Cypress and other lumber cut especially from the Atchafalaya Basin and in the Lake Arthur region brought south Louisiana to the attention of lumbermen early in the 1800s. In addition to cypress, settlers found oak, tupelo, gum and other trees that they used to build homes and sugar mills. Trees were also cut and milled into lumber for export, much of it sent to Texas via the port of Galveston.

In the early 1800s, demand increased as builders needed wood to make and fuel steamboats. After the War of 1812, the U.S. Navy looked to south Louisiana for timber to build its ships, and, during the era of railroad construction after the Civil War, sawmills sprang up to furnish railroad ties, fuel for wood burning engines and for boxcar construction.

The Acadiana timber harvest really took off after 1876, when the federal Timber Act resulted in the sale of millions of acres of cypress swampland to raise money to build a levee system. With passage of that act, Louisiana was invaded by northern and eastern investors who bought millions of acres to harvest and mill cypress products.

By the late 1880s and early 1890s, "swampers" were employed by the thousands, cutting the cypress from the Atchafalaya Basin and its borders - working in waist-high water to cut the timber, while fighting off mosquitoes, snakes and sometimes other swampers.

For the really big trees, the swampers built scaffolds five or six feet above the ground, sometimes higher, to reach a point where the trunk of century-old trees had tapered enough to be cut. Most often, the logs were chained together in huge rafts and towed to mills along the Teche. St. Mary Parish alone had sawmills in Baldwin, Franklin, Centerville, Patterson, Berwick and Morgan City. The largest of these mills was the F.B. Williams Lumber Co. of Patterson. Richard Brownell organized the Berwick Lumber Co. just after the Civil War. In 1899, the Brownell-Drews Lumber Co. built a mill on the Morgan City waterfront. Cypress lumber was milled in Baldwin by C.W. Coleman and Son before the turn of the century. They operated both a sawmill to turn out finished lumber and a shingle mill and owned 120,000 acres of timber land in Terrebonne, Assumption and St. Martin parishes.

By World War II, the cypress industry of south Louisiana made just as good of its former self - as did the huge cypress groves that had been cut.

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Acadiana Diary
Cypress trees paid during its heyday