

Urbanization in the Southern United States: The Rise of the Sprawling South

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ABSTRACT

It may seem intuitive that cities in different regions are bound to develop in different ways, but why is it that Northern cities appear to be so starkly different from those of the South? What specifically influenced the divergence in the urban design of these regions? This paper explores the history of urbanization in the United States by examining growth patterns while considering various economic, social, and historical factors that may have influenced regional distinctions in urbanization. Evidence points towards the Civil War as a catalyst for the delay in peak urbanization in the South, and contextual technological advancements at the time resulted in the more diffuse cities we see today. Findings about the period in which peak urbanization took place in the South contributes to the understanding of what types of factors have and will shape regional/city development, and especially in a world with a rapidly growing urban population, understanding city growth and change will no doubt become an imperative part of our future.

Introduction

It has generally been accepted that, up until 1940, the American South had lagged behind in terms of growth compared to Northern cities, but up until the eve of the Civil War, the pattern of Southern urbanization had actually paralleled that of the North.¹ The early nineteenth century brought about a widespread mania for urbanization that took the North by storm, and although there were many Southern farmers who opposed the idea, major proponents, including Andrew Jackson, pushed for the same rapid urbanization in the South. Cities and small towns in the South began to pop up to keep up with Northern economic competition.² While this urbanization certainly occurred on a smaller scale in comparison to the North, its speed of expansion was roughly the same. By 1860, the gap between Northern and Southern urban populations was only around 15% on average, but this gap would later grow up to around 40% within just 20 years, reflecting more so what the nation sees now. The resulting cities are typically conceived to be more rural and spread out, piling in contrast with the concentrated metropolises of the North. As the North continued to grow industrially, certain factors would cause the South to remain relatively rooted in its agricultural dependence and dispersed structure.³ Southern agrarian dependence influenced racial attitudes, shaped the economy, and persisted through the Civil War, hindering urbanization and resulting in the development of Southern US cities that differed from that of the North.

Antebellum Dispersion

Preceding the Civil War, the heavy reliance on and implementation of slavery resulted in agricultural dependence and more rural usage of land. Up until around 1860, just before the Civil War, the Southern economy was largely based on slavery. This slave economy was heavily established on portable slave labor, which, as economist Gavin Wright asserts, “generated a weaker and looser connection between property holders and the land

they occupied.”⁴ Rather than creating permanent settlements and conglomerating around a central area, Southerners valued their land more because of its potential for cultivation rather than industrialization. John Clayton, a botanist who surveyed Virginia, highlights this usage of land, writing how “Plantations run over vast Tracts of Ground...the Country is thinly inhabited; the Living solitary and unsociable; Trading confused and dispersed; besides other Inconveniences,” in his letter to the royal society.⁵ This comes in stark contrast with the way Northern entrepreneurs would try to increase land value. At the same time that the South continued to expand agriculturally, the North “constructed roads and railroads, towns and villages, and schools and factories,” and its “search for precious metals and mineral deposits” would attract new settlers to contribute to the urban populations. The ability to move freely across land and the widespread utilization of land for farming allowed Southerners to produce wealth without having to engage in urban development in the same way as the North. As a result, the dependence on slavery and its functionality resulted in less infrastructure development and smaller-scale city growth, if at all.⁶

Civil War Setback

The Civil War catalyzed the delay in urban growth in the South, causing major setbacks in infrastructure and driving economic disparity between the North and the South. The war left the majority of the South in shambles; physical destruction of infrastructure alone set cities at least half a century back in progress, a particularly significant adversity given this was a time when the rest of the nation was rushing into industrial advancement.⁷ The effects lasted for years after; cities such as Charleston and New Orleans, previously areas that had undergone consistent urban expansion, were left in a stagnant state. Even by 1879, evidence of the destruction still remained: disease and architectural standstill plagued the area.⁸ As a result of this period, a clear divergence in the urbanization of the North and South arose. In the decades that followed, the Southern urban population would reach only about 12.2%, while the Northern urban population rose to over 50.8%.⁹ The destruction of both the economic and human resources of the region only served to exacerbate the disparity in urban growth between the North and South.

Besides the physical damage, the Civil War's devastation exposed the South's economic conditions, casting a negative light upon the region that discouraged the investment of many Northerners. While there were certain Northern advocates for investment in the Southern economy, their efforts weren't always met with positive results. Henry Grady, an American journalist, was one of these notable proponents. In one of his speeches, he categorizes the South into the “Old South” and the “New South.” In doing so, he advertises the “New South” as having moved past agriculture and slavery, which “could neither give nor maintain healthy growth,” and asserts that it now represents “a perfect democracy.”¹⁰ Despite his efforts, in most cases, the ingrained image of the destroyed and unstable South overpowered the inclination to invest in it, and Grady faced much criticism for his arguments—the reality was that the so-called New South after the Civil War fell back into a dependence on agriculture. Without Northern investment, the South continued to struggle to rebuild its infrastructure and break free from urban inactivity. Furthermore, due to the loss of “internal capital and a supply of skilled labor,” the South turned to the investment of more resource-oriented industries such as lumber and tobacco.¹¹ This, of course, induced more land to be dedicated toward agriculture. Ultimately, the Civil War marked a turning point and split between Northern and Southern city development, devastating the Southern economy and setting it decades back in growth.

Reconstructing the South

Differences in infrastructure and racial attitudes between the North and South after the Civil War and the delayed surge in urbanization resulted in a more dispersed and wide-ranged urban structure. Following the Civil

War, the South naturally had a high black population; the majority of small and developing regional cities in the South were over 50% black.¹² Despite the postbellum trend of urban growth, the majority of the migration in the South was among those already born in the region, and the black population would continue to grow in developing Southern cities. These demographics of the Southern urban population caused a less dense trend of urbanization, primarily due to cultural differences and tendencies.¹³ Not only this, but despite the abolition of slavery, there remained a strict racial apartheid of the South. This resulted in a different social landscape and economic function in the South: there was more integration, dispersion, and a light or commercial industry, which all worked to directly slow urban growth.¹⁴

As the South continued to rely on the agriculture industry, cotton began to emerge as “the region’s leading staple crop.”¹⁵ At the beginning of the Reconstruction, railroad expansion in the South had initially slowed, and as the South lacked a railroad network, the economic development of more inland cities was greatly hindered.¹⁶ However, when its implementation finally reached the area, it only boosted the localization of the crop, allowing for further dispersion and sprawl for economic growth.¹⁷ Cotton proved to be a hindrance to urban growth: areas outside of the cotton belt showed significantly higher urbanization. At the same time, however, it was also a major component of the Southern economy. When the cotton industry began to collapse, the Southern economy suffered as a result, leading to little development of cities at the time.¹⁸ The collapse of the cotton market resulted in a turn away from the agricultural values that had been so deeply rooted in the region. Changes to minimum-wage regulations forced the previous cotton harvesters to recognize the value of the national labor market.¹⁹ As the South shifted away from its more traditional methods, it saw a more rapid urban growth.

Similar to its Northern counterpart, the South eventually reached a period of peak urbanization in part due to policies of the New Deal, which pushed for more mechanization of agriculture and investment in infrastructure, and in part due to World War II, which brought about investment for more defense industrialization in the South.²⁰ As this period of development was much later than the North, the South began to urbanize during the era of automobiles.²¹ The rise of the car allowed for longer commutes, and the investment in highways resulted in the rapid growth to follow a sprawling pattern rather than a more concentrated one like metropolis growth. As a result of both the delay in urbanization and the different demographics of the South, the urbanization of Southern cities resulted in more dispersed urban layouts.

The Development of American Cities

In a sense, cities act as though they are living beings; they mold and bend based on modern contexts, just as presented by the development of Southern cities. The development of the South was not necessarily exceptional from the development of any other region; it followed the basis of any city growth—being influenced by the prevailing patterns in its region. Despite urbanization lagging behind that of the North, the South was able to recover and grow in its own ways by adapting to its economic, political, and environmental factors. The examination of these factors and the histories of each region allows for a deeper understanding of what constitutes differences in regional development and growth and how these differences evolve. Cities across America will continue to transform, and the factors that restrict and allow for their development must be considered to shape the progression of this change.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Blaine A. Brownell, "Urbanization in the South: A Unique Experience?," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1973): 109.
- ² Lyle W. Dorsett and Arthur H. Shaffer, "Was the Antebellum South Antiurban? A Suggestion," *The Journal of Southern History* 38, no. 1 (1972): 94-95.
- ³ David R. Goldfield, "The Urban South: A Regional Framework," *The American Historical Review* 86, no. 5 (1981): 1016.
- ⁴ Richard Lloyd, "Urbanization and the Southern United States," *Annual Review of Sociology* 39 (2012): 486.
- ⁵ John Clayton, Mr., "A Letter from Mr. John Clayton Rector of Crofton at Wakefield in Yorkshire, to the Royal Society, May 12. 1688. giving an Account of several Observables in Virginia, and in his Voyage thither, more particularly concerning the Air.," *Library of Congress*, last modified May 1688.
- ⁶ David W. Galenson, "Review: [Untitled]," *Journal of Political Economy* 96, no. 2 (1988): 447.
- ⁷ Brownell, "Urbanization in the South," 110.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Goldfield, "The Urban South: A Regional Framework," 1014.
- ¹⁰ Henry Grady on the New South," *The American Yawp Reader*.
- ¹¹ Brownell, "Urbanization in the South: A Unique Experience?," 111.
- ¹² Lloyd, "Urbanization and the Southern United States," 486.
- ¹³ Brownell, "Urbanization in the South: A Unique Experience?," 114.
- ¹⁴ Lloyd, "Urbanization and the Southern United States," 486.
- ¹⁵ Goldfield, "The Urban South: A Regional Framework," 1015.
- ¹⁶ Brownell, "Urbanization in the South: A Unique Experience?," 109.
- ¹⁷ Goldfield, "The Urban South: A Regional Framework," 1016.
- ¹⁸ Lloyd, "Urbanization and the Southern United States," 486.
- ¹⁹ Galenson, "Review: [Untitled]," 448.
- ²⁰ Lloyd, "Urbanization and the Southern United States," 487.
- ²¹ Goldfield, "The Urban South: A Regional Framework," 1014

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