

Historic Context

The Louisiana Lumber Boom, c.1880-1925

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CONTEXT SUMMARY

Prior to about 1880, timber production in Louisiana was fairly small, meeting local needs. Mills and logging were confined largely to areas along waterways. By contrast, the so-called second phase of lumbering, the industrial phase, was huge in its output. "These were the days of giant trees, giant mills, and giant lumbermen," notes Louisiana lumber historian Anna C. Burns ("Frank B. Williams: Cypress Lumber King," *Journal of Forest History*, July 1980). In 1880, Louisiana ranked thirtieth in the United States for the dollar value of its timber product. By 1900, it ranked tenth in the nation, and by 1920, second. In some years in the 1910s the state led the country in timber production.

Several factors came together to make industrial lumbering possible: (1) the availability of large tracts of timberland at low prices; (2) demand for lumber and the exhaustion of sources in the Northeast and the Midwest; (3) the arrival of railroads; and (4) technological improvements in removing lumber from the forests and swamps.

The lumber boom's impact on Louisiana is seemingly beyond exaggeration. Fueled largely by out-of-state capital, the lumber boom fundamentally changed the look of the state. With a policy of "cut out and get out," priceless natural resources were lost by the millions of acres. Large sections of the state, in a relatively short period of time, became vast "stumpscapes" of barren cutover land as rapacious mill owners moved on to yet another stand of virgin timber elsewhere in the country. Some 4.3 million acres of Louisiana virgin timber had been clear cut – a land area roughly the size of the state of New Jersey. As George Alvin Stokes aptly concludes in his 1954 dissertation ("Lumbering in Southwest Louisiana"): "The rapidity with which big-time lumbering had entered Louisiana was matched by the speed of its departure." The early to mid-1920s is generally given as the ending date for the great lumber boom, for it is then when almost all of the big mills had run out of timber and closed down.

Particularly hard hit were western Louisiana parishes, such as Vernon, which had the most timber to lose. Here it took only about twenty years to consume the forest. It was "short but intense" notes Steven Smith of the lumber boom in Vernon Parish (*A Good Home for a Poor Man: Fort Polk and Vernon Parish, 1800-1940*, 1999).

Importantly for this document, it was the industrial phase of lumbering that far and away had the greatest impact on the built environment of Louisiana. New components were added to the landscape – most notably, huge industrial plants with a sawmill at the center and scores of purpose-built company towns. And existing towns where lumber companies located were largely rebuilt due to the attendant prosperity. But today, of the thousands of historic buildings