

## Frontier Violence in the New State

The settlers who pushed eastward from the Mississippi River in small groups had hardly dented the wilderness. Bears still roamed the countryside, and violence was common. Force was the law of the land. Joseph Baldwin described the attractions of frontier Mississippi:

What country could boast more largely of its crimes? What more splendid roll of felonies! What more terrific murders! What gorgeous bank robberies! . . . Swindling Indians by the nation! Stealing their land by the township!

In the early days of statehood, laws were passed to curb the violence that accompanied frontier life. In the early 1820s, Governor Poindexter devised the Poindexter Code. But many of these laws were as harsh as the crimes they legislated against. Minor crimes could bring about capital punishment.

Later Governor Brandon labeled Mississippi's criminal laws the "Bloody Code." In 1836, the legislature set aside state funds to build a penitentiary where criminals would be rehabilitated and then allowed to rejoin society. Ten years later, with the penitentiary complete, the state began revising its criminal code.

**Capital  
punishment:  
death.**

Mississippi's  
"Bloody Code."

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### *George Poindexter, 1779–1855*

George Poindexter was one of Mississippi's most important early leaders. J. F. H. Claiborne said of him: "The history of his career is, in fact, the history of the Territory and the State, so closely was he connected with everything that occurred."

Poindexter was born in Virginia. At 23 he migrated to Natchez and began to practice law. Two years later he was appointed attorney-general of Mississippi Territory. He cleared the Natchez Trace of the organized robber bands that had terrorized it. From this beginning, he went on to carve out a distinguished career as judge, territorial representative to Congress, governor, and United States senator. At the Constitutional Convention of 1817, he almost singlehandedly shaped Mississippi's first constitution.

His life was filled with hard times. In 1822, he lost his second wife, his son, and his second race for Congress. Despair, bitterness, and disease followed. For a time he could not walk, but by 1830 he was well enough to serve in the United States Senate. He served four years as president pro tempore of the Senate. Then, in 1836, he lost his seat to Robert Walker. Soured, Poindexter moved to Kentucky with his third wife. He later came back and practiced law in Jackson, where he died in 1855, an embittered old man.

Claiborne called Poindexter "the ablest man who ever lived in the State." But he was not a "popular" man. Today he is hardly known. Ironically, this man who shaped so much of early Mississippi history has been almost completely forgotten.

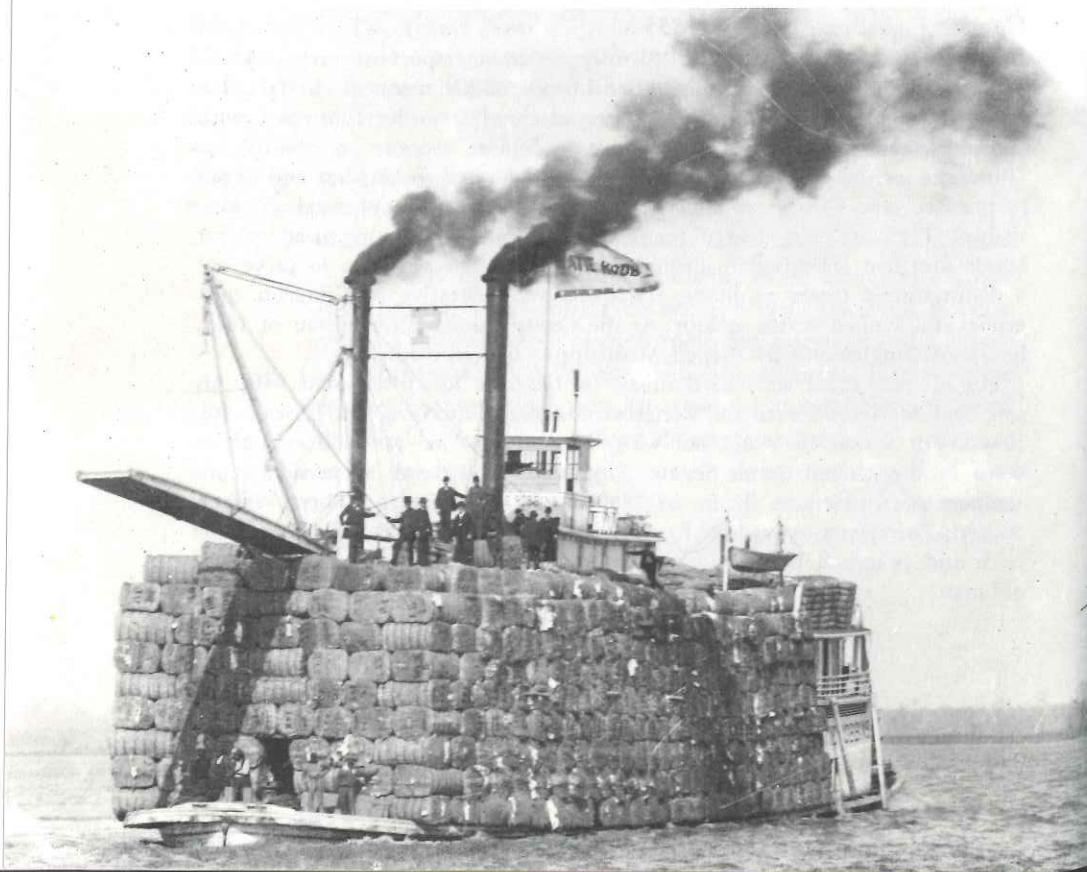
### Transportation

Mississippi had few good roads before 1860. Since river counties dominated the government, towns in the eastern backwoods were seldom connected even by dirt roads. As late as 1854, it took 40 hours to travel from Oxford to Jackson.

In 1812 the steamboat *New Orleans* first came to Natchez from Pittsburgh. Three years later, the *Enterprise* steamed up from New Orleans. Now goods could come upriver as well as down. Flat-bottomed steamboats were designed to float in shallow water; soon they provided regular service on the Pearl, Yazoo, Tombigbee, and smaller rivers.

In the 1830s Mississippi built railroads. Slave laborers worked for eight years to build the West Feliciana Railroad. It connected Woodville, Mississippi, and St. Francisville, Louisiana, and was the first interstate railroad in America. It carried cotton to river ports to be shipped to market.

*Steamboat loaded with cotton.*



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