The Social, Economic, and Political Landscape of Baton Rouge in 1850

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"Let us foster home enterprise—let us encourage home industry," this call to action echoed through Baton Rouge in 1850, a small yet rapidly developing medium-sized town in Louisiana driven by economic growth, social expansion, and the consolidation of a Southern, slaveholding society.[1] In 1850, Baton Rouge's shifting social landscape reflected a period of intense national turmoil, debate, and division across American politics, society, and economy, influenced by major events like the introduction of the Compromise of 1850, the Nashville Convention of Southern States, and the passing of the Compromise. In this research paper, I will explore the social, economic, and political context of Baton Rouge in 1850, examining how these dynamics positioned the town within the broader transformations unfolding in the United States.

To explore these issues, I will examine evidence from the 1850 census, the slave schedules, the local newspaper Baton Rouge Gazette, and other primary sources from the period. After evaluating my sources, I will first examine the demographic landscape of Baton Rouge in 1850. Next, I will explore the social reality of women in Baton Rouge, analysing their roles within the household and the broader societal expectations of the time. I will then turn to Baton Rouge's economic landscape, focusing on its industrial expansion. This will be followed by a discussion on the local sense of nationalism and the search for economic independence from the North. Finally, I will analyse the institution of slavery, emphasizing Baton Rouge's position within the national debates on slavery.

I first collected data from the 1850 published census, which provided an overview of the demographics of Baton Rouge and the state of Louisiana. Using the manuscript census available on Ancestry.com, I then created a simple random

1 "The future," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, September 21, 1850, 2.

sample of the Baton Rouge population. I began by locating the manuscript, which listed a total of 523 families, and calculated a sample rate of 20. For my sample of 25 households, I recorded data from the first family number 20 through the last family number 520. This included information about the household head's name, age, sex, race, occupation, real estate value, and place of birth, along with details about the spouse's name, age, occupation, number of children, children's occupations, and household size. Since enslaved individuals were not included in the general census and were recorded separately, I used the Slave Schedules from AncestryLibrary.com. By matching the household head's name and the Baton Rouge location, I reviewed each family in my sample. Only 6 households owned slaves, and I recorded the total number of enslaved individuals along with their ages. For my newspaper research, I selected the Baton Rouge Gazette. Initially, the Baton Rouge Gazette released its first issue in 1819 as a four-page weekly newspaper, with two pages in French and two in English. However, by the 1840s, English had become the established language of publication. The paper contained news related to politics and commerce, along with advertisements for local businesses, schools, and entertainment. Politically, the Gazette was sympathetic to the Whig Party and supported slaveholders, frequently publishing runaway slave notices. In 1856, the Gazette merged with the Baton Rouge Weekly Comet to form the Weekly Gazette and Comet.

In 1850, Baton Rouge was a growing medium-sized town with a complex social structure shaped by its agricultural economy, reliance on enslaved labour, and significant population growth. Situated along the Mississippi River, Baton Rouge, Louisiana was originally inhabited by Native American tribes such as the Houma, Bayougoula, and Acolapissa. It was conquered by French explorers in 1699 and later ceded to England through the Treaty of Paris in 1763. According to the 1850 census, Baton Rouge had a population of around 3,905 people, divided into 2,562 white people and 1,343 Black people, including both free African Americans and slaves.[2] In Baton Rouge, the population was predominantly male, with 1,441 white men and 1,121 white women.[3] The free African American population was relatively small, consisting of 112 men and 139 women.[4] Among the enslaved population, there were approximately 528 male slaves and 564 female slaves.[5] Therefore, Baton Rouge had a predominantly male population among white individuals, while the enslaved population was predominantly female. In a broader context, Baton Rouge reflects the demographics of the state, which at the time had approximately 126,917 white settlers born in Louisiana, 60,641 born

2 United States Census Bureau, "Seventh Census of the United States 1850- Louisiana," (Washington, DC, Public Printer, 1853), https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1853/dec/1850a.html.

3 Seventh Census of the United States 1850, United States Census Bureau, Louisiana.

4 Seventh Census of the United States 1850, United States Census Bureau, Louisiana.

5 Seventh Census of the United States 1850, United States Census Bureau, Louisiana.

outside the state, and 67,308 born in foreign countries.[6] Louisiana experienced significant population growth in the 1850s as is show in figure 1, particularly among white settlers and enslaved individuals. According to the census, Louisiana's white population grew from 34,311 in 1810 to 158,457 in 1840 and reached 255,491 by 1850.[7] This represented a growth of 644.63% from 1810 to 1850, and a 61.24% increase from 1840 to 1850. The enslaved population also grew exponentially, from 34,660 in 1810 to 168,452 in 1840, and 244,809 in 1850.[8] The enslaved population grew by approximately 607.6% from 1810 to 1840 and 45.3% from 1840 to 1850.

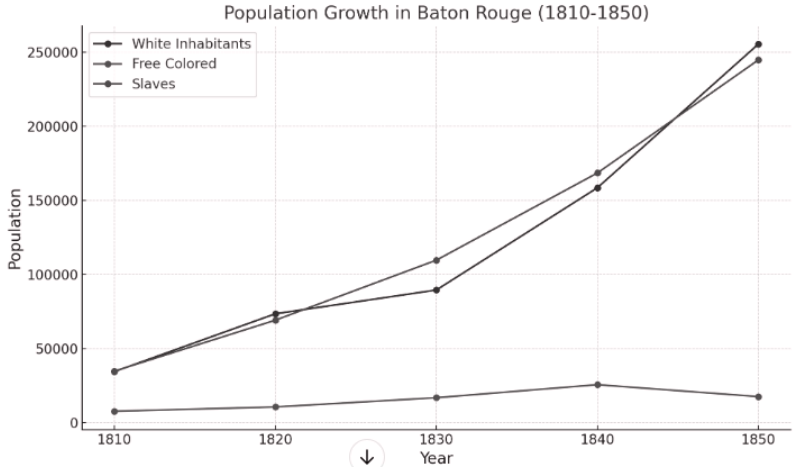

Figure 1. Population Growth in Louisiana (1810-1850). Source: Seventh Census of the United States 1850, United States Census Bureau, Louisiana.[9]

Despite limited newspaper coverage of women's daily lives in Baton Rouge, household data and media references reveal the varied roles and social standings of women, from heads of households to community organizers and participants in local education. The sample of the 25 households shows that 6 of the households were headed by women.[10] These women, typically older and with multiple children, represented different social classes and therefore realities. For example, Eulalia Hende owned $2,000 in real estate and four enslaved individu-

6 Seventh Census of the United States 1850, United States Census Bureau, Louisiana.
7 Seventh Census of the United States 1850, United States Census Bureau, Louisiana.
8 Seventh Census of the United States 1850, United States Census Bureau, Louisiana.
9 Seventh Census of the United States 1850, United States Census Bureau, Louisiana.
10 Ancestry Library, *U.S. Federal Census Collection*, accessed November 12, 2024, https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/records?recordId=2677362&collectionId=8054&tid=&pid=&queryId=5b45bd8d-a98a-4d9e-8470-8d6544f71174&_phsrc=bdN27&_phstart=successSource.

als, while Edg Plunket, a Black woman, owned no real estate and had four young children.[11] The Baton Rouge Gazette provided little local commentary on women's experiences in Baton Rouge but frequently published articles from women's magazines, suggesting that women were an important audience for the paper. These publications typically focused on women's roles within the household and their participation as primary consumers of beauty products. Despite this narrow portrayal, evidence suggests that women were active members of the community within the boundaries of religion and their home. For instance, "the ladies of the Presbyterian Church" were responsible for organizing and raising funds for the construction of a new church, with their efforts described as an "unusual degree of brilliancy."[12] More evidence of social participation comes in the form of multiple advertisements from the Baton Rouge College which offered seminaries for the "education of young Ladies" focusing mainly on different languages and artistic courses.[13] For example, there classes of "French, Latin, German, and Italian," as well as classes of "music, drawing and painting."[14] In summary, women's roles in Baton Rouge were largely constrained by an ideology similar to that advocated by Catharine Beecher, which emphasized women's duty to embody "peace and love" and suggested that "intellectual advantages" should reinforce their prescribed societal roles.[15]

In 1850, Baton Rouge's economic landscape was deeply intertwined with the institution of slavery and marked by ambitions for industrial expansion, infrastructure development, and self-sufficiency. Across Louisiana, the 1850 census recorded a total of 77,168 free employed individuals.[16] In contrast, there were 145,892 enslaved people between the ages of 15 and 60 listed as part of the workforce.[17] In East and West Baton Rouge alone, the enslaved working population within this age range numbered 6,901.[18] The free employed individuals were distributed across various occupations, including the biggest ones: 12,978 laborers, 11,697 farmers, and 6,471 planters.[19] For enslaved people, it is impossible to determine in which area of production they were used, whether as farmers or laborers. The sample of 25 households in Baton Rouge reflects these trends, showing a population of carpenters, clerks, merchants, and farmers, indicative of the region's agricultural and trade-cantered economy.[20] The Baton Rouge Gazette, as

11 Federal Census Collection.

12 "The Ladies of the Presbyterian Church," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, February 23, 1850, 3.

13 "Baton Rouge College, La," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, June 8, 1850, 4.

14 "Baton Rouge College, La," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, April 6, 1850, 3.

15 Catherine Beecher, Essay, "Duty of American Females" (Philadelphia, 1837), 241, 243.

16 United States Census Bureau, "Seventh Census of the United States 1850- Louisiana" (Washington, DC, Public Printer, 1853), https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1853/dec/1850a.html.

17 Seventh Census of the United States 1850, United States Census Bureau, Louisiana.

18 Seventh Census of the United States 1850, United States Census Bureau, Louisiana.

19 Seventh Census of the United States 1850, United States Census Bureau, Louisiana.

20 Federal Census Collection.

a Whig newspaper, highlighted the town's economic growth and emphasized the importance of "encouraging home enterprise," urging readers to prioritize "home stocks before filling city orders."[21] Advertisements reveal a town that imported many new products yet increasingly focused on supporting local small businesses with offerings in categories such as "elegant and light goods," "heavy goods," and "plantation supplies."[22] Like other Southern cities, Baton Rouge aspired to become "commercially independent," and viewed the Plank Roads project as just the start point for it.[23] In 1850, a group of "many citizens" initiated the construction of the Plank Roads, also known as the "farmer's railroad."[24] This project, led by "public-spirited citizens," promised a "new, cheap, and speedy" way of connecting Baton Rouge to surrounding areas and facilitating communication with the interior.[25] This infrastructure project represented the town's aspirations to be a key link in the South's trade network, aiming to boost cotton production to "fifteen thousand bales of cotton" annually.[26] For a growing Baton Rouge, the Plank Roads were an "incalculable" opportunity to increase their production and the system of slavery, offering the way for increased trade, prosperity, and a step toward the economic self-sufficiency so valued by its citizens.[27] The new roads enabled the efficient movement of "wagons, carts, and all vehicles."[28] Providing a system for transporting cotton and goods and promising a more united, efficient, and "well-managed plantation" that would drive the town's anticipated growth, bringing in "new resources and energies."[29]

Baton Rouge's economic aspirations for local manufacturing in 1850 reflected a deep-rooted desire for Southern independence and resistance to Northern influence, intertwining local industry with Southern identity and nationalist sentiment. In an anonymous local commentary from the Baton Rouge Gazette, a local resident stressed the need to "create a home market" and "manufacture [their] cotton at home" rather than send it to Massachusetts in the north.[30] These economic aspirations were more than just a business goals, they were deeply tied to local pride and Southern identity, as the reliance on Northern markets was seen by the Baton Rouge population as an imbalance that placed local cotton growers at a disadvantage. The growing threat of a "sectional contest" between the North and South heightened this sentiment, with Southern residents urging the South to "resist" Northern influence and seeing dependence on Northern manufactur-

21 "The Fall Season," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, September 21, 1850, 2.
22 "The Fall Season," 2.
23 "The Future," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, September 21, 1850, 2.
24 "Plank Road meeting," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, August 24, 1850, 2.
25 "Plank Roads- The Advantages," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, June 8, 1850, 2.
26 "The Prank Road Meeting," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, August 24, 1850, 2.
27 "Plank Roads- The Advantages," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, June 8, 1850, 2.
28 "Plank Roads- The Advantages," 2.
29 "Plank Roads- The Advantages," 2.
30 "The Future," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, September 21, 1850, 2.

ers as a severe disadvantage.[31] Support for "the policy of home manufacturing" became part of a broader movement toward Southern economic independence, perceived to shift the "balance of political power" and decrease reliance on Northern markets.[32] Additionally, this strategy was viewed as a way to strengthen the institution of slavery, providing the South with the "enterprise and public spirit" to declare newly acquired Mexican lands as "slave territory."[33] The aim was to establish "Southern manufacturing that should be put in permanent operation" and that could shield the South from instability with the North.[34] However, this is not an outline of the social context of the time, Baton Rouge as a community was trying to create a strong sense of belonging and nationalism. For example, in 1850, the celebration of Washington's birthday was a key and essential date for the community, a way of celebrating a "great and glorious republic" by remembering the founder.[35] They refer to the national reality as a moment in which the "political elements [were] portending" and a moment in which the union was "threatened with disunion," with nationalism as the exclusive solution.[36] Baton Rouge's evolving social, economic, and political landscape in 1850 was deeply connected to broader transformations across the United States. Locally, Baton Rouge's investment in projects like the Plank Roads exemplified a strong drive for infrastructure to support "home industries" and promote Southern manufacturing.[37] The market revolution of the 1840s had intensified national debates, particularly between Jacksonian Democrats and Whigs. The Baton Rouge Gazette, aligned with the Whig Party, echoed the ideas of Alexander Hamilton, who emphasized the "necessity of enlarging" domestic commerce and "encouraging manufactures."[38] Baton Rouge, experiencing a period of rapid growth, saw in Whig principles of economic "freedom and independence" the promise of a "lucrative and prosperous" future.[39] While Hamilton viewed manufacturing as essential for "independence and security" of the entire Union, Southern Whigs—also those in Baton Rouge—advocated manufacturing to protect and "absolutely control" the Southern economy and way of life.[40]

To understand Baton Rouge in 1850, it is essential to recognize how the deeply embedded institution of slavery, the exclusion of free African Americans, and an emerging Southern identity shaped the town's landscape. A closer examination of the household data reveals how slavery operated on a personal, day-to-day

31 "The Future," 2.
32 "The Future," 2.
33 "The Future," 2.
34 "The Future," 2.
35 "Twenty- Second Day of February," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, February 16, 1850, 2.
36 "Twenty- Second Day of February," 2.
37 "The Future," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, September 21, 1850, 2.
38 Alexander Hamilton, "Report to Congress on the Subject of Manufactures," *Library of Congress*, December 5, 1850, 1.
39 Alexander Hamilton, 4.
40 "The Future," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, September 21, 1850, 2.

level in the town. The sample of 25 households showed that 6 owned slaves, with holdings ranging from 2 to 18 individuals.[41] Most of the enslaved people were young, with the oldest being 51 and the youngest only 2 years old.[42] The majority were women in their twenties, yet 9 enslaved individuals were under the age of 10, indicating a larger, more generalized trend in the enslaved population.[43] Advertisements in the Baton Rouge Gazette from 1850 often listed "negro slaves" for sale, with some properties offered "with or without negroes."[44] In a estate sale in April 1850, multiple enslaved people were sold for "fifty dollars cash on each head," with ages ranging from 5 to 52 years old.[45] The ad referred to them simply as "negro woman," "negro man," "negro girl," or "negro boy," underscoring their commodification.[46] Although enslaved people were not named in the 1850 census, they were given names in advertisements, helping with the sale process.

On the other hand, free Black individuals, despite their presence in society, were viewed with suspicion, referred to as "strange negroes" or "wrongdoers" who warranted the "strict attention" of Baton Rouge's citizens.[47] This attitude reflected the broader Southern perspective, as Manisha Sinha notes in her book, where all free African Americans were regarded as a "potential security risk."[48] Consequently, slavery was not just a political issue; it was an economic and social cornerstone, fuelling intense discussion among the people of Baton Rouge. On June 22, the Baton Rouge Gazette published an open invitation for citizens to address the "slavery question," a national debate that was deemed worthy of the "attention of every patriot."[49] As a slave-holding state, Baton Rouge had much at stake, both to gain and to lose, in this national conflict.

The debates over runaway slaves, the Nashville Convention, and the passage of the Compromise of 1850 illustrate Baton Rouge's clear position within the national debate and conflict over slavery. Publications in the Baton Rouge Gazette reflects a supportive and optimistic approach to the Compromise of 1850, viewing it as a means to "give effect to the constitutional provisions" that the Union originally embodied in relation to the institution of slavery.[50] From their perspective, the compromise would restore the "wisdom" that once united North and South, which they argued had been disrupted by "fanatics of the North," re-

41 Federal Census Collection.
42 Federal Census Collection.
43 Federal Census Collection.
44 "Valuable Sugar Plantation and Negroes for sale," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, February 16, 1850, 1.
45 "Succession Sale," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, April 13, 1850, 3.
46 "Succession Sale," 3.
47 "Negroes," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, May 4, 1850, 2.
48 Manisha Sinha, "Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics & Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina," (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Ch. 1, 15.
49 "The Washington Union," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, June 8, 1850, 2.
50 "The Compromise Committee," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, May 11, 1850, 2.

sponsible for an "anomaly" threatening the Union's harmony.[51] Sinha highlights how the South was forging a "distinct national identity" based on the belief that slavery was the "natural condition of labour," where the "free north was more alien" that any other slave country.[52] The Gazette voices hope for "peace and fraternal concord" and urges Louisiana's senator not to overlook the "obvious sentiments" of his Baton Rouge constituents.[53] Despite the senator's Southern Democratic allegiance, the Gazette's Whig alignment reflects a strong Unionist bias. A local commentary titled The Prophetic Statesman suggests that the acquisition of new territories prompted the South to "calculate the value of the Union," leading to potential harm rather than benefits.[54] The article even describes the new lands as a "Pandora's box of mischief."[55] This indicates that Baton Rouge, or at least the Gazette's target readership, leaned towards Unionism in this debate, referring to radical positions as those of "traitors of the South and the traitors of the North."[56] In analysing the speech given by Louisiana's senator in Baton Rouge, the Gazette underscores the idea that "the North is not the enemy" and that both regions are "fighting battles against the fanatics."[57] In fact, a local news article from September 14 describes the town's celebration of the Compromise's passage with "one hundred guns fired" in support of the Union.[58]

However, the town's position on the Union was highly more complex. While Baton Rouge defended Unionist principles, its citizens were also ready to "defend and protect" the institution of slavery, advising the North to "attend to its own problems" and "draw the line," promising that if the North continued interfering, they would reciprocate.[59] Therefore, the Gazette supported the Nashville Convention, emphasizing the need for a "united and decided stand" by the South defending slavery.[60] However, the Gazette cautioned against organizing themselves as a "Southern Convention" that could deepen divisions with the North.[61] The publication urged delegates not to pursue measures that would generate resentment and disunion. As Sinha argues in The Counterrevolution of Slavery, Southern nationalism was "based on the defence of racial slavery" as a "superior way of ordering society."[62] According to this view, "slaveholders' right to prop-

51 "Slavery Question- The Union," *Baton-Rouge Gazette,* March 9, 1850, 2.

52 Manisha Sinha, "Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics & Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina," (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Ch. 8, 222.

53 "The Compromise," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, May 11, 1850, 2.

54 "The Prophetic Statesman," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, September 7, 1850, 2.

55 "The Prophetic Statesman," 2.

56 "From Washington," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, September 14, 1850, 2.

57 "Speech of Senator Down," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, November 30, 1850, 1.

58 "ONE HUNDRED GUNS! The union now and forever," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, September 14, 1850, 2.

59 "Slavery Question- The Union," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, March 9, 1850, 2.

60 "Nashville Convention," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, May 11, 1850, 2.

61 "The Nashville Convention," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, June 8, 1850, 2.

62 Manisha Sinha, "Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics & Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina," (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Ch. 3, 63.

erty" outweighed, the "slaves' right to liberty."[63]This viewpoint was echoed by Louisiana's Democratic senator, who described that the South as being "deprived of much of her property," grieving over the loss property and the "penalty paid" for those attempting to "rescue" their slaves.[64] For this reason, the Baton Rouge Gazette found the Compromise of 1850 compelling, hoping it would provide protections for slaveholders struggling with frequent escapes to the North.[65] By October, the Gazette celebrated the Compromise's "productive results," reporting the recovery of several runaway slaves.[66] Although they acknowledged that some were attempting to flee to Canada, they suggested these individuals would have a "better future" if they resumed their "proper social positions."[67] It's impossible to know exactly what the people of Baton Rouge were thinking at this time, but it is clear that slavery, as a labour system, was deeply embedded in their daily lives and in their visions for the future.

In examining Baton Rouge's social, economic, and political landscape in 1850, we see a community deeply shaped by the national divisions and challenges that defined the United States at this time. The institution of slavery and the exclusionary social structure underscore the contradictions of a society building toward prosperity while denying freedom and equality to many of its inhabitants. Baton Rouge's evolving role in national debates around slavery, industry, and Southern identity illustrates how even a small, growing town could mirror, and contribute to, the broader tensions threatening the Union. In the end, Baton Rouge's story in 1850 offers a lens into the forces pulling the country both toward prosperity and, ultimately, toward conflict.

63 Manisha Sinha, Ch. 3, 89.
64 "Speech of Senator Down," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, November 30, 1850, 1.
65 "The Compromise Committee," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, May 11, 1850, 2.
66 "The Compromise Committee," page 2.
67 "Fugitive Slave Law- The Factionists," *Baton-Rouge Gazette*, October 19, 1850, 2.