Livingston livelihood

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ENIAMS SPRINGS — The Amite River long provided a geographical barrier between East Baton Rouge and Livingston parishes, as well as a transportation route that allowed Livingston to remain economically independent of its larger neighbors, historians say.

Livingston had its own ports that handled a large percentage of its imports and exports before the 20th century, according to historian Sam Hyde of Southeastern Louisiana University.

Port Vincent and Springfield both had viable ports that handled livestock, resins, food, consumer goods and lumber, he said.

One of the major jobs of politicians from Livingston Parish was to secure continual funding for snag boats to keep the Amite and Tickfaw rivers clear for shipping, he said.

Large planters from East Baton Rouge Parish generally owned the roads, ferries and bridges leading to the port in Baton Rouge.

They extracted tolls from Livingston Parish residents wanting to move goods to and from Baton Rouge, making the Livingston Parish ports more attractive.

The routes to and from the Livingston Parish ports developed various aids to commerce. These included cattle pens and bunkhouses strategically located along the way, according to records of the SLU Center for Regional Studies.

Other livestock, including turkeys, was driven to these ports. That included the great turkey drives in the mid-1800s, he said.

Boys, each holding one end of a long stick, formed moving barriers to keep the winged turkeys in line, he said. At night the turkeys were allowed to sleep in trees to avoid predators. In the morning, they would be flushed from the branches and put back in the long column, guarded on both sides by the youths.

Furs trapped in the lower part of Livingston Parish provided another important export for the Livingston Parish ports.

Lumber and forest byproducts provided the big exports for those ports, however.

Wood, hauled by teams of oxen from the parish's pine forests, was loaded onto boats at Springfield and Port Vincent and shipped to New Orleans.

The parish's forests also provided turpentine, resins and the makings for tar, pitch and charcoal, which were exported from Port Vincent and Springfield.

Beginning with the Civil War, major changes occurred in the economy of Livingston Parish, however.

Parish residents had little American currency and sold their timberlands for as little as $1 an acre to northern lumber companies, which cut the trees and sent the wood north to be made into finished products, he said.

Thus began a period of exploitation of Livingston Parish, in which its resources and labor were purchased at very low prices and the resources sent elsewhere to have value added by the making of finished products, the historian said.

Meanwhile, changes in transportation formed a stronger link between Baton Rouge and Livingston Parish.

The use of large steamships grew on the Mississippi River.

The bigger boats could handle the cotton at lower prices than the smaller boats that traversed the Amite and Tickfaw rivers, he said.

And gradually roads and bridges became public, so Livingston Parish residents could get their goods to and from Baton Rouge without having to pay a series of tolls along the way.

Baton Rouge also became more of a financial center where importers and exporters were able to get financial backing unavailable in Port Vincent and Springfield.

With those changes, the handling of cotton and other goods began to shift from the Livingston Parish ports, he said.

The Livingston Parish ports began to fade, although a commercial steamboat did continue to traverse the Amite River to Port Vincent until the early 20th century.