Chapter 1

Mississippi: The Name and the Place

To understand the world, you have to understand a place like Mississippi.[1]

Chapter Objectives

1. Locate on a map of Mississippi the soil regions, rivers, major towns, and other important places.
2. Discuss the influence of geography on the state's social, economic, and political history.

The State Name

Meeting at a little Methodist Church in the heat of July and August 1817, a group of white frontiersmen had to decide what to call their state on the eve of its admittance into the United States of America. They debated whether to adopt a European name, like Washington or Columbia, or retain the Native American phrase already in use. The majority preferred the second option, to keep the name "Mississippi," an expression that had originated in the Muskhogean language, dialects of which were spoken but not written by most Indian tribes in the region. The phrase, which originally may have sounded more like "Meechee Seepe" or "Meact Chassipi," was used by the Choctaws and other native peoples to mean "great river" or "ancient father of waters." The French explorer and Jesuit missionary Jacques Marquette in 1672 translated the words he heard the Indians say as "Mitchisipi," and Franciscan friar Louis Hennepin in 1698 recorded the same as "Mechasipi" in a book describing his journeys with the French explorer La Salle. But credit goes to a British traveler, Daniel Coxe, for first spelling the name nearly in its final form when, in 1722, he published it as "Missisipi" in a description of his family's land claims in North America.

[1] Attributed to William Faulkner by Willie Morris.

Mississippi: A History, Second Edition. Westley F. Busbee, Jr.

Climate and Physical Geography

When Spanish explorers first entered the Mississippi area in the 1540s—almost seventy years before the English colonists founded Jamestown in Virginia—they found a land virtually covered with forests. Some 460 years later, at the start of the twenty-first century, more than half of the state's land remains forested.

Located in a transitional zone between the tropics to the south and cooler climates to the north, Mississippi has long fostered abundant plant life (flora) and animal life (fauna). The state's average annual precipitation is 53 inches with little seasonal variation, ranging from about 56 inches in the northern counties to about 64 inches along the Gulf Coast. Along with such abundant rainfall, the state experiences high relative humidity rates, averaging above 70 percent but even higher in the summer.

Mississippi is one of the nation's warmest states, with an average annual temperature of 65° Fahrenheit. During the relatively short winters the average temperature is 48°, ranging generally from 42° in the north to 52° in coastal counties. Through the long summers the average temperature statewide is about 81°, but daytime temperatures routinely exceed 90°. Mississippi has a famously long growing season, extending from April through October in the northern counties, with at least 200 frost-free days, and from March through November along the Gulf Coast, with at least 270 frost-free days.

Borders

Before Mississippi entered the Union as the state with its current borders, the Mississippi Territory comprised the present-day states of Mississippi and Alabama as well as portions of present-day Florida and Louisiana. The land area within the present state is 47,914 square miles, ranking Mississippi thirty-first in size among the fifty states. The shape of the state is basically rectangular, with the longest distance from the Tennessee border to the Gulf Coast (north to south) about 350 miles, and the longest distance from the Alabama border to the Mississippi River (east to west) about 180 miles. Located in the center of the Gulf South region of the United States, between 30° and 34° north latitude and 88° and 91° west longitude, the state has both natural and geometric boundaries. On the west, the Mississippi and the Pearl rivers separate Mississippi from Arkansas and Louisiana. On the south, the eastern portion of the state reaches the Gulf of Mexico, and the western portion extends to 31° north latitude, which is the border with Louisiana. Mississippi borders Tennessee on the north and Alabama on the east. The latter borderline runs from the junction of Bear Creek and the Tennessee River southward to the northeast corner of Wayne County, and then southward to a point on the Gulf about ten miles east of the mouth of the Pascagoula River.

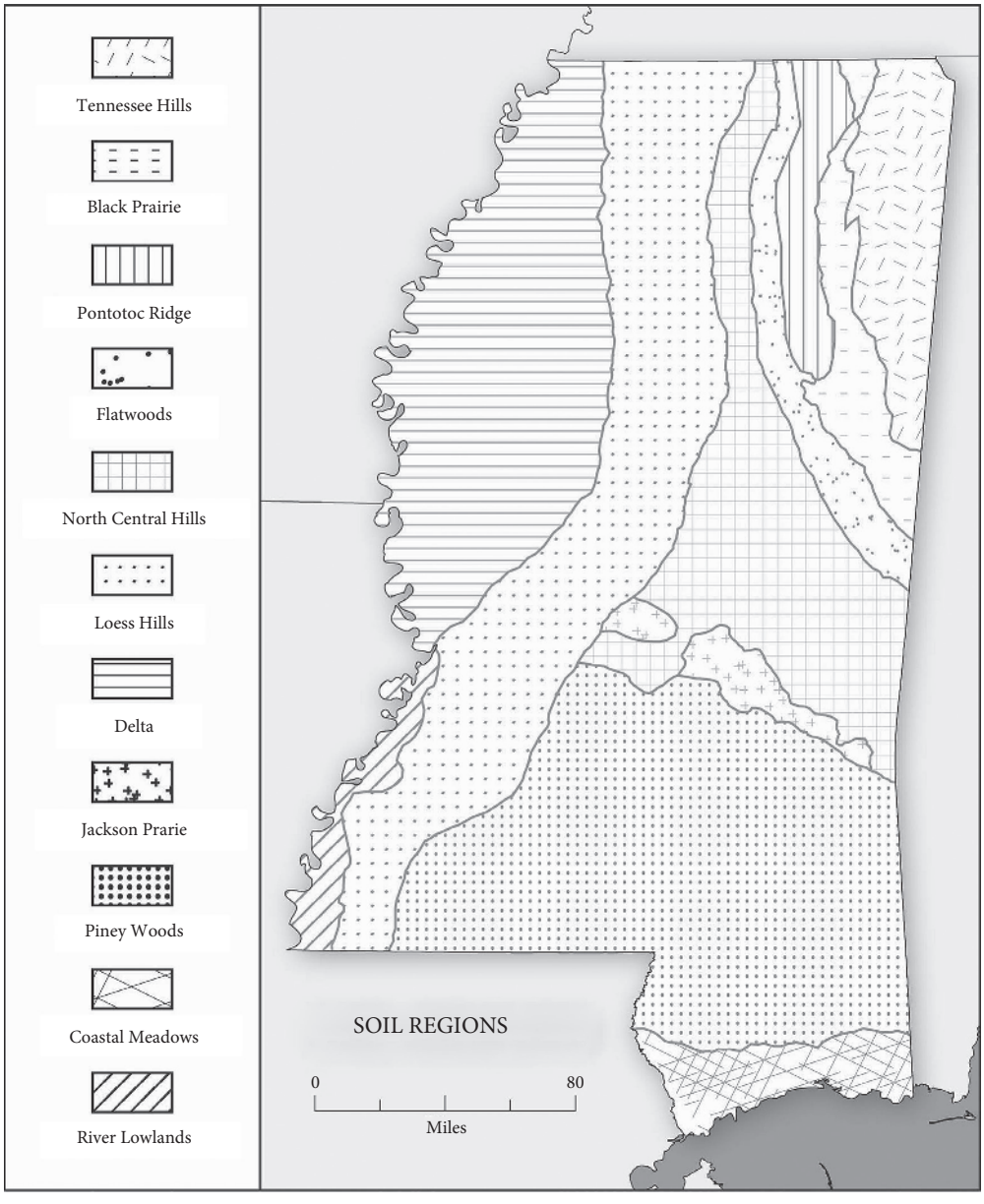
Land surface

Located in the East Gulf Coastal Plain, a physiographic region of the southern United States, Mississippi's terrain varies relatively little. The land ranges from flat plains to rolling hills to slight elevations (in the northeast), but most of the land surface lies less than five hundred feet above sea level. Even the high points in the northeast reach only about eight hundred feet above sea level, with the highest point, Woodall Mountain in Tishomingo County, reaching 806 feet. In the central part of the state the elevations range from three hundred to five hundred feet, and in the south, near the coast, the land slopes from thirty feet down to sea level.

Soil regions

The character of the soil varies in Mississippi and may be divided into ten major regions (see Map 1.1, Soil regions).

The *Tennessee or Tombigbee Hills* in the northeast is a region that features the highest elevations in the state, averaging 650 feet; it is drained by the Tennessee and Tombigbee rivers. Except in the river bottoms, the soil of this region is primarily a reddish, sandy, and infertile loam.



Map 1.1 Soil regions

The *Black Prairie* lies west of the Tennessee Hills and forms a crescent, stretching from the Corinth area southward through the Macon vicinity and eastward into Alabama. This region, which ranges about twenty-five miles in width, has a relatively flat surface and lies several hundred feet lower than the surrounding regions. It is drained by the Tombigbee and its tributaries. Because its dark and fertile soil makes excellent farm and pastureland, this region attracted cotton planters and their African slaves early in the state's history.

The *Pontotoc Ridge*, west of the Black Prairie, extends from Tennessee southward to the West Point area; its elevation ranges from four hundred to six hundred feet in remarkable contrast to the surrounding flatlands. Reddish clay and sandy loam compose the region's soils, and although they can sustain crops, they tend to erode easily.

The *Flatwoods* region, west of the Pontotoc Ridge, is only about ten miles wide but extends from Tennessee southward through Kemper County. Its clay soils are not well suited for farming.

The *North Central Hills* (also known as the Sand-Clay Hills) is a much larger area west of the Flatwoods that extends from Tennessee southward through Leake County in the central part of the state and eastward through Lauderdale and Clarke counties and into Alabama. This region forms a large plateau ranging from four hundred to six hundred feet high, with most of it lying within the Pearl and Big Black river watersheds. Its soil is a mixture of reddish sand, clay, and loam and is very susceptible to erosion. The bottomlands of the region, however, contain very rich soil. In Lauderdale, Kemper, and Neshoba counties, located in the southern zone of the plateau, the terrain becomes quite hilly in places.

The *Loess Hills* (also known as the Bluff Hills) is a region located west of the North Central Hills that forms a narrow belt extending from Tennessee southward through the state. Bordering the Delta to the west, the Loess Hills is named for the color and nature of the soil, a pale, fertile material, but one that tends to run shallow and erode and exhaust easily. Most of this region lies within the watersheds of the Big Black and Yazoo rivers.

The *Delta* (also known by geologists as the Yazoo Basin or the Mississippi–Yazoo Alluvial Plain) lies between the Yazoo River and the Loess Hills on the east and the Mississippi River on the west. About eighty miles at its widest point, the Delta extends roughly two hundred miles from Memphis's Chickasaw Bluffs to Vicksburg's Walnut Hills. A floodplain, the Delta is composed of alluvial deposits. Basically flat and dark, the soil is a mixture of sand, silt, and clays. Thanks to its level topography and rich soil, the Delta is the largest and most productive agricultural region in the state.

The *Jackson Prairie* is a narrow strip in the center of the state, extending from the vicinity of Madison County generally southeastward through Clarke County. The flat and undulating lands, containing areas of dark lime soils like those found in the Black Prairie, are well suited for farming and livestock concerns. This region is drained by tributaries of the Pearl and the Pascagoula rivers.

The *Piney Woods*, an extensive region covering most of south Mississippi, extends southward from the Jackson Prairie to within twenty miles of the Gulf Coast and westward from Alabama to the Loess Hills near the Mississippi River. The relatively high and rolling terrain ranges from two hundred to five hundred feet above sea level and lies within the Pearl and Pascagoula river watersheds. Its soils of red and yellow sandy loams are not very fertile, but the region produces longleaf and other types of pine trees in great abundance—the vast forests that underlay the development of Mississippi's important lumber industries in the twentieth century.

The *Coastal Meadows*, a region along the Gulf Coast, is about twenty miles wide, relatively flat, and contains fine sand and sandy loams that support some timber but very little farmland.

Plate 1.1 Piney woods. Courtesy of Westley F. Busbee, Jr.

Major rivers

The river systems of Mississippi played a significant role in the state's history, providing avenues of transportation and communication well before the colonial period (see Map 1.2, Major rivers). And because they provided the means for importing supplies and exporting farm produce, navigable rivers enabled European and then American settlers to populate and develop interior regions. Before the railroad revolution, the rivers were the main arteries of commerce in the state. Today river bottoms and swamps still compose about 16 percent (7,560 square miles) of Mississippi's total land area.

The *Mississippi River*, the western border of the state, is naturally first among the state's rivers in size and importance, having provided the main avenue for exploration, trade, and transportation since the very beginning of the state's history. A number of major rivers enter the Mississippi, draining the western part of the state.

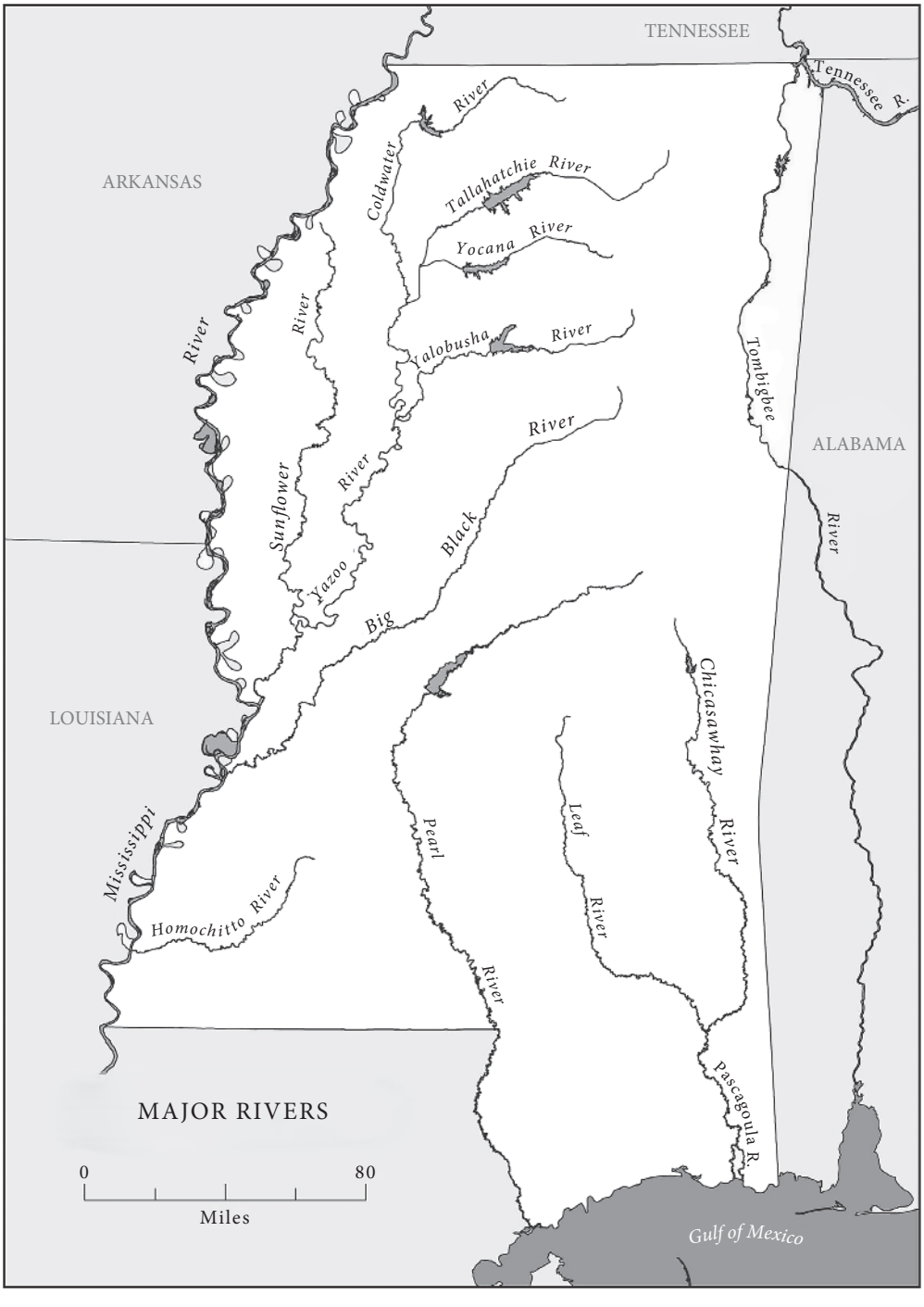
The *Yazoo River* and its tributaries form the most important watershed located wholly within the state. This system begins in the northwestern portion of the state, where it is formed by the union of the Tallahatchie and Yalobusha rivers, and flows about 190 miles southwestward, entering the Mississippi River at Vicksburg. Its main tributaries are the Coldwater and the Sunflower rivers.

The *Big Black River* flows more than three hundred miles in a southwesterly direction from the state's north central area and enters the Mississippi in the vicinity of Grand Gulf, about twenty-five miles south of Vicksburg. Farther south,

The *Homochitto River* provides a watershed for the extreme southwestern corner of the state.

The *Pearl River*, the longest internal river, meanders nearly five hundred miles from north central Mississippi southward to the Gulf Coast, forming the border with Louisiana south of 31° north latitude.

The *Tombigbee River*, in the northeast, was connected by canal with the Tennessee River in the 1980s. The Tombigbee provides an important watershed and avenue of transportation as it flows into Alabama then southward to the port of Mobile.



Map 1.2 Major rivers

Plate 1.2 Big Black River. Courtesy of Westley F. Busbee, Jr.

The *Pascagoula River*, formed by the confluence of the Leaf and Chicasawhay rivers, drains the southeastern part of the state and empties into the Gulf at the port city of Pascagoula.

The Influence of Geography on History

As indicated in following chapters, the state's geographic features have influenced the course of Mississippi's social, cultural, economic, and political history. For example, geographical controversies between the eastern and western regions of the Mississippi Territory delayed statehood for several years. Initially, the westerners in the more populous Natchez District demanded that the entire Territory be included in the new state, while the "back country" people in the eastern areas insisted on a division. Later, after the War of 1812, the regions reversed their preferences: now the Natchez District wanted a division and the "back county" folks, who had experienced a more rapid population increase, favored including the whole Territory. During the antebellum period the western soil zones attracted farmers who wished to grow cotton, a highly labor-intensive crop, so slavery grew faster there than in all other areas except for portions of the Black Prairie. In the decades following the Civil War, when the construction of levees along the Mississippi River lessened the threat of flooding, the Delta became the most important agricultural region of the state. Supplying the demand for labor on the massive cotton-producing farms, African Americans (former slaves and their descendants) were more numerous there than in most other regions. Most eastern counties, on the other hand, were not as productive agriculturally; thus relatively fewer African Americans, almost all of whom engaged in some form of agriculture for their livelihoods, resided there. A notable exception to this pattern was the large number of black residents in Clay, Lowndes, and Noxubee counties within the Black Prairie.

Signs of sectionalism, caused in part by geographic differences, became increasingly evident in the nineteenth century. Because the greatest concentrations of antebellum slave-owning

Plate 1.3 Pascagoula River. Courtesy of the Archives and Records Services Division, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

planters resided in western counties, this region tended to produce many of the state's economic and political leaders well into the twentieth century. Eastern counties, which had greater proportions of small nonslaveholding farmers, tended to support "populist" causes in the post-Civil War decades. Sectional differences were equally stark between the southern and northern counties. For example, beginning as early as the 1830s and continuing through the twentieth century, leaders from these geographic regions disputed such issues as legislative apportionment and the location of state educational institutions.

One of the clearest manifestations of regional sectionalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the political party rivalry between "Bourbon" Democrats, based in Delta and other western counties, and Populists, strongest in the eastern counties. Often influenced by geographic circumstances, these groups battled to protect their divergent interests on such important matters as state regulation of corporations, restrictions on suffrage, the means of selecting judges, and the distribution of public school funds.

Some areas of the state experienced only gradual growth and would not wield significant influence in the state's economic and political life until the twentieth century. One example is the Piney Woods region, the influence of which awaited the development of the timber and petroleum industries. Another late bloomer, the Tennessee Hills, experienced increased economic importance only after the advent of projects by the Tennessee Valley Authority in the 1930s and the construction of the Tennessee–Tombigbee Waterway thereafter.

Partly because of its regional distinctiveness, the Delta fostered a particularly advanced cultural milieu in the twentieth century. There, African Americans overcame poverty and racial discrimination to produce original musical genres like the blues, and nationally acclaimed authors, both black and white, penned works remarkable in their quantity, quality, and variety. Even with their black population majorities, the Delta counties were dominated

politically by white conservatives through the mid-twentieth century. But beginning with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, these same counties emerged as liberal, Democratic Party strongholds. Meanwhile, during the last half of the twentieth century, eastern Mississippians increasingly supported conservative Republicans, thus reversing that region's long tradition of Democratic populism.

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