *Natchez Democrat*, January 14, 1920.

was getting their mail, paying their taxes, or filing permits to build, they might as well do their purchasing—retail or wholesale—in Natchez at the same time and make only one trip, as getting to any town in the state was a hard task in 1920 because the state's roads, when they existed at all, were often in deplorable condition.

This difficulty in traveling to Natchez was a major problem and much business was lost due to it. The chamber's traffic manager, B.F. Martin, worked to remedy this situation by initiating a variety of projects—from writing to the officials of other towns to inquire if sprinkling dirt roads with oil instead of water was cost-efficient and effective, to traveling to Washington, D.C., to testify at hearings of the Interstate Commerce Commission, to suing railroads to improve service. Steamboats and ferries were old forms of transportation that had served the town well in the past, but by 1920 they were outmoded. The territory that Natchez businessmen most wanted to open for trade was across the Mississippi River in Louisiana. It was difficult to generate this trade when there was no bridge. For well over a century there had been ferry service, but the ferries did not run often enough and could not transport enough people to make the economic impact the chamber wanted.

Once these potential customers from Louisiana crossed the river they still needed convenient transportation to access the business district. Southern Railway & Light operated street cars in Natchez for fifteen years, but by April 1920 the company had gone into receivership. It was no loss as far as editor Lambert was concerned, for he noted that street cars all over the country had been a losing proposition. There were complaints from both sides of the river about the poor condition of the access road to the bluffs. The streetcar line was replaced by a bus that could hold twenty-four people, had a regular route, and ran from seven in the morning until eight at night. An article in the *Democrat* stated that the bus was becoming more and more popular in town “just as they have become popular in New York and other metropolitan cities.”²¹

Phillips, who had spoken so fervently at the first chamber meeting of the year, composed a poem “That Natchez Bridge.” It was twelve stanzas of corny boosterism, but every chamber member could agree that a bridge would increase the town's prosperity phenomenally. The bridge became the centerpiece of all their aspirations—it was not just

²¹ *Natchez Democrat*, April 4, February 24, March 24 and 25, 1920.



View of train station with approaching train and parked carriages, circa 1915.

a bridge, but “The Bridge.”²² The bridge issue even entered the schools, and Elizabeth Ogden Reed’s prize-winning essay “A Bridge Across the Mississippi at Natchez” was read at the commencement of Institute School. Reed’s essay was more to the point than Phillips’s poem and in one sentence got to the heart of the matter: “A bridge made Memphis a city and a bridge will make Natchez one.”²³ It had been known for years that a bridge would be built somewhere south of Memphis, and Natchezians believed there could only be one site for it. That may have been the case, but engineers would have to do an extensive survey, and the river had a history of fooling the best of experts. If a site other than Natchez was chosen, a new town would rise up quickly around the new bridge and everything that Natchez had hoped and worked for would be ended. Eventually Natchez got its bridge, but not until 1940.²⁴

²² *Natchez Democrat*, January 14 and 15, 1920. “Mr. Phillips is absolutely right. Think Bridge, talk Bridge and write Bridge! And after a while we will get the Bridge.”

²³ *Natchez Democrat*, May 23, 1920.

²⁴ Thomas J. Reed, “Natchez Bridge To Be Opened Sept. 26,” *Mississippi Highways*, September 1940, 9.

The bridge was needed to tap business across the river; good roads were needed to encourage business from the surrounding areas on the eastern side. Even after the "Good Roads Movement" had made great progress in other southern states, Mississippi lagged far behind. Most of what was considered a surfaced road was merely a short stretch of sand or gravel.²⁵ By 1920, federal, state, and local funds had become available for the improvement of roads, and the chamber of commerce applauded the state legislature's \$25 million outlay for roadwork, but it would take much more than that to create a serviceable system of roads in the state. The roads around Natchez were in deplorable condition, and businessmen complained that they were losing both regular and prospective customers and money. At one point the federal government threatened to cancel mail service between Natchez and Woodville because the road was impassable most of the time. An editorial in the *Democrat* noted that much Woodville business could be tapped, both directly and through the post, if the road was improved. The same was true with the road leading to Knoxville, and the boosters were certain that much business that should have been Natchez's was going to Gloster, a hamlet of 1,079 people. The roads certainly were a concern, but Natchez was overreacting—what could Gloster possibly have that could threaten Natchez? Natchez's population was more than ten times that of Gloster. To pursue business was one thing, but to think that all the business in the surrounding area was for Natchez alone was not only unrealistic but unreasonable. All the neighboring counties had floated bonds to improve the roads connecting those going to Natchez, and the Adams County Board of Supervisors had allotted \$200,000 for road repair. It was proclaimed that these expenditures would make Natchez a "hub of a system of good roads that will radiate in all directions."²⁶ According to the state highway commission biennial report, there were only two road projects completed for Adams County in 1920 (a third had been terminated because the federal allotments went to the other two). One road, 11.6 miles long, connected Natchez to the Wilkinson County line, and the other, 3.6 miles, went to the Jefferson County line; not exactly the spokes for the hub the boosters envisioned.²⁷

²⁵ Corey T. Lesseig, *Automobility: Social Changes in the American South, 1909-1939* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 55-68.

²⁶ *Natchez Democrat*, February 11, April 21, January 15, and January 1, 1920.

²⁷ State Highway Commission, *Third Biennial Report of the State Highway Commission*

The most contentious and vexing transportation problem was that of railroads, and Natchez, like other communities around the country, chafed at the power the railroads had over them. A railroad could destroy instantly any aspirations to success if it bypassed a town near its route. As a consequence, competition among towns was fierce, and questionable methods were used in enticing a railroad company to lay its tracks at a particular location. Until a bridge across the Mississippi River was built, Natchez relied primarily on trains to bring Louisianans. In 1920 the city was served by four railroads, including a branch of the Illinois Central. Natchez was not pleased with the service from these railroads and complained to the point of haranguing and eventually filing suit with the ICC. The city's case against the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad was especially revealing. The line brought many people to Natchez, but not the people who mattered most. The general superintendent of the railroad wrote the chamber of commerce saying that parlor car service would be discontinued because people wanted to save "a paltry twenty-five or fifty cents" instead of receiving superior accommodations in a parlor car.²⁸ The superintendent was being disingenuous as those were not paltry sums in 1920. Hamburger meat was about 30 cents a pound, sugar was about 25 cents a pound, premium bacon was about 55 cents a pound, and a peck of sweet potatoes was 50 cents. The railroad official also said there was heavy service in the common cars, but these passengers were not the caliber of people in which the town's merchants were interested—the ones in the parlor cars had more money. And Natchez had its reputation to look after:

Natchez is criticised [sic] on all sides for its poor passenger train service, and while much has already been accomplished in the way of betterment much remains yet to be done before Natchez will have anything like the passenger service it is *entitled to* [italics added].²⁹

Chamber traffic manager Martin believed that the same was true with the Missouri–Pacific line and said that the trade between Monroe and Natchez was brisk but could be even better with safer and improved accommodations. The chamber brought suit against the Louisiana & Arkansas line because of the company's refusal to institute passenger

to the *Legislature of Mississippi* (Jackson, Miss., 1919/1921), 4.

²⁸ *Natchez Democrat*, January 30 and April 18, 1920.

²⁹ *Natchez Democrat*, October 6, 1920.

service. Town retailers believed they could reap up to \$100,000 annually if the railroad was forced to bring its road to Natchez from Vidalia. Martin went to Washington to testify at an ICC hearing in an attempt to force the line to provide Natchez with passenger service. About a month later President William Buchanan of the Louisiana & Arkansas along with President F.L. Peck of the Mississippi Central line showed up unannounced in Natchez and when interviewed were less than friendly—no doubt because of the suit against them. Martin responded that he had written Buchanan for four years with no satisfaction and had no choice but to sue the company. The ICC ruled in favor of Natchez, but the Louisiana & Arkansas believed that they were being unfairly singled out as the other two railroads did not really want to provide Natchez with the service the town wanted.³⁰ Was Natchez overreacting as in the case of business going to the little hamlet of Gloster? Perhaps, but the city leaders had to pursue every lead for growth, and they were goaded by the intransigence of the railroads not only in this case and in general, but specifically when it came to one issue: freight rates.

Of all the issues that the Natchez advocates faced in 1920, the matter of freight rates, which were vital to future economic growth, was the most infuriating and frustrating. Judging by the number of articles in the *Democrat*, only the possibility of baseball coming to town exceeded freight rates in mention and emotional intensity. Baseball, though, was a reason for joy. The anger over freight rates reflected the town's fall from the heights of the antebellum era and reinforced the popular view of Natchez exceptionalism. Town advocates were driven to regain "lost prestige."³¹

Railroads gained power and prominence as their network of lines crisscrossed the nation providing year-round service that was fairly fast. The rates they charged, however, were neither uniform nor fair, and for decades railroads refused to publish their rate schedules. Freight rates, rebates, kickbacks, charges for loading and unloading, charges for warehousing and grain elevators, and the most egregious, the inequity in charges between the short and the long haul, were contested by many Americans, particularly farmers, in the postbellum era.³² In

³⁰ *Natchez Democrat*, May 26, October 10, September 15, and April 16, 1920.

³¹ *Natchez Democrat*, March 3, 1920.

³² Arthur S. Link, *American Epoch: A History of the United States Since the 1890s* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 107-11.



Main Street toward Mississippi River, circa 1925.

Mississippi the hegemony of the railroads was so despised that provisions were included in the Constitution of 1890 to control them. The regulation of railroads was difficult to achieve because the success of a town depended on rail service. The United States Congress passed the landmark Interstate Commerce Act in 1887 that provided for the creation of the Interstate Commerce Commission, the first regulatory agency in American history. The commission was not very powerful in its first twenty years but it did provide access for adjudication, and that went a long way in satisfying complainants.

Natchez boosters were active in the years after World War I but experienced difficulty in achieving their objectives as the railroads worked in collusion with business and banking in the Northeast. It was well known that south of the Potomac and Ohio rivers and west of the Mississippi River railroad rates were always higher, and rates were fixed in those areas to be cheaper for the shipping of raw materials out and higher for finished goods shipped in. The goal was to provide raw materials for northern industries and limit southern industrial competition.³³

³³ James A. Henretta, et al., *America's History*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, (New York: Worth Publishers, 1993), 560; and John Ray Skates, *Mississippi, A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999), 135-36.

Although the Natchez chamber of commerce fought various railroads over rates, quality of service, and extension of service, it was the favorable freight rates given by the railroads to towns in Louisiana, especially New Orleans, that Natchez boosters challenged most aggressively. New Orleans's position as the preeminent harbor of the South had long been assured because of its location as an outlet on the Gulf of Mexico. Because of the city's sheer volume of commerce, carriers not only could offer cheaper freight rates, but free loading and unloading, and free or cheaper rates on warehousing as well. Natchez struggled to compete, but even in its heyday as a cotton port it could only claim to be "one of the busiest landings above New Orleans."³⁴ Natchez had been filing various complaints with the ICC against Louisiana for three years, and hearings continued throughout 1920. In July the ICC ruled that Louisiana rates within the state and from Natchez to points in Louisiana were discriminatory and ordered rates to rise in parity with those in Natchez. This was what the boosters had long awaited and believed would enable Natchez to return to the flush times and rival New Orleans. Louisiana's assistant attorney general Wylie M. Barrow scoffed at Natchez as a has-been: "Natchez has just awakened after a long sleep, and its charges of unjust discrimination in many cases are more imaginary than real." He vigorously opposed the rate hikes, saying that Louisiana industries "would suffer immeasurably." The Natchez chamber could smile at Burrow's statement, for that was how they had felt for decades. Also handed down by the ICC was a tentative order that would prohibit the practice of free loading and unloading by carriers in New Orleans. This benefit offered to shippers because of the immense traffic through the Crescent City was believed by Natchez merchants to be, again, discriminatory and put them at a distinct disadvantage.³⁵

Natchez continued to press for any opportunity to increase its markets. While it demanded a rise in the diverse rates from New Orleans to Louisiana towns, it went the opposite direction for freight rates on cotton coming south from interior points in Louisiana and Arkansas. In the "Cotton Rate Cases," the ICC ordered a 40 percent reduction in the cost of shipping a bale of cotton to Natchez. And once again, New Orleans was shown to be the town's chief adversary when the commis-

³⁴ Bern Keating, "Today Along the Natchez Trace," *National Geographic*, November 1968, 643.

³⁵ *Natchez Democrat*, July 20 and 13, and May 23, 1920.

sion ruled that in reshipping a bale of cotton a larger refund would be given if the cotton was going to New Orleans than to the eastern seaboard. Natchez factors believed much cotton that was going to New Orleans would now come to Natchez and so “very materially add to the importance of Natchez as a cotton market.”³⁶

Yet the town found itself in the same position as its arch-rival when the ICC ruled that rates at water points could not be lower than those at interior Mississippi points. Whatever advantage Natchez might have had as a shipping center would be lost, and the chamber of commerce estimated that Natchez jobbers would have to absorb half a million dollars per year due to the new freight charges.³⁷ The boosters were at their wit’s end with the railroads and the only solution seemed to be the reestablishment of Natchez as a river terminal where they had a natural advantage, recognition from the past, and more important, control. The *Democrat* waxed nostalgic over the old river days and wrote “that the sole and only way to maintain our commercial supremacy is by handling our freight by boat down the great waterway.”

As an experiment the federal government built towboats to ship freight by river. They were not as handsome as the steamboats in the old days, but they were powerful and fast. A large port facility would have to be constructed with a channel fourteen feet deep that would have to be maintained at all times for ocean-going vessels. Numerous engineers surveyed the shoreline of Natchez and stated construction was practicable just about anywhere and would also serve to stem the erosion of the bluffs. The chamber of commerce was told if Natchez built the “proper terminal, there would not only be no difficulty in obtaining ship lines to serve Natchez but we would have ‘a waiting list.’” Editor Lambert urged the town to act quickly on the river terminal question for this “progressive city” in order “to keep pace with competing centers.”³⁸

The traditional economic attachment to the Louisiana parishes across the river was due to cotton, but recently discovered fields of natural gas and oil offered bright prospects in which Natchez boosters wanted a share. Natural gas had been discovered in the northern parishes and

³⁶ *Natchez Democrat*, July 24 and November 21, 1920.

³⁷ *Natchez Democrat*, May 23 and December 29, 1920.

³⁸ *Natchez Democrat*, September 24, February 1, May 23, and December 10, 1920. The first of the barges built by the federal government was called the *Natchez*, and it arrived in town in December. A docking barge was needed, and the traffic department of the chamber of commerce successfully appealed to the federal government for one to be built.

had already begun to be piped to market. The economy of Shreveport, which was rich in both natural gas and oil, was booming. In February 1920 a large field was discovered near Alexandria, and plans were made to ship the oil and gas to New Orleans by way of a pipeline that would come across the Mississippi and then head south. Natchez was close by, and town leaders saw no reason why they should not tap into this new source of power as coal was becoming quite expensive due to railroad and miners' strikes. Southern Railway and Light, Natchez's utility and streetcar company, raised both electric and gas (gas from coal) rates; there would be no more flat rates or free service calls. Natchez bought its coal from Alabama and Kentucky, but because of strikes found itself in severe circumstances in early September with only a three-day supply of coal left. Natchez business leaders were able to secure five carloads, but "at almost prohibitive prices." Natural gas seemed to be the practical alternative as it would be cheaper and in time, plentiful. Not only that, its use would give the town a modern appearance, which would help in attracting industry. But Polk's *City Directory* for 1922 mentioned that the lines had yet to come across the river. Five years later the town was still waiting to be connected, and an editorial cautioned townspeople not to get too excited about natural gas.³⁹

Even more exciting than natural gas was oil. With mass production of the automobile, oil was going to be big business. The *Democrat* reported that much exploration and drilling was taking place in Louisiana and Mississippi. "Four big strong responsible companies" had especially focused on Sicily Island in Catahoula Parish—about thirty miles across the river from Natchez. A long feature article discussed the history of oil and gas in the area and included a map of all the activity showing Natchez as the center. It claimed the town was "practically the hub in this great wheel of activities." A few days later, another article appeared connecting the expected fortunes of Sicily Island to Natchez. The editor arrived at this conclusion by a circuitous route; the town was linked with Sicily Island because the surviving members of the Natchez Indian tribe had fled there after the French massacre of 1730. The booster spirit notwithstanding, even this story was stretching it a

³⁹ *Natchez Democrat*, February 24, January 2, July 10, January 4, and September 18, 1920; and Richard Aubrey McLemore, ed., *A History of Mississippi*, vol. II (Jackson, Miss.: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973), 237. Mississippi's first natural gas field was found in 1928 near the town Amory in Monroe County.

bit. Nonetheless, Natchez was determined to play a central role in oil development in the area. But Mississippi's anti-corporation laws made things difficult. Oil men examining both sides of the river for possible port and refinery sites rejected Natchez immediately because of the legal restrictions. One engineer from a Texas company found Natchez favorable and saw no reason why the town should not have oil and gas connections: "There is no reason on earth why Natchez should not be a second Shreveport." Proudful Natchezians might have stiffened at the backhanded compliment—no doubt they believed their town was second to none—but to a booster with dollar signs in his eyes the comparison was as fitting as it was welcome.⁴⁰

Economic growth anywhere in Mississippi was severely hampered by the Constitution of 1890, which was hostile to large corporations. Prior to 1890, corporations in Mississippi had virtually no legal checks on their power. The framers of the new constitution sought to end abuses by large corporations, especially the railroads, and bring them under state control. The views of politicians such as Frank Burkitt, James K. Vardaman, and James Z. George (who would dominate the convention that drafted the Constitution of 1890) represented the Populist anti-business views of the hill country of northeastern Mississippi.⁴¹ They

⁴⁰ *Natchez Democrat*, May 12 and 16, February 19 and 18, and April 11, 1920; and *Jackson Daily News, Oil and Industry of Mississippi* (Jackson, Miss.: Jackson Daily News, 1945), 9. Mississippi's first producing well was found in Yazoo County in 1939; the first well in Adams County was put down in 1943.

⁴¹ Clarence E. Cason, "The Mississippi Imbroglia," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 7 (April 1931), 229-40. A protégé of Vardaman's was Theodore G. Bilbo, who rose from obscurity as a state senator from Pearl River County and held various public positions including governor and United States Senator during his controversial (colorful to his advocates) career. In 1920 he concluded his first term as governor. Although his reforms in his first term were extremely progressive and sweeping, the way they were achieved and his antics and later virulent racism (racism that became obsessively full of hatred) overshadowed his accomplishments. For this paper he is important in that he held the views of Burkitt and Vardaman and others that were jealous of the Delta and Natchez. This can be seen in the controversy of the "Secret Caucus," where LeRoy Percy was chosen over Vardaman for the U.S. Senate seat in 1910. Bilbo appeared a few days after the election saying that he had been bribed by the Percy contingent. The "Secret Caucus" has become a staple in Mississippi political history. Percy refused to be anywhere near Bilbo during campaigns, and their hatred toward each other is couched in the old poor white vs. nabob rhetoric. Percy's son would write of this controversy in his loving recollection of his father and their place in the Delta in *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son*. For Natchez, the dislike of Bilbo was manifested in an alleged complaint that there was malfeasance in the county, and Bilbo appointed an auditor to go over the books. Bilbo claimed 25 percent of the voters of Adams County demanded a reckoning and as a public

went to the opposite extreme and created restrictions that stunted the state's economic growth for decades. The state legislature had the power to "alter, amend, or repeal" any charter. It also could "limit or restrict the acquiring or holding of land by corporations" and placed a million dollar ceiling on corporate real estate holdings. Other statutes that hindered business development were passed in 1910, and it would not be until 1924 that these anti-corporation laws were relaxed or repealed outright.⁴²

Initially, the opposition of Natchez (as well as the Delta) to the Constitution of 1890 related to fears that their representation in the state legislature would be reduced due to the resentment they encountered from the hill country. The overwhelming African American majority population in the Delta and in the Natchez region that was counted in apportionment yet not allowed to vote gave both areas great political power in the legislature and in the Democratic Party primaries—power that the hill country craved and wanted to curb.⁴³ Natchez and the Delta voted against calling the convention and the constitution itself.⁴⁴ The Delta so opposed the reapportionment scheme that the area threatened secession from the state.⁴⁵ In the end, however, only two counties in the Delta, DeSoto and Warren, had the number of their representatives

servant he had to obey their wishes. An editorial in the *Democrat* asked how 25 percent constituted a majority and said if the county books needed to be audited then the board of supervisors should be free to choose their own auditor to remove it from the "pale of politics." In disgust the *Democrat* asked, "Have we not had enough of Bilboism?" Bilbo's successor was his protégé, Lieutenant Governor Lee Russell. He was loyal but Bilbo's reforms left him with nothing much to do. McLemore, *A History of Mississippi*, vol. II, 49-54; William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee; Recollections of a Planter's Son* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 143-55 and passim; and *Natchez Democrat*, January 8, 9, and 13; February 6, 7, 17, and 19, 1920.

⁴² Eric C. Clark, "Regulation of Corporations in the Mississippi Constitutional Convention of 1890," *Journal of Mississippi History* (Vol. 48, No. 1, February 1986): 31-41; McLemore, *Mississippi*, vol. II, 39, 235, and 238; and Charles S. Sydnor and Claude Bennett, *Mississippi History* (Richmond, Vir.: Johnson Publishing Company, 1930), 308-09.

⁴³ Cason, "The Mississippi Imbroglio," 233.

⁴⁴ James P. Coleman, "The Origin of the Constitution of 1890," *Journal of Mississippi History* 19 (April 1957): 77, 88, and 90. An editorial in the *Democrat* "referred to supporters of a convention as 'cranks' and said that 'a convention is a dangerous agency because its power is unlimited.'" Coleman, 77. According to William A. Mabry, the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* fully supported the constitutional convention as opposed to the *Democrat*, which "doubted their sincerity and the likelihood that they would accomplish anything of positive value. A running editorial battle ensued." William Alexander Mabry, "Negro Disfranchisement in Mississippi," *Journal of Southern History* 4 (August 1938): 321.

⁴⁵ Albert D. Kirwan, "Apportionment in the Mississippi Constitution," *Journal of Southern History* 14 (May 1948): 237.



Bluff City Cannery building with delivery truck and workers, circa 1925. Boxes of canned goods on the back of the truck bear labels such as “Natchez Brand String Beans” and “Natchez Tomatoes.”

reduced, from three to two and five to three respectively. Adams County, too, had its representation reduced from three to two, but it was not as bad as had been feared because the city of Natchez was given its own representative, while another representative would serve the entire county.⁴⁶ In spite of its political maneuvering, the hill country had failed to get what it wanted.⁴⁷ Even with reapportionment the Delta and other “black” counties still had more votes than the “white” counties. Although the hostility generated by the convention remained, by 1920 the Natchez boosters’ opposition to the constitution had shifted to its anti-business provisions that stymied the economic development the boosters desired.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁴⁸ Cason, “The Mississippi Imbroglia,” 230-32, 236; and John Ray Skates, “Mississippi Constitution of 1868” and “Mississippi Constitution of 1890 as Originally Adopted,” *Mississippi History Now*, <http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/>.

The frustration of Natchez boosters by the restrictive constitution is seen by a Lambert editorial that wailed, "How long are we going to be tied to the millstone of stagnation on account of this law, passed by a fanatical legislature, and in keeping with the wishes of a fanatical governor?" Lambert suggested that if the repeal of the noxious regulations was all that the Natchez chamber of commerce ever accomplished it could consider itself successful. Meanwhile, town advocates were forced to sit by and wring their hands as big corporations passed over Natchez because of the rigid anti-corporation laws. Standard Oil went to Baton Rouge. A lumber company saw profit in the timberland surrounding Natchez but eventually went to Bogalusa to build its sawmill, which at its completion was the largest in the world. British oil and gas investors were very much interested in the town, but the laws prohibited foreign corporations.⁴⁹ Surrounded by timber, town advocates saw no reason why the factory of a furniture company should not locate in Natchez. "We have every facility and every convenience. Let's nail the factory." Yet no factory was established. Even the modest Blount Plow Works of Indiana was turned away due to the constitutional prohibition of foreign corporations!⁵⁰

Building and new business did come to Natchez, but not on the scale the boosters envisioned. A vegetable canning plant and a stove factory were added to the town's commercial life as well as a new drug store and construction firm. Three of Natchez's largest companies, Natchez

⁴⁹ Baker, *Catch the Vision; The Life of Henry L. Whitfield of Mississippi* (Jackson, Miss.: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1974), 129. According to Baker, "rumor had it that many of the oil and chemical industries that located at Baton Rouge, actually preferred Natchez, Mississippi, but this law [1910 law that placed a cap of one million dollars in assets of an industry] prevented their coming."

⁵⁰ *Natchez Democrat*, February 19, 1920; McLemore, *Mississippi*, vol. II, 258; Sydnor, *Mississippi History*, 309; *Natchez Democrat*, February 18, 21, and 20, and October 15, 1920; and C.N. McCormick, ed., *The Queen City of the South: Natchez, Mississippi On Top, Not Under the Hill* (Natchez, *Natchez Daily Democrat*, 188-), 26. The long-held frustration of the boosters can be seen in a promotional booklet from 188- [Library of Congress designation]. At a cursory look, the quote appears to be a coarse racial slur, but read closely it strongly suggests that the town advocates had been thwarted at every attempt to regain the prosperity of the past and were angry:

Don't judge the South by merely viewing it from a flying railroad train. If you do you will form a poor opinion every time. Remember that Mississippi passed through a war which left few houses and no fences standing; that Mississippi is 6000 square miles larger than Ohio, and has only one-third as many inhabitants, half of whom are shiftless negroes who do not aspire to own land, and who are ignorant of all proper means of cultivating it if they did own it.



View of Natchez Hotel from corner of Franklin and Pearl streets, circa 1910.

Manufacturing Company (cotton ginning and milling); National Box Company (the world's largest single unit box factory—wooden crates); and Natchez Baking Company (known for “Ole Missus Fruit Cakes—It Sho Am Good” shipped worldwide even to China) all enlarged, remodeled, and retooled. After protracted litigation Wilson and Company bought out the defunct Natchez Packing Company, and production was scheduled to resume in the fall of 1920. The Corinna Hotel remodeled inside and out. The Natchez Hotel added phone service to its one hundred rooms because it believed it would then be on the same scale as the other elite hotels in the country. There were companies in the town that were nationally known: Coca-Cola Bottling Company and Piggly-Wiggly. F.W. Woolworth Company's “recognition of the growing trade importance of Natchez” led to its opening a “popular price store” in July. The four main banks, which posted record deposits and increasing assets, paid the prevailing 4 percent interest on savings. George Cantania added a sixth chair to

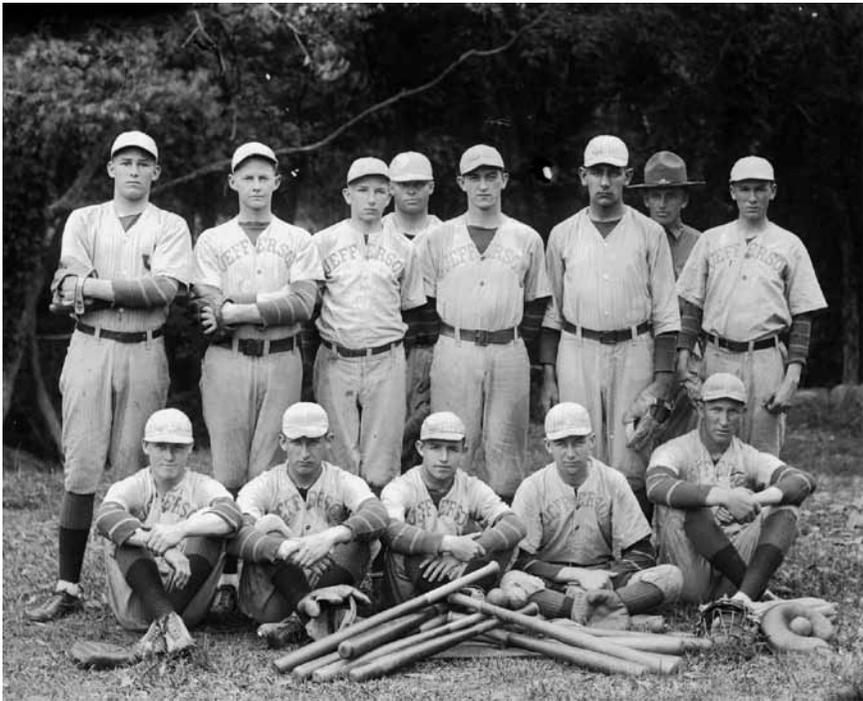
his barbershop—the only one in town with that many—because business was so brisk. All of this could only help to increase growth, but it was small town in terms of commercial activity. It was not Standard Oil.⁵¹

While working to expand its economic base the town had to rely on the mainstays of the past, the wholesale and retail trades and agriculture. Natchez had a reputation as a center for trade, and a Lambert editorial claimed Natchez merchants kept pace with the “so-called mail order houses” in price and quality. In a rare departure from the boosters’ zeal for anything urban or newfangled, Lambert wrote that Natchez merchants had “a character of merchandise and service that cannot be duplicated by the far-away department stores of the metropolitan cities.” Even so, Natchez businesses sought to expand into new trade territories while culling old established ones to maximize profits. A jobber, Jon Seiferth, inaugurated a “Spring Buyer’s Convention” to expand his area and was confident that he could compete with the “metropolitan cities.” To encourage new business from New Orleans and Memphis, he offered to reimburse prospective customers for their train fares.⁵²

Even baseball was used to provide an inducement for business and growth of the town. The Natchez Locals were organized in 1920, and it is ironic that despite the team’s name none of the players came from Adams County, let alone Natchez proper. Most were from Louisiana, where the majority of the teams in the league were located. Judging by the number of articles in the paper, the length of the articles, the size of the headlines, and the front page placement accorded the articles, baseball was far and away the most exciting thing to happen to Natchez that year. Publication of subscriptions to support the team far outweighed donations to charitable organizations. Young and old, black and white, male and female, booster and old fogey loved the team. Baseball was so popular that Lambert penned an editorial suggesting the state law prohibiting Sunday ballgames be repealed. Several ministers were horrified at the suggestion and wrote a letter to the editor castigating the newspaper. Chastened, editor Lambert advocated adherence to the law, and Sunday games were played across the river where either there was

⁵¹ *Natchez Democrat*, March 21, June 6, November 5 and 14, June 20, April 18, and February 12, 1920; *South Mississippi*, n.p. [1925?], 33; Polk, *City Directory*, 24; *Natchez Democrat*, May 9, June 18, October 10, March 5, May 30, March 17, and January 7 and 8, 1920.

⁵² Polk, *City Directory*, 23; *Natchez Democrat*, May 25, and February 26, 1920.



Group portrait of Jefferson Military College baseball team, circa 1920. Jefferson Military College, now Historic Jefferson College, was located a few miles from Natchez in Washington.

no such prohibition, or if there was, it was ignored. The Natchez Locals played over .500 ball for the season, winning nineteen of thirty-one games. It was hoped that Natchez's devotion to baseball would lead to the town's selection as a spring training site for major league teams. The 1919 World Series champion Cincinnati Reds were anxious to train at Natchez but were obliged to seek a location in Florida when the local fields were judged unacceptable.⁵³

Though the boosters looked to industry and commerce to modernize their town, they had to rely upon what had made Natchez in the first place: cotton. Most of the cotton was grown in the parishes across the river just as it had been during the antebellum era. The only difference now was that the land was no longer owned by Natchezians. Chamber

⁵³ *Natchez Democrat*, March 31, April 6, August 3, and June 11, 1920; and Glenvall Estes, sports columnist for the *Natchez Democrat*, telephone conversation with the author, November 18, 1996.

of commerce president Wensel stated that Natchez “handled” fifty to seventy thousand bales of cotton each season. A factor himself, Wensel said that eighty percent of the cotton that came to his firm was from Louisiana. In contrast, in 1920 Adams County produced only 1,895 bales. The four counties that surrounded Adams produced more cotton but nothing on the scale of the principal Louisiana parishes that Natchez did business with, which produced three times the cotton of Adams and the neighboring counties combined.⁵⁴

The year 1920 was disastrous for cotton from start to finish. Heavy rains packed the soil, and spring planting was delayed for a month. There was a “shortage of efficient farm labor” that season, and when secured, “was unusually expensive.” The rain continued, and the bolls never dried out and were susceptible to weevils. It was the pink boll worm, however, that sent factors and processors into a panic. In April officials in Mississippi prohibited cotton from Louisiana and Texas, where the pest infiltrated the crop, from entering the state. Mississippi’s action was upheld by the federal government, which issued further regulations that cotton from Louisiana and Texas could be shipped, but only through New Orleans and Texas ports. When it re-entered the United States, it would be treated as foreign cotton and could only come in through New York or Boston. The efforts of Natchez leaders had backfired on them, and the town’s factors would be completely shut out of the market and face financial ruin. Wensel protested the ruling, stating the two parishes mainly afflicted, Calcasieu and Cameron, were in the southwestern part of Louisiana and so far from Natchez that cotton from the river parishes could not be affected. Businessmen from Natchez, Vicksburg, Greenville, and other Delta towns joined together and took their case to government agencies for redress. They requested modification of the quarantine to reflect the distance from the affected parishes and also suggested that Louisiana do a better job of patrolling its parishes for the mutual benefit of all. By early August, the ruling was relaxed, and cotton from the Mississippi River parishes was allowed to enter Mississippi with permits.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *Natchez Democrat*, April 7, 1920; and Bureau of the Census, *Bulletin: Agriculture: Louisiana: Statistics for the State and Its Parishes* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 24-29. Figures are based on field production of 1919; the next agricultural census would be in 1925. It is interesting to note that the census classifies cotton as a “miscellaneous crop.”

⁵⁵ *Natchez Democrat*, June 3, 1920; Department of Agriculture, Weather Bureau, *Clima-*

Modification of the quarantine was a hollow victory as the crop was one of the worst ever produced. It was probably the most expensive one to produce as well. The season began “in the worst condition in fifty years,” but the crop ended up the largest since 1914. Still, it was called a “short one” because it consisted of too much low-grade cotton, and to make matters still worse, there were large quantities of low-grade cotton left over from the previous year. Wensel traveled to Montgomery, Alabama, to a cotton conference to work out a collective strategy. The delegates voiced the same producers-versus-manufacturers complaints their ancestors had experienced. Articles in the *Democrat* were more jeremiads than news stories:

The Southern cotton growers have been driven as slaves under the lash of the speculator and the spinners for more than a half an century ... The policy of Southern agriculture in the widespread and extensive culture of cotton at the expense of diversification and the more bountiful production of food and feed crops has been all wrong, but the system was forced as the result of the war between the states from 1861 to 1865.

Absolute necessity forced the production of cotton as the only staple crop upon which the northern banker or wholesale merchant would grant terms of credit for the reconstruction of Southern agriculture and industry. The yoke once fastened upon the South as the cruel penalty inflicted by a victorious foe, it was well nigh impossible to shake off the incubus ... The slave growers of cotton have so long been unmercifully driven by the task masters of Wall street and New England, backed by the unlimited money and power of Great Britain’s textile industry.⁵⁶

Wensel and his colleagues at the Montgomery conference decided to withhold from the market a quarter of the area’s best cotton until their

tological Data: Mississippi Section (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, [1920], 97-100. *Natchez Democrat*, April 7 and 10, July 22, and August 1, 1920. The years 1900, 1905, 1912, and 1919 were wetter than 1920, with 1919 the wettest on record to that date.

⁵⁶ *Natchez Democrat*, December 14, October 8, August 31, October 30, and September 14, 1920. The Department of Agriculture estimated that the cost to produce the 1918 crop was 28 cents per pound, and in 1919 the cost had increased 33 percent to 37 cents per pound. The *Democrat* bemoaned the situation: “We all know that the 1919 crop is the most expensive ever made—therefore any one can guess the minimum cost of the 1920 crop.” And they viewed themselves as helpless victims: “You have seen the vultures of the New York Cotton Exchange enjoying the carnage and feeding upon our wealth.”

demand for forty cents per pound was met. They also agreed on acreage reduction for the 1921 season because “the world must be made to feel the pinch of a cotton famine.” Their strategy failed, and the average price for Southern cotton in 1920 was fifteen cents per pound—down twenty cents from 1919. It was the lowest cotton price since 1915.⁵⁷

Because the boosters equated progress, and therefore success, with growth and development, they were particularly anxious about the decennial census that was conducted that year. Several articles in the *Democrat* exhorted townspeople to cooperate with census takers. To encourage cooperation and generate enthusiasm, the paper sponsored a contest with the prize of a men’s hat from Grady’s Men’s Store for the closest guess of the total population of the town (by making the prize a men’s hat was Lambert suggesting that only men would make the correct guess?). For a month the guesses, some of which came from out of state, were published on the front page of the *Democrat*. The boosters were dismayed that more than one thousand people were missed in the census enumeration, including one prominent family on South Union Street. Wensel, as well as the postmaster, W.D. Deterly, offered cash bonuses for the longest list of uncounted Natchezians. Participation was crucial because money for government contracts and services depended on an accurate report. Lambert complained, “The population has much to do with prospective settlers, new industries, etc., and if Natchez shows no greater population today than it did ten years ago, Uncle Sam officially stamps it as a dead town, and advertises it to the world as such.” Although the thousand citizens unaccounted for were eventually enumerated, boosters rued the fact that the board of aldermen did not extend the town limits as other towns had done to increase their population. Natchez’s population was contained in one square mile. The census revealed that for the first time Natchez was not in the top five most populous towns in the state, as it dropped to sixth place.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ *Natchez Democrat*, September 14 and 21, October 30, and December 14, 1920; and Bureau of the Census, *Bulletin: Agriculture: Mississippi*, 28. As much as cotton was important in the town’s ideology, there were 5,000 more acres of corn under cultivation in Adams County. There were also forage crops that were particularly suited to the soil, and Adams County had one of the largest concentrations of beef cattle in the state. Timber was also an abundant raw material.

⁵⁸ *Natchez Democrat*, April 6, January 14, 18, and 30, February 1, January 23 and 28; and McLemore, *History of Mississippi*, vol. II, 357. J.J. Murphy won the new hat from Grady’s for the closest guess: 12,600. He was off by eight.

Although Natchez was founded in the early 1700s, accurate census data did not exist until 1810. From that time until the 1870 census, the town showed phenomenal growth, averaging a 35 percent increase in population every ten years. Even in the 1870 census, which reflected the Civil War and its aftermath, growth was 37 percent, which brought the town's population to 9,057. A decade later the 1880 census revealed that Natchez's population had declined to 7,058—a dramatic loss of 22 percent of the town's population. During the boom of the 1880s the town not only recovered its losses, but increased its population by 43 percent to 10,101. Another solid 20 percent increase from 1890 to 1900 brought the town's population to 12,210, but then Natchez began to experience the stagnation that town advocates greatly worried about. The 1910 census showed a 3 percent loss of population, and from 1910 to 1920 growth was a modest 7 percent, followed by a 6 percent increase from 1920 to 1930. Although the boom period of the 1880s was heartening, Natchez seemed to have peaked in the antebellum era when cotton was king. In 1920, Natchez had a population of 12,608, which was over half female (6,933 females to 5,675 males) and over half black (6,801 blacks to 5,799 whites). The population was relatively young, with the largest age group in both races twenty to forty-four years old. The census listed 3,518 males twenty-one years old and over. The 1919 Census of Manufacturers showed that there were twenty-two manufacturing plants in the town employing 1,180 persons. Of the 2,338 remaining males, it is not known how many were gainfully employed, but it seems the town had a sizeable labor pool from which to draw, and once industry began to be established it would bring new workers.⁵⁹

Labor and the control of it had been troublesome to planters since Reconstruction. During World War I, the Great Migration to northern cities pulled more than a million African Americans from the South. Natchez suffered as did other southern towns and tried to stop labor agitators from luring “honest labor” away with “glittering lies and misrepresentations.” Ads appeared in the *Democrat* from the river counties appealing to young single black men between the ages of eighteen and

⁵⁹ Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: State Compendium, Mississippi* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 35; and Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken In the Year 1920*, vol. 3 “Population,” 1920 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 543 and 532; and Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of Manufacturers: 1919, Mississippi* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1921), 8.

thirty. A lumber company in Louisiana offered “good board and location [and] wages \$2.50 and up” per day. The ad declared, “Don’t write; come at once, we can use you.” There were laws that prohibited such recruiting, but perhaps Natchez business leaders were hoping that blacks could not read the ads as Natchez tied with Columbus for the highest rate of illiteracy in the state. Active recruiting was another matter, however, and two black recruiters from an aluminum company in Alabama had been arrested, but in the meantime it was estimated that more than 1,500 workers had been lured from Adams County by “labor pirates” like these. If Natchez wanted to foster a conducive atmosphere to entice new manufacturing and industry it would need a good-sized labor pool from which companies could draw. Also, people leaving the county and town created a negative image that would turn off prospective businessmen. An editorial stated that “these pests must shake the dust of Adams County from their feet,” and a front page story ominously warned that the chamber of commerce planned a “warm reception” for labor agitators. Announcements for Ku Klux Klan meetings can be found throughout the newspaper and were as matter-of-fact as those of the Woodmen of the World. There was also the eerie letters KKK in white on a black background scattered about the newspaper periodically.⁶⁰

Blacks knew their place, but they also knew they were a vital component in the town and county’s economy. Prominent African American leaders such as Professor S.H.C. Owen, president of Natchez College, and Dr. A.W. Dumas, a physician, pressed for better working conditions and pay.⁶¹ Adams and the surrounding counties grew little cotton in comparison to the Louisiana parishes, but there were many small farms in the county. Of these 1,673 small farms, 1,271 were tenant

⁶⁰ *Natchez Democrat*, March 12, January 15 and 18, 1920; Bureau of the Census, *State Compendium, Mississippi*, 533; *Natchez Democrat*, January 24 and September 23, 1920; *Natchez Democrat*, passim. The *Democrat* was extremely anti-labor and when thirty black employees of the town’s largest industry, Natchez Box Factory, went on strike for higher wages, the *Democrat* applauded the company’s breaking of the strike remarking that the strikers got what Germany had gotten in the Great War and that business was not going to be held up by labor.

⁶¹ George M.D. Kelly to Ethel Moore Kelly, “Dearest:-,” September 10, 1920, George M.D. Kelly Papers, Historic Natchez Foundation, Natchez, Miss. Kelly wrote “There are 5,000 less colored people in the county than there were 10 years ago.” Also: “I heard that another reason why it is impossible to get men laborers for the crops, as formerly, in addition to the smaller population, is that the Government is paying \$2.40 per day for river work, with 3 meals and lodging free.”



Dominick Di Stefano's service station, circa 1925.

farms. The situation on both sides of the river in 1920 was difficult with heavy rains, weevils, and boll worms. Whether a man made his living in industry in the town or in agriculture in the county, if he could not earn an adequate income to support his family and pay his debts he would have to go elsewhere to do so. Such action would send the wrong message to prospective companies considering Natchez as a plant site. Black leaders knew this and exploited it as best they could. They worked along the accommodationist lines of Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise that eschewed political and social equality in exchange for economic opportunity. Dr. J.H. Attaway, a secretary in the Mississippi state Y.M.C.A., came to town to lobby for a community center for blacks. He addressed a meeting of white planters and businessmen of Natchez and Adams County that was held in January. He spoke at the end of the meeting and only for a few minutes, but he told blacks to stay where they were. He and other African American leaders stressed cooperation and repeatedly urged whites to view blacks "sympathetically." He said he deplored the activity of northern agitators, or northern newspapers that "talked much of theories, but knew little of actual practical things with which the Southern white and black man must deal." He appealed

to the Old South mentality by saying that with all the modern equipment for cotton planting, nothing was ever better than “the ‘negro [sic] and the mule.” However, he pointedly stated that “businessmen realizing that only in [sic] through satisfied and contented labor may they expect stable labor conditions which are so necessary to the growth and development of that section.”⁶²

While the boosters looked to the future with pie-in-the sky ventures, the town government was firmly fixed in the present. Natchez was governed by a mayor and a board of aldermen. In 1920 the mayor was W.G. Benbrook, who was born in 1837 and turned eighty-three in May; he had been mayor since 1888! The board of aldermen was made up of eight men, each of whom had a business of his own. The board met bi-weekly, and meetings were regularly reported in the *Democrat*. At the first meeting of 1920, aldermen “spoke of the necessity of following the same policy of economy which governed the administration of city affairs during the past year.” Indeed, Alderman A.B. Learned said there was no way to increase revenues to cover costs and that the “situation was more than ever difficult.” The aldermen were completely hamstrung by the lack of funds. By the end of the year the town was overdrawn \$20,000, and with a \$5,000 note due on the new fire engine the aldermen had to authorize borrowing to meet the town’s obligations.⁶³

The aldermen were mostly concerned with the maintenance, repair, or improvement of the physical infrastructure of the town. By 1920 the urban landscape of Natchez was showing wear and the strains of growth. Now automobiles as well as horse-drawn wagons and buggies were using the same streets that had been laid out under Spanish auspices in the last decade of the eighteenth century. There was enough congestion that several streets were made one-way to promote safety and alleviate gridlock. The construction of sidewalks, paving of streets, and sprinkling of unpaved streets were the issues that consumed most of the aldermen’s meetings. Sidewalks were not part of the initial development of the town, and the aldermen had to decide which streets would get sidewalks, if they were to be on both sides of the street, and whether the cost was to be borne by the adjacent property owners or by the city. Since money was lacking, the process of constructing sidewalks was a slow one. The city

⁶² Bureau of the Census, *State Compendium, Mississippi*, 62; and *Natchez Democrat*, February 22, January 25 and 24, September 12, 15, and 16, 1920.

⁶³ *Natchez Democrat*, May 16, January 6, and November 18, 1920.



View of Main Street. circa 1925. Businesses include a laundry, a bottling company, a tire store and a bicycle repair shop.

also struggled with the development of a street-paving program. What seemed to perplex the town leaders most was what material should be used; they wanted to get the most for their money, but also something that would hold up in a semi-tropical climate. The costs were staggering and at the close of the decade Natchez had yet to pave the entire business district; most of the residential areas were unpaved as well. While the citizens waited for their streets to be surfaced or sidewalks put down, they depended on sprinkling to create a serviceable road and settle the dust. The city watered two-and-a-quarter miles three times a day for ten months out of the year using well over fifty-eight million gallons of water.⁶⁴

A serious problem that affected the trade and business of the town as well as its safety was erosion and cave-ins along the bluffs. A riverboat captain who had been plying the Mississippi past Natchez for thirty years thought the town's location on a bend made it more susceptible to erosion than other places. He believed that during that year's flood

⁶⁴ *Natchez Democrat*, January 16, February 5, April 23, July 10, and August 6, 1920.

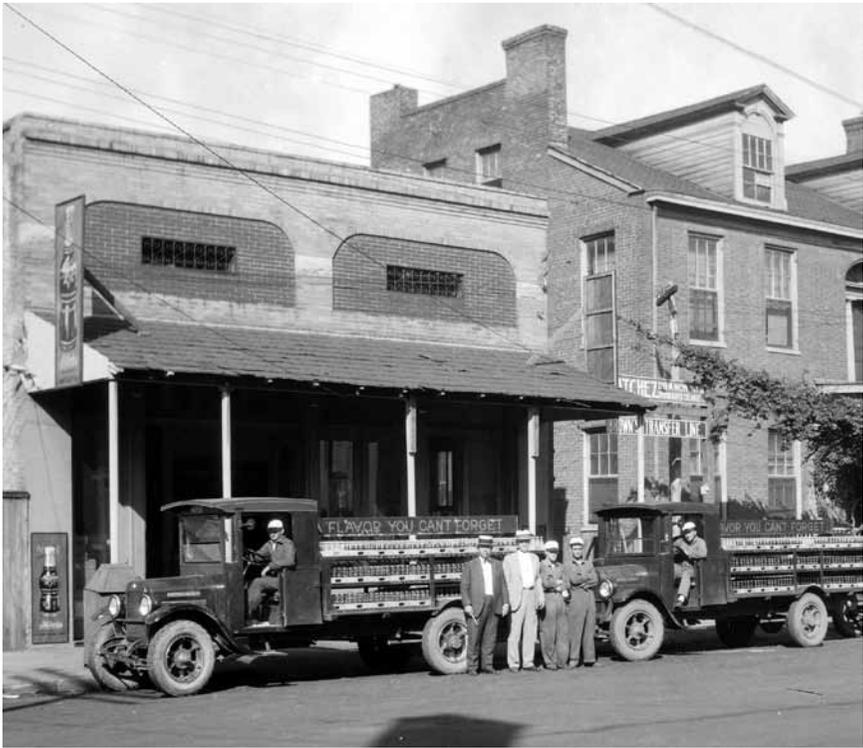
season more of the river front had eroded than at any other time. A cave-in on Silver Street in May, which was caused by underground springs that had risen during flood season, threatened the water works. The city engineer oversaw the shoring up of the area, but two months later the worst cave-in occurred—a section 150 feet long and 20 feet deep sloughed off and caused a major depression slide near the water works. It damaged the road below, threatened to contaminate a well, and left a water tank in an unstable position. If no other cave-ins occurred the water works could survive—at least until next year's high water.⁶⁵ Time was of the essence, and the board of aldermen gave the city engineer full authority to find a way to safeguard the city's drinking water and pumping station. In delegating this authority the aldermen appeared to be motivated more by saving money rather than truly securing the water works. Five of the aldermen rejected the idea of having an independent engineer assess the situation and make recommendations and agreed with Alderman C.E. McClure that

An outside engineer would not care how much the work [would] cost ... He might, and probably would call for an expenditure of thirty or forty thousand dollars and would make no difference to him that an extra burden would be placed on the tax payers.⁶⁶

The cave-ins were not the only problems concerning the water works. The plant itself was outdated, and there was much waste of water. It was purported that thirty-four million gallons a day were pumped, but only eighteen million were actually consumed. By the end of the year the city had contracted with a company that would measure water usage so it could be determined whether there were leaks in the tanks or mains. Also, much of the water that was pumped was not actually purchased, therefore reducing revenues. The cost of repairs, maintenance, and general operations exceeded revenues, so in August the Municipal Water Commission requested a 50 percent rate increase. A provision in the request stated that churches, asylums, hospitals, and other various charitable institutions would no longer receive free water. The council unanimously approved the abolition of free water, but held off on a rate

⁶⁵ *Natchez Democrat*, April 9 and 29, May 1 and 18, and June 18, 1920. The 1920 flood season was mild and the levees above and below the town were in good condition and held up. Flood stage was forty-six feet and the river crested twice at a little over fifty-one feet. The worst floods prior to 1920 had occurred in 1912 and 1916.

⁶⁶ *Natchez Democrat*, July 23, May 19, July 3, and August 10, 1920.



Delivery trucks parked in front of Nu Grape Bottling Company, circa 1925.

increase in the hope that the elimination of free water would increase revenues. Street sprinkling rates, however, were raised.⁶⁷

While the boosters envisioned a rosy future and city fathers were fixed in the present, there was an element in the town that looked to the past and held tenaciously to the old Natchez. They were not organized like the chamber of commerce, but they had power and rejected the grandiose plans of the boosters. They were the old plantation elite, many of whom had lost their wealth and were now “genteel poor,” but who probably constituted a larger segment of the populace than in other towns because of the concentration of wealth during the antebellum era. They liked their town as it was and did not want large-scale industry or manufacturing and the growth that would accompany it. They no doubt knew their influence would diminish if the boosters succeeded in rebuilding the town into an urban-industrial center. They did not have a formulated plan to stop the boosters and instead relied on inertia to

⁶⁷ *Natchez Democrat*, July 3, November 9, August 19, September 7 and 2, 1920.

stymie them. As long as they did nothing to help the boosters accomplish their dreams, they could hold them off and their town would remain the way they wanted it.⁶⁸

The boosters were aware of this opposition and references to “knockers” and “old fogies”—standard booster terms of derision about anyone who opposed them—are found in the newspaper and in Lambert editorials. The views of the old fogies were not presented nor sought by the *Democrat*, but Lambert had to tread carefully as they were powerful. And they would remain powerful. Twenty years later in one of those fluffy picture books that were staples in the “Old South” sections of bookstores, Nola Nance Oliver wrote:

Natchezians have been entirely satisfied, even proud to be termed ‘provincial.’ A sense of inherent aristocracy has given these people a secure and placid self-sufficiency which neither time nor stress of outside conditions nor the frettings of progress can jar or mar.⁶⁹

Judging from the extant articles, advertisements, and records pertaining to the Natchez chamber of commerce, there is a conspicuous absence of names of the town’s “inherent aristocracy.” That the old guard was successful can be inferred by the success of Mayor Benbrook. That he had been mayor so long and born in the antebellum era strongly suggests the town liked what he represented. The incoming president of the chamber of commerce, Thornton Green, was the antithesis of the old guard. Green was a Yankee from Michigan who had purchased large amounts of land in the state and who in 1920, sold 15,000 acres to another northerner for \$500,000. He had also purchased Elgin, one of the town’s premier antebellum homes.⁷⁰

The Natchez boosters were not alone in their struggles with the old guard. In his study of the urban character of the South, Blaine Brownell found that the commercial–civic elites had to contend not only with the old fogies, but their antebellum past as well. The boosters consciously distanced themselves from the agrarian antebellum past. In contrast to

⁶⁸ Harnett T. Kane, *Natchez* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1947), 14-21.

⁶⁹ *Natchez Democrat*, August 31, July 18, June 4, and April 3, 1920; Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1861-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 119 and 125; and Nola Nance Oliver, *Natchez: Symbol of the Old South* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1940), 3. “Croaker” was another derisive term for those who opposed the boosters. Doyle, 18.

⁷⁰ *Natchez Democrat*, May 1 and June 9, 1920.



Eola Hotel and adjacent buildings, July 15, 1927.

many of their fellow southerners, they did not view plantation society as the pinnacle of their civilization. Instead, they looked down on it as indolent and stagnant. If they did draw from it, it was highly selective, and there were instances often enough where it was ignored altogether. Brownell also completely rejects the concept of the plantation as a little

self-contained city—the prototype of the emerging post-bellum city.⁷¹

The early frontier period was the era the boosters invoked most often to further their goals. They saw themselves as they imagined the early settlers: full of energy and strength that subdued raw elements and turned them into a thriving successful venture. There was no leisured aristocrat here casually supervising his holdings from a distance, but a hands-on entrepreneur seeking success for himself and his community by growth, interaction, and development.⁷²

Natchez was not included in Brownell's study as he did not consider it urban. The six cities he studied were New Orleans (population 387,219), Atlanta (population 200,616), Birmingham (population 178,806), Memphis (population 162,351), Nashville (population 118,342), and Charleston (population 67,957). The smallest of those, Charleston, was still more than five times as populous as Natchez. Even so, the town's boosters identified with the cities studied. Brownell also contends that the older the city, the more formidable the opposition by the old elite. Charleston was founded in 1670 and New Orleans in 1718. Natchez founded in 1714, fits in with Brownell's view.⁷³

Agrarianism was firmly entrenched in the South, and in Mississippi it was represented by two disparate groups, the old plantation elite and the small farmers of the hill country in the northeastern part of the state. These two groups had little love for each other, but they had less for the boosters. Their agrarian views did not dovetail and often ran counter to each other, but they did agree strongly in their opposition to cities and large-scale manufacturing and industrialism. Let those go to Birmingham and Atlanta—they wanted nothing to do with that in Mississippi. Their views were hostile and had been around long before 1920. The old elite in Natchez was powerful and as much as they opposed the Constitution of 1890 when it was created, they now could use it to help them prevent business and industry from coming to the town and upsetting their place. In 1921, the *Democrat* was much more subdued in its tone for the town's growth and future.⁷⁴

The old guard leaders sought to safeguard heritage and refused to

⁷¹ Brownell, *The Urban Ethos in the South, 1920-1930*, 191-216.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 213. Brownell writes of the covers of two history books pertaining to Nashville and Atlanta that show a frontier scene juxtaposed with a modern urban-industrial city. There were no white-columned mansions or fields of cotton in the picture.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Natchez Democrat*, 1921, *passim*.

have anything to do with the boosters' schemes. They were successful for the time being, but how long could they hold out and was it wise? Natchez was on the threshold of modernity. This new decade was a seminal period in American history where everything was changing. Even Studebaker stopped making buggies and carriages in 1920 and focused solely on production of the automobile. Yet Liberty Vehicle and Harness on Franklin Street placed ads to reassure customers that they had a full selection of wagons and carriages, and perhaps more important, parts for repair.⁷⁵ After a sharp recession from 1920 to 1921, the economy not only rebounded but flourished. It was at this time that the modern corporation prospered with marketing and research and development departments that were directed by a full range of managers. New markets opened overseas, and the demand for all sorts of new products was tremendous. All sorts of products, that is, except cotton. Agriculture never recovered from the demands and boom times of World War I. Perhaps the boosters and their grand plans to bring manufacturing and industry into Natchez were not so farfetched after all. If they truly had the advantages they claimed and if they worked together, they could get in on the ground floor and find their niche in this new prosperity and new America. However, in their zeal to bring new industry, railroads, natural gas, oil, baseball, to bring the future to Natchez, the boosters did not realize their ticket to growth and development was in the town all along; they walked past it every day, perhaps worked, or even, lived in it. They were fully aware of their historical and architectural legacy, but it did not fit into their concept of a modern, urban, and industrial Natchez.

The restoration of Independence Hall in Philadelphia in 1813 marked the beginning of preservation in the United States. Progress in historic preservation was slow and difficult for the next hundred years because there was little interest. Initially, landmark buildings of a historic nature were chosen, but that was no guarantee of success as the herculean lifelong effort by Ann Pamela Cunningham to save and restore Mount Vernon has shown. If it was hard to convince people to save the home of the august and beloved George Washington, then structures of lesser personages, and ones with solely an architectural significance, would not stand a chance. The United States Congress helped in 1906 when it passed the Antiquities Act, which aimed to protect structures from demolition and vandalism. Still, it was a struggle as antique

⁷⁵ *Natchez Democrat*, 1920, *passim*.

hunters, vandals, or even cash strapped owners ransacked or gutted old structures for arabesques, balustrades, columns—anything that was salvageable or sellable. In 1910 the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities was formed to protect what founder William Appleton believed was a totally neglected part of the area's way of life. Stories abound in fiction and real life, particularly in the South, of the grand mansion disintegrating and the desire by the family to hold on to it even though they could not afford upkeep or repairs. Progressively, they sold off furniture and family valuables to pay bills and taxes and moved to a corner of the house, and the rest was an empty shell.⁷⁶ With the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg in the mid-1920s, saving and "fixing up" old homes progressed and solidified into the preservation movement, but it still would take much more time and effort to get the public and various levels of government to accept its philosophy and integrate it into the national historical consciousness. In 1931, Charleston, South Carolina, became the first city in the nation to create a historic district to safeguard its architectural treasures and prevent vandalism and demolition.⁷⁷

Natchez and Adams County were known for an exceptional concentration of grand antebellum mansions and other historically and architecturally significant structures—well above 600—that spanned two centuries with French and Spanish influences as well as English and American.⁷⁸ Many of the buildings, however, looked like candidates for demolition, and five of the grand homes, the Wigwam, the Towers,

⁷⁶ New Yorker George M.D. Kelly inherited four mansions in Natchez: Melrose, Concord (burned 1901), Choctaw, and Cherokee. He and his wife divided their time between New York and Mississippi. They were well-connected to the elite in the town, but Kelly wrote to his wife complaining about high taxes on his properties: "I have to appear before the Board of Aldermen, as I believe I wrote you, on Aug. 16th. The paper says that of some 40 petitions presented to the Board of Supervisors not one reduction was allowed. Its [sic] lucky that I got assessment reduced from \$5,250, or, thereabout, to \$3,500., before the meetings commenced. However, I was over-assessed as compared with the others, I think. I doubt if I will be so fortunate with the City Idiots, but I will have a try at it anyway." George M.D. Kelly to Ethel Moore Kelly, "Darling Wifey:-," August 10, 1920, George M.D. Kelly Papers, Historic Natchez Foundation, Natchez, Miss. (Typescript.)

⁷⁷ Norman Tyler, *Issues of Historic Preservation* (Columbus, Ohio: Greyden Press, 1994) from <http://www.emich.edu/public/geo/history.html>; and Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States before Williamsburg* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 41-62.

⁷⁸Mimi Miller, executive director, Historic Natchez Foundation, in an email to the author, May 24, 2011.

the Briars, Linden, and Stanton Hall, were for sale in 1920.⁷⁹ Even the landmark City Market was being considered for sale since it was only bringing in \$30 per month rent and covered a quarter of a block that some aldermen believed could be put to better use.⁸⁰

Visitors were always toured about and shown the town's most splendid homes, but the boosters were merely paying lip service to their heritage. They viewed the past as dead and wanted to cross that threshold into modernity and not look back. If it was not new and shiny—"up to the minute" in the slang of the day—they wanted nothing to do with it. Even so, it was the prominence and wealth of the past the boosters sought to reclaim, and that prominence and wealth of the past still resided in those old homes. The "old fogies" were powerful, and they wanted nothing to do with the industrial and manufacturing schemes of the boosters that would alter their town and way of life as well as perhaps displace them in prominence and power. The boosters were shrewd enough to use the romantic agrarian past with its lovely architectural legacy as a draw for prospective business, but not at the expense of progress and prosperity. An article in the *Democrat* announced that "an old frame rookery" on the corner of State and Commerce streets was soon to be demolished and applauded the removal of "what has long been an eyesore, as well as a real menace to other properties in the neighborhood." The article did not discuss the building's age, function, or historic value, only that it needed to be razed. The boosters were emotionally attached to their landmarks only in a casual and superficial way. So if St. Mary's Catholic Church, which was currently using D'Evereux as an orphanage for boys, received an offer for the land as an industrial site and the old mansion had to be torn down, town promoters would have lamented it, but only for a moment because if Natchez was to become "a real, active, thriving, hustling city" some of the physical past would have to go.⁸¹

The boosters and the "old fogies" were polar opposites and neither side seemed interested in working together, but an innocuous event would give them an opportunity to advance their own interests and perhaps reconcile their differences. The garden club movement pro-

⁷⁹ *Natchez Democrat*, January 11 and 19, April 4, May 15, August 24, and September 26, 1920.

⁸⁰ The City Market was leased to the Dudley Motor Company as a showroom and soon after its ordinance was repealed by the Board of Aldermen. *Natchez Democrat*, September, 26, April 4, January 19, January 11, and August 24 1920.

⁸¹ *Natchez Democrat*, March 6, February 1, March 4, April 8, May 6 and 29, 1920.

vided a creative outlet for women and in 1931, Natchez was the site for the annual meeting of the clubs in the state. The president of the Natchez Garden Club, Katherine Grafton Miller, knew the town did not have particularly interesting gardens, but what they did have was in bloom and surrounded excellent examples of southern plantation architecture that could offset any landscape deficiencies. Even so, she had been thinking of having the garden clubbers tour inside the homes. She may have known about the tours of homes in Richmond, Virginia, two years before, but even if she did not, there were lots of people who had come to Natchez and their friends and relatives would show them about. There was even Miss Charlie Compton who would see visitors wandering about and proceed to take them on her own planned tour of the homes.⁸² But they never got to go inside the true architectural landmarks. Natchez's homes were well known in the state, and no doubt many of the owners had past experiences of strangers in their yards or with their noses pressed up against a window, so the thought finally occurred to them to show the interiors of their homes with all of their unique architectural details that were highlighted by specimen pieces of period furniture and family heirlooms. The women in the club agreed, and the resulting pilgrimage tour was a short, two-day event. Mrs. Harris Barksdale, writing about the gardens themselves for the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, rhapsodized about the event and wrote that "Natchez, the Beautiful, was ours."⁸³ Another article focused solely on the homes themselves and extolled their "magnificent furnishings, perfectly entact [sic] as they were before the war between the states. All with antiques worth a King's ransom."⁸⁴ The next day the garden clubbers continued on their "pilgrimage between Natchez and St. Francisville where ten magnificent homes and gardens were thrown open to us."⁸⁵

Under Mrs. Miller's determined guidance and organization, the little tour of homes evolved into the Natchez Pilgrimage, perhaps the most

⁸² Katherine Grafton Miller, *Natchez of Long Ago and the Pilgrimage* (Natchez, Miss.: Rellmark Publishing Company, 1938), 23-29. Miss Compton is also credited with the beginning of the preservation movement in Natchez in 1925 when she "vainly protests the demolition of the historic city hall and columned open-air market for construction of the current city hall." Natchez Welcome Center Exhibit, Natchez, Miss..

⁸³ Mrs. Harris Barksdale, "Natchez Garden Pictures Are Beautiful," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, March 29, 1931, 4.

⁸⁴ "Echoes From the Federation of Garden Clubs of Mississippi Held in Historic City of Natchez," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, March 29, 1931, 3.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.



Natchez Pilgrimage king Johnny Junkin and queen Eliza Sims with their court, circa 1937.

well known of all house tours in the South. It was not easy, as many homeowners refused to be involved with what they considered a lack of propriety as well as an intrusion into their privacy. Businessmen also scoffed, but after they heard of the proceeds netted by the event they were interested—as were those who had initially turned their noses up at the planned tours. Editor Lambert was enthusiastic and gave the garden club ladies full coverage in the *Democrat*. At the end of the first official pilgrimage in 1932, Jon Seiferth presented Mrs. Miller with a silver loving cup in appreciation of her vision and leadership.⁸⁶ It was probably not what Lambert and Seiferth had envisioned at their chamber of commerce meetings in 1920, but they saw in the pilgrimage tours great potential for the economic growth they desired. And no doubt Mrs. Miller struck a chord with the boosters in her history of the Pilgrimage when she cited her grandfather, Major Thomas Grafton, from his essay “A History of Natchez,”

⁸⁶ Miller, *Natchez of Long Ago and the Pilgrimage*, 33-43, 54.

The manufacturing spirit of the people of Natchez, together with its facilities for carrying on industries of all kinds, points to the conclusion that it will become one of the most important of Southern manufacturing towns.⁸⁷

Natchez was not the first Pilgrimage, but it went on to create one of the most organized ones with many accompanying events that coincided with the town's social season.⁸⁸ The Pilgrimage brought in much-needed money for the preservation and restoration of the old homes, and it brought security to the old guard and their cherished way of life. For the boosters it created a notability that could attract business and industry that would bring the growth and development that they desired. Here was the opportunity for the boosters and the "old fogies" to work

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸⁸ The story of the Pilgrimage as found in Miller's *Natchez of Long Ago and the Pilgrimage* is the correct version according to Mimi Miller, executive director, Historic Natchez Foundation, in a telephone conversation with the author, April 8, 2011. Miller without prompting also emphasized "No freezing! No freezing!" in regard to the story that has turned into legend of a late frost that killed off the gardens and so forced the garden club to show their houses instead. She is confirmed in this by a front-page article that said the storm that was moving very rapidly eastward from Colorado fizzled out. "Mississippi Escapes Freeze When Winter Loses Last Battle," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, March 29, 1931, 1. The *Natchez Democrat* concurred, "Normal Weather Forecast for South," *Natchez Democrat*, March 29, 1931, 2. Harnett T. Kane affectionately joshes the garden clubbers in his *Natchez* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1947), 334-49; while Steven Hoelscher sternly takes the organizers of the Pilgrimage—then and now—to task in two separate works over their neglect to acknowledge the true creators of the wealth, prestige, and heritage of Natchez—slavery and the black workers who labored unrecognized under the oppressive system. Steven Hoelscher, "Where the Old South Still Lives': Displaying Heritage in Natchez, Mississippi," in Celeste Ray, ed., *Southern Heritage On Display: Public Ritual and Ethnic Diversity within Southern Regionalism* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 218-50; and Steven Hoelscher, "The White-Pillared Past: Landscapes of Memory and Race in the American South," in Richard H. Schein, ed., *Landscape and Race in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 39-72. Hoelscher does not paint a very flattering portrait of Katherine Grafton Miller and questions if she was the originator of the Pilgrimage and faults her large ego that she covered up with a faux Southern Belle-ism. In the beginning of her chapter on the history of the Pilgrimage, Grafton Miller cites several people who had written about the town's architectural heritage in books and souvenir pamphlets that influenced her. Eccentric Miss Compton was giving tours long before all the garden clubs of the state showed up in 1931. It was a large undertaking and Grafton Miller was strong-willed and determined to succeed and as president she took the lead. One can see her determination—large ego to her critics—in a photograph of her in her book (p. 21). Dressed in lacy crinoline and hoop skirt Grafton Miller looks straight into the camera, not down or away. Her hands are firmly grasping the edges of a birdbath—not folded demurely in her lap or in some artful pose as seen in many photographs of belles at the time.

together or at least compromise, but in 1920, Natchez's future, like the meaning of its charming name, was uncertain.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Jim Barnett, director, Historic Properties Division, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and foremost authority on the Natchez Indians, in a telephone conversation with the author, November 18, 1996. Even though the language of the Natchez was still intact in the 1930s and there were descendants of the tribe who were fluent speakers, there is no known meaning of the word, 'Natchez'. The tribe's true name is 'Thecoel'; 'Natchez' came from the French and was a corruption of the word, 'noche' heard often at the main village.