Power, Politics, and the Delta Elite: Plantation Economy, Racial Hierarchy, and the Mississippi Delta Before the 1927 Flood

Vocabulary for Focus: Power, Politics, and the Delta Elite

Vocabulary	Student-Friendly Definition	Context in This Lesson
Delta elite	A relatively small group of wealthy and influential landowners, businesspeople, bankers, lawyers, and political leaders in the Mississippi Delta.	Members of the Delta elite often had influence over land, employment, credit, levee decisions, business, and local politics.
Plantation economy	An economic system centered on large farms or plantations and a labor force that works the land.	Cotton plantations were a major part of the Delta economy and depended heavily on Black agricultural labor.
Sharecropper	A farmer who works someone else's land and gives the landowner part of the crop as payment.	Many Black families in the Delta worked as sharecroppers rather than owning the land they farmed.
Tenant farmer	A farmer who rents land from a landowner and farms it.	Tenant farmers generally had more independence than sharecroppers but still depended on landowners and local credit systems.
Credit	The ability to receive goods or money now with an agreement to pay later.	Farmers often needed credit for food, seed, tools, and supplies before the crop was harvested. Debt could increase dependence on landowners and merchants.
Debt	Money or another obligation that a person owes.	Debt could make it difficult for agricultural workers to leave a plantation or change employers.
Economic dependence	Relying on another person or institution for employment, housing, land, credit, or other necessities.	A worker might depend on the same plantation for a job, house, credit, and access to land.
Political power	The ability to influence government decisions, laws, policies, or public resources.	Wealthy landowners and business leaders often had greater access to local and state decision-makers.
Economic power	The ability to influence others through control of money,	Land ownership and control of employment gave the Delta elite economic influence.

Vocabulary	Student-Friendly Definition	Context in This Lesson
	property, jobs, credit, or resources.	
Social power	The ability to influence how people are treated, whose opinions matter, and whose interests receive attention.	Race, wealth, family connections, and social status affected whose voices carried influence.
Mobility	The ability to move, leave, relocate, or seek opportunities elsewhere.	During a flood, owning a vehicle or having money and transportation could determine whether someone could evacuate. Mobility also becomes important during the Great Migration.
Racial hierarchy	A social system in which people have unequal rights, opportunities, status, and power because of race.	Jim Crow placed Black residents at a political and social disadvantage despite their importance to the Delta economy.
Jim Crow	Laws, customs, and institutions that enforced racial segregation and discrimination against Black Americans.	Jim Crow restricted voting, political participation, mobility, education, employment opportunities, and access to institutions.
Disenfranchisement	Preventing or greatly limiting people's ability to vote or participate politically.	Black residents could make up a large portion of a county's population while having little influence over elected government.
Paternalism	When people with greater power make decisions for others while claiming that they are acting for those people's benefit.	Some plantation owners described themselves as protectors of Black workers while still maintaining control over land, labor, and decision-making.
Noblesse oblige	The belief that wealthy or privileged people have a responsibility to care for people with less power.	This idea helps students analyze figures such as LeRoy Percy without reducing the story to simply “good” or “bad” individuals.
Labor control	Ways employers or institutions influence or restrict where, when, or under what conditions people work.	Keeping agricultural workers in the Delta became important to plantation owners because the cotton economy depended on their labor.

Vocabulary	Student-Friendly Definition	Context in This Lesson
Coercion	Using pressure, threats, punishment, or control to make someone do something they would not freely choose.	This concept becomes especially important when students examine levee labor and refugee camps.
Levee board	A local or regional organization responsible for building, maintaining, or managing levees and flood protection.	Decisions about levees affected land values, agriculture, towns, transportation, and flood risk.
Infrastructure	Human-built systems such as levees, roads, railroads, bridges, ports, and drainage systems.	Flood-protection infrastructure was not only an engineering issue; decisions about it also reflected economic and political priorities.
Influence	The ability to affect another person's decisions or actions without necessarily having formal authority.	A landowner might influence a banker, levee board, politician, or employer through wealth and connections.
Stakeholder	A person or group affected by a decision or able to influence its outcome.	Plantation owners, workers, bankers, engineers, businesses, and communities were all stakeholders—but they did not have equal power.

The terms to consider to pre teach for **middle school**, and explicitly teach these before the activity:

Delta elite • plantation economy • sharecropper • economic dependence • political power • mobility • racial hierarchy • coercion

For **high school**, please add: paternalism • noblesse oblige • disenfranchisement • labor control • stakeholder • influence

The rest can be introduced naturally during the power-map activity.

One distinction to explicitly put on the board is: DEPENDENCE ≠ POWER. This is due to the fact that a sharecropper might be essential to the cotton economy while having relatively little power over the economic system. Conversely, a plantation owner depended on workers but possessed greater ability to influence land, credit, government, and transportation. That apparent contradiction is one of the most important ideas in the lesson.

Students may predict migration, attempts to prevent workers from leaving, labor shortages, conflict over evacuation, or changes in the plantation economy before you

teach them what actually happened. Then, in the next lesson, you can open by putting their predictions beside the historical evidence.

Therefore, the exit ticket for this lesson isn't a simple assessment but a prediction that the next lesson tests—which should make the progression from Delta power → forced labor and relief → Great Migration feel much more connected.

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Describe the plantation economy of the Mississippi Delta before 1927, including the roles of landowners, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, merchants, bankers, levee boards, and agricultural laborers.
2. Distinguish among economic, political, and social power and explain how each shaped people's choices before and during the flood.
3. Explain how Jim Crow, racial hierarchy, disenfranchisement, and economic dependence affected access to land, credit, transportation, mobility, and political decision-making.
4. Analyze how dependence on Black agricultural labor influenced decisions about levee work, evacuation, relief, and recovery.
5. Evaluate paternalism and noblesse oblige as forms of social power, distinguishing stated responsibility for workers from the economic benefits of maintaining a dependent labor force.
6. Construct a systems model of Delta power showing relationships among land ownership, labor, credit, transportation, infrastructure, and government.
7. Use evidence to explain how pre-disaster social structures can increase or reduce vulnerability during an environmental disaster.
8. Develop an evidence-based prediction about how the 1927 flood might disrupt, expose, or reinforce existing power relationships.

Louisiana standards

Grade 8 Social Studies

8.6 — Primary and Secondary Sources

Students use multiple sources to analyze content, evaluate claims and evidence, compare accounts, and consider how available sources shape historical interpretation. This aligns particularly well if students use Barry, Mizelle, archival evidence, or historical accounts alongside the power-map activity.

8.7 — Construct and Support Claims

Students construct claims using relevant evidence and reasoning, including comparison of viewpoints and analysis of cause and effect. The lesson's questions—*Who had*

power? Is dependence the same as power? Did the flood change or expose the power structure?—are direct applications.

8.9 — Social, Political, and Economic Change

This is one of the best content standards for the lesson. In particular:

- **8.9(c)** addresses working conditions and struggles of labor;
- **8.9(j)** requires students to explain the emergence of the Jim Crow system and its effects on Black Americans.

This lesson gives students a concrete way to see Jim Crow not simply as segregation, but as a system affecting credit, land, labor, political participation, transportation, mobility, and institutional power.

8.12(g) — Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927

Students describe the causes of the 1927 flood and explain how the disaster and government response affected Louisianans. The Delta Elite lesson addresses the crucial question of why people entered the disaster with unequal resources and decision-making power.

8.12(j) — Great Migration

Students explain causes and effects of migration and population shifts, including the Great Migration. This directly supports the bridge question: What happens to a labor system when the people it depends upon gain the ability to leave?

The standard explicitly identifies the Great Migration.

8.4 — Geographic Representations and Historical Data

This applies if students map the Delta, plantations, transportation routes, levees, or migration networks while examining economic and political characteristics.

Louisiana high school

For high school, the strongest statewide standards are the disciplinary practices:

9–12.SP1 — Examine sources for origin, point of view, intended audience, and reliability.

9–12.SP2 — Analyze primary and secondary sources, compare accounts, and evaluate claims and evidence.

9–12.SP3 — Construct evidence-supported claims, analyze causes and effects, compare viewpoints, and evaluate counterclaims.

These fit especially well if students compare Barry's treatment of the Percys and elite decision-making with Mizelle's emphasis on Black experience, labor, migration, and cultural memory.

Mississippi standards

Mississippi Studies

MS.7 — Jim Crow Era Mississippi

This is probably the single strongest Mississippi standard for the lesson.

MS.7 asks students to examine the economic, political, and social changes in Mississippi from the end of Reconstruction through World War II. Its objectives include:

- tracing changes in Mississippi's economy after Reconstruction;
- analyzing Jim Crow, poll taxes, literacy tests, and segregation;
- and working with concepts including cotton production, sharecropping, tenant farming, racial inequality, voting rights, railroads, and transportation infrastructure.

That is almost a direct description of the Delta Elite lesson.

The Mississippi instructional guide even recommends primary-source analysis, case studies, discussion, role-playing, and examining how reforms affected different groups—very close to the design of the power-map activity.

MS.1.4 — Geography and Development

Students explain how Mississippi's geographic features and processes contributed to social, technological, and economic development. The standard specifically names the Mississippi River, Delta, and Great Flood of 1927.

This is a strong fit for the lesson's larger argument:

> rich alluvial soils → cotton agriculture → plantation economy → labor system → levees → development → unequal vulnerability.

Mississippi high school U.S. History

USH 1.5 — New South / Post-Reconstruction

This standard is exceptionally relevant. Students evaluate:

- Reconstruction Amendments;
- Black Codes;
- **Jim Crow**;
- **disenfranchisement**;
- **sharecropping**;
- *Plessy v. Ferguson*;
- and early civil-rights responses.

The lesson extends those concepts into the 1920s by asking students what those structures meant during an environmental disaster.

Optional: African American Studies

If the lesson is used in an African American Studies course, **AAS.5** is also a strong alignment because it examines the economic and social effects of Jim Crow and African American migration from the South.

Supporting science connection

This is not a primarily a science-standard lesson. The flood is the environmental context, but the intellectual work is mainly historical, political, economic, and social.

For an interdisciplinary science connection, Louisiana **MS-ESS3-2** can support a discussion of natural hazards and mitigation because students consider levees and how infrastructure affects flood risk.

State	Level	Core Standard	Why it fits
Louisiana	Grade 8 SS	**8.6–8.7**	Analyze sources and construct evidence-supported claims
Louisiana	Grade 8 SS	**8.9(j)**	Jim Crow and its effects on Black Americans
Louisiana	Grade 8 SS	**8.12(g)**	Directly addresses the Great Flood of 1927
Louisiana	Grade 8 SS	**8.12(j)**	Great Migration and population change

State	Level	Core Standard	Why it fits
Mississippi	Mississippi Studies	**MS.7**	Jim Crow, cotton, sharecropping, tenancy, racial inequality
Mississippi	Mississippi Studies	**MS.1.4**	Mississippi River, Delta, and Great Flood of 1927
Mississippi	HS U.S. History	**USH 1.5**	Jim Crow, disenfranchisement, sharecropping
High School LA	Social Studies	**9–12.SP1–3**	Source analysis, perspectives, claims, evidence

Overview

The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 did not strike a socially or economically equal landscape. The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta was dominated by cotton agriculture, large landowners, tenant farming and sharecropping, racial segregation, and political institutions in which a relatively small group of white landowners, lawyers, bankers, businessmen, and public officials exercised substantial influence. The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 caused an estimated $1 billion in economic damage at the time, which equaled nearly **one-third of the total U.S. federal budget** in 1927.

This lesson asks students to examine how power worked before the flood. Who owned land? Who depended on whom for labor? Who controlled credit, transportation, levee decisions, and local government? Who could leave when danger approached? Who could demand protection? The goal is not simply to identify a group of “bad actors.” Students instead investigate a system of relationships in which economic dependence, racial hierarchy, infrastructure, political authority, and ideas about paternal responsibility shaped both the Delta before 1927 and the disaster response that followed.

Central Question

When the river threatened everyone, why did some people have much more power than others to decide what should be protected, who should work, and who should be allowed to leave?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- describe the plantation economy of the Mississippi Delta before 1927;
- explain the roles of landowners, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, merchants, bankers, levee boards, and laborers;
- distinguish economic power, political power, social power, and physical mobility;

- explain how Jim Crow and racial hierarchy shaped access to resources and decision-making;
- evaluate the relationship between white planter paternalism and economic self-interest;
- examine how dependence on Black agricultural labor influenced decisions during the flood;
- identify how pre-disaster social structures can shape disaster vulnerability and recovery.

Part I — Thinking Exercise: Who Has Power? 8–10 minutes

Before discussing the Delta, give students this hypothetical community:

A town of 5,000 people depends primarily on one industry. A small number of families own most of the land and businesses. Most other residents work for those families or rent land from them. The landowners also sit on banks, local government boards, and infrastructure committees. A major environmental hazard is approaching.

Ask students: Who has power in this community?

Then make them identify different kinds of power:

- Who owns property?
- Who controls jobs?
- Who controls credit?
- Who has political connections?
- Who controls transportation?
- Who controls information?
- Who can leave?
- Who can influence government?
- Who decides which infrastructure gets protected?

Then reveal: This is roughly the kind of power structure we need to understand before we can understand the 1927 flood.

Part II — The Plantation Economy

The Mississippi Delta contained some of the richest agricultural land in the United States. Floodwaters deposited deep layers of fertile alluvial soil, making the region highly productive for cotton. But agricultural wealth was distributed extremely unevenly.

Large landowners controlled much of the land. Many African Americans worked as sharecroppers, tenant farmers, or agricultural laborers. Sharecropping and tenancy did not mean that every worker experienced exactly the same arrangement, but these systems often left families dependent on landowners and local merchants for land, seed, supplies, credit, housing, and access to markets.

The Delta's plantation system required a large labor force. The need to retain workers therefore influenced economic and political decisions long after slavery had ended. The National Park Service describes the plantation and later sharecropper/tenant systems as labor-intensive systems that depended on maintaining a substantial labor pool.

Key Concept

Landowners did not simply own land. Ownership could also provide influence over labor, housing, credit, transportation, and political decisions.

Vignette 1: Cotton on Someone Else's Land

A Black family farms cotton on several acres of Delta land. They do not own the farm. At planting time, they need seed and supplies. During the year, they purchase food and necessities on credit. Their house belongs to the plantation. At harvest, the cotton is sold and accounts are settled. If the family owes more than expected, leaving becomes difficult. Moving also means finding another house, another employer, and another source of credit.

A few miles away, the landowner owns hundreds or perhaps thousands of acres. He has access to banks, automobiles, lawyers, business partners, and political officials. Both families depend upon the cotton crop. But their dependence is very different.

Ask Students: Who has more choices if the crop fails? Who has more choices if the river rises? Is economic dependence a form of power?

Part III — What Was the “Delta Elite”?

The term Delta Elite can be used to describe influential white families and networks whose power derived from combinations of: Land ownership, cotton production, banking and credit, law, business ownership, levee boards, political connections, and transportation and commerce.

These systems overlapped. A wealthy planter might also serve on a bank board, know state and federal politicians, influence a levee district, employ hundreds of workers, and have business relationships outside Mississippi. That means power operated through networks, not simply through official elected positions.

Case Study: LeRoy Percy

LeRoy Percy is an especially useful case because he does not fit neatly into a simple hero-or-villain narrative. Percy was a planter, lawyer, businessman, former U.S. senator, and one of the most influential figures in the Mississippi Delta. His connections extended far beyond Greenville into national political, financial, and philanthropic circles.

He also publicly opposed the Ku Klux Klan in Washington County and promoted a paternalistic vision in which elite white landowners believed they had obligations toward Black workers. But the plantation economy depended heavily upon Black labor.

That creates an important distinction: Paternalism. Paternalism occurs when people with greater power make decisions for others while presenting themselves as protectors or caretakers. It can involve genuine concern. It can also preserve unequal power. Those two things can occur at the same time. Historians discussing Percy have described this mixture as *noblesse oblige*—the idea that people of privilege have responsibilities toward those with less power—combined with a strong economic interest in maintaining the Delta labor force.

Ask Students: Can someone believe that they are protecting people while also benefiting from keeping those people dependent?

Vignette 2: The "Good" Planter

A plantation owner considers himself fair. He provides housing. He advances credit. He sometimes helps families experiencing hardship. He believes that relationships between landowners and workers should involve mutual obligations. But he also believes that the plantation cannot survive without its labor force. If workers leave for Chicago, Detroit, or St. Louis, his land loses value. Now, imagine a flood destroys workers' homes. The planter thinks: "We must rebuild the Delta." A worker thinks: "Maybe this is my chance to leave."

Ask Students: Are these two people talking about the same meaning of "recovery"? When does paternal responsibility become labor control?

Part IV — Racial Hierarchy

The plantation economy operated within the larger system of **Jim Crow**.

Black residents of the Delta frequently faced:

- political disenfranchisement;
- segregation;
- discriminatory policing;

- unequal access to credit;
- dependence on white-controlled institutions;
- limited influence over government decisions;
- greater difficulty challenging employers or landowners.

The issue therefore was not simply that some people were richer than others. Race and economic status reinforced one another. Black residents made up a very large portion of the population in parts of the Delta while exercising comparatively little formal political power. NPS research on the period emphasizes how existing racial, economic, and social inequalities were reproduced and magnified during the flood and refugee-camp experience.

Vignette 3: Majority Without Power

Imagine a county where most residents are Black. Most agricultural labor is performed by Black workers. The cotton economy cannot function without them. Yet the people deciding where levees are strengthened, how police are used, how relief is distributed, who controls transportation, who receives credit, and how government officials respond, are overwhelmingly white.

Ask Students: How can a group be essential to an economy while having relatively little political power? Is population size the same thing as power?

Part V — Levees Were Political Too

Students have already learned to think of levees as engineering structures. Now add another layer: A levee is also a political structure. Building, maintaining, strengthening, or abandoning a levee affects land values, agricultural production, towns, railroads, businesses, transportation, workers, and neighboring communities.

Someone therefore has to decide: Whose land is worth protecting? Before and during 1927, influential landowners and local leaders had strong incentives to protect the Delta's agricultural economy. As river levels rose in March and April 1927, plantation hands and other Black residents were put to work strengthening levees; PBS's historical timeline describes African Americans being pressed into levee work gangs, sometimes through police coercion. This is where infrastructure, race, labor, and political power become one story.

Vignette 4: Save the Levee

The river is rising; there is not enough time. If the levee fails, farms, houses, railroad lines, businesses, and towns may flood. Thousands of workers are needed immediately. A plantation owner says: “The levee protects everyone. Everyone therefore has a

responsibility to help save it." A Black laborer says: "My family is in danger too. Why should someone else decide that I must work here rather than help them evacuate?"

Ask Students: Is emergency levee labor a shared civic obligation? At what point does emergency labor become coercion? Who gets to decide? This vignette provides a direct transition into the later Forced Labor and Red Cross Policies lesson.

Interactive Activity — Build the Delta Power Map

25–30 minutes

Divide students into groups. Give each group these eight actors: (1) Large plantation owner, (2) Black sharecropper, (3) Black agricultural laborer, (4) Local banker/merchant, (5) Levee board member, (6) Railroad/business representative, (7) Local elected official, and (8) Federal engineer

Give each group a large sheet of paper. Place the words "**1927 MISSISSIPPI DELTA"** in the center. Students connect the actors using labeled arrows.

Possible labels: owns land, employs, owes money to, provides credit to, controls housing, influences, depends on, protects, polices, transports, can leave and cannot easily leave.The important rule: Every arrow must contain a verb. Students should not merely draw a hierarchy. They need to explain how power moves through the system.

The Complication: After groups finish their maps, announce: The Mississippi River is rising rapidly. Engineers believe the levees may fail.

Give them three decisions:

Decision 1: You need **5,000 people immediately** to strengthen the levee. Who works? Who decides? Can people refuse?

Decision 2: There are not enough boats or trains to evacuate everyone. Who leaves first?

Decision 3: If large numbers of agricultural workers evacuate permanently, cotton production may collapse after the flood. Should economic recovery influence evacuation policy? Give groups ten minutes to modify their power map.

Then ask: Did the flood change the power structure—or make the existing structure more visible?

Add a "Power Tokens" Variation

Give each actor ten hypothetical tokens representing: wealth, political influence, mobility, access to information, and control over labor. Have students distribute the

tokens. There does not need to be a single correct distribution. The way the students frame their argument matters.

Then ask: Which form of power matters most during an environmental disaster?

Students may discover that **mobility** suddenly becomes just as important as wealth.

Connection to the Great Migration

This lesson also sets up the migration unit. The Delta elite depended upon labor remaining in the Delta. Black residents increasingly had alternatives:

Memphis
↓
St. Louis
↓
Chicago

and other destinations connected by railroad networks and existing migrant communities. The flood destroyed houses, crops, and local economic relationships at exactly the moment when migration networks were becoming increasingly important.

That gives students the question: What happens to a labor system when the people it depends upon gain the ability to leave?

Connection to Barry

Barry's *Rising Tide* is particularly useful for examining the Percys and the political-economic structure of Greenville. Ask students while reading Barry: How does Barry describe the Percys' understanding of their responsibilities toward the Delta? Where do humanitarian concern and economic self-interest overlap? What does Barry mean by power in the Delta? Which people appear in elite decision-making—and which people primarily experience those decisions?

Connection to Mizelle

Mizelle provides the counternarrative needed to complicate elite-centered accounts. His focus on Black experience, labor, relief, migration, music, and cultural memory allows students to ask: What does the flood look like when we move the center of the story away from engineers, politicians, and planters? That creates a useful source comparison:

Barry → Who wielded institutional power?

Mizelle → How did people living within that power structure experience the disaster?

The distinction is not absolute, but it gives students a productive way to read the two books together.

Exit Ticket

1. Identify one form of power held by the Delta elite that was not simply wealth. Explain how it could matter during a flood.

2. How could a Black agricultural worker be economically essential to the Delta but politically powerless?

3. Explain one way that levees connected engineering to politics and economics.

4. Complete the sentence: The 1927 flood did not create racial and economic inequality in the Mississippi Delta; it _____.

Explain your answer.

5. Big Question: Did the flood disrupt the Delta power structure, reinforce it, or expose it? Use at least two pieces of evidence from today's activity or readings.

Transition to the Next Lesson

End with this: If the Delta economy depended on Black labor, what happens when a disaster gives workers both a reason and an opportunity to leave? That moves directly into forced labor → refugee camps → restricted mobility → Great Migration. And later, students can return to the same power map and ask: Did the Flood Control Act of 1928 redistribute political power from Delta elites to the federal government—or did it simply create a new partnership between local economic interests and federal engineering?

Bridge Exit Ticket

1. Identify one kind of power that the Delta elite possessed other than wealth. How could that power matter during a flood?

2. Complete this sentence: Black agricultural workers were essential to the Delta economy, but that did not necessarily give them power because _____.

3. Looking ahead: If the Delta economy depended heavily on Black labor, what do you predict might happen when a catastrophic flood gives workers both a reason and an opportunity to leave?

Then tell them: Keep your answer. We will return to it in the next lesson.