

King Cotton

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Artist’s Proof

**King Cotton**

Cotton is today the most widely used natural fiber in the manufacture of clothing. It has a number of qualities making it ideal for making textiles and clothing. It is a natural vegetable fiber--the most important textile raw material. This was not the case in the 18th century. The reason the shift to cotton occurred was technical advances in first manufactuing textiles and second in the production of raw cotton. Cotton played a major role in the Industrial Revolution that has so changed modern life. The first industrial machines designed for mass production were developed to manufacture cotton textiles. This created a demand for raw cotton. American slavery was declining in importance in the late 18th century. Many even in the South thought that it would eventually disappear as was happening in the North. The Industrial Revolution, however, led to Ely Whitney's cotton gin. Suddenly there was way of supplying the European demand for cotton. The resulting efficiencies changed the economies of cotton cultivation. New plantations were founded on King Cotton as Southern planters moved west into Alabama and Mississpi and eventually Texas. Huge profits could be made in cotton. But it was a labor intensive crop. This meant that large plantations and slave labor were the most efficient production system. A very substantial proportion of American slaves were employed in the production of this single crop. Cotton became the primary American export commodity, in effect financing America's early industrial development. The revitalization of the South's slave-based economy began a process that was to lead inexorably to Civil War. Cotton today continues to be the most important natural textile, still widely used in the production of clothing.

**Technical Developments (18th century)**

Cotton was not yet a key crop in the 18th century. This was not the case until early in the 19th century. The reason the shift to cotton occurred was technical advances in first manufacturing textiles and second in the production of raw cotton.

[**Industrial Revolution**](http://histclo.com/essay/war/war-ir.html)

Cotton played a major role in the Industrial Revolution that has so changed modern life. The first industrial machines designed for mass production were developed to manufacture cotton textiles. This substantially lowered the cost of producing textiles and thus increased the demand for them. There was no way sufficient wool or flax could be grown to fill the demand. This created a rapidly increasing demand for raw cotton.

**Cotton Gin**

American slavery was declining in importance in the late 18th century. Many even in the South thought that it would eventually disappear as was happening in the North. The Industrial Revolution, however, led to Ely Whitney's cotton gin. Whitney was from New England and had just graduated from Yale. He traveled south (1792). He wanted to be lawyer, but could not afford to continue his studies. He accepted a position as a tutor on a Georgia plantation. After he arrived in Georgia, he soon learned that Southern planters faced major problems. Their principal crop in the 18th century was tobacco. But prices were falling and yield declining because of soil exhaustion. There was a growing demand for cotton in Europe and high priced to be had. Separating cotton from the seeds in a ball required so much labor that it was not profitable. Long-staple variety of cotton was easy to separate from its seeds. But this could only be grown close to the coast. The short-staple variety of cotton that grew inland had sticky green seeds that could not be esily separated from the cotton fibers. Whitney began working on the problem. And his solution was the the cotton gin which revolutionized southern agriculture. Suddenly there was way of supplying the European demand for cotton. The resulting efficiencies changed the economies of cotton cultivation.

**Revival of Slavery**

New plantations were founded on King Cotton as Southern planters moved west into Alabama and Mississippi and eventually Texas. Huge profits could be made in cotton. But it was labor intensive crop. This meant that large plantations and slave labor were the most efficient production system. A very substantial proportion of American slaves were employed in the production of this single crop. Cotton became the primary American export commodity, in effect financing America's early industrial development. The revitalization of the South's slave-based economy began a process that was to lead inexorably to Civil War.

[**Cotton Plantations**](http://histclo.com/act/work/slave/us/plan/plan-cot.html)

A plantation is an agriculture institution focused on the large-scale cultivation of a specific crop using slave or wage workers. Usually it does not involve cereal production or pasture. Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton had sharply contrasting views of America's future. It is the Jeffersonian image that caught the American imagination--the idea of a republic of virtue based on the yeoman farmer. Ironically it was the Hamiltonian vision of a commercial future that proved the most accurate. And Jefferson's vision hardly described Monticello and the ruling class of Virginia and the other Southern states where plantations based on slave labor came to dominate society. Again ironically it was another Jeffersonian rival--John Adams--who was the archetypical yeoman farmer. The colonial plantations were often diverse operations growing a variety of crops. Tobacco was especially important, but the depletion of soils on many tobacco plantations led many to conclude that slavery was a dying institution. Tobacco was not the only crop Cotton was grown, but because of the labor intensive step of separating the seeds, not a particularly lucrative crop. This changed in the late 18th century. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, demand for cotton was growing. Many thought that plantations and slave labor was an outdated economic model. When Ely Whitney perfected the cotton gin (1793), the economics of cotton and plantation agriculture was transformed. Cotton plantations were opened in the new southern states beyond the Eastern seaboard. They fed the voracious demand for cotton from English and other European textile mills. Huge fortunes were made. Cotton was the major American export product and essentially financed the industrialization of the United States. Historians for years focused more on northern agriculture and industrial development. Scholars today are giving increasing attention to the ante-bellum plantation. There is some debate over the political dominance of the planter class. Interestingly there are many largely untapped resources about Southern cotton plantations. They were commercial enterprises and in many cases sizeable, sophisticated operations. These operations required detailed record keepings and the records of many plantations in addition to diaries and letters have survived for scholarly research.

[**Work Assignments**](http://histclo.com/act/work/slave/am/sa-work.html)

The vast majority of the slaves in the Deep South were involved in agricultural labor on large plantations. This is where the living and working conditions were often horrendous. The principal crop was cotton and slaves were used to plant, hoe, and then pick the cotton balls. Picking was called "choppin" cotton. This was back breaking manual labor. Few of the slaves on these plantations were taught or developed skills. Except for the household slaves, few plantation slaves had peroneal relations with their owners. Some plantation slaves did learn trades to facilitate the plantation's operations, but this was a small minority. The slave owners were primarily focused on maximizing cotton production. Slaves in the Border States were much more likely to be owned on small farms or small-scale property like black smiths or carpenters. They were thus more likely to have a closer working relationship with their owners. They were also more likely to have been taught trades and other skills. While slavery was an economic system primarily centered on agriculture, slaves were also used as servants to make live more pleasant. Another occupation for slaves, always slave women, is child care.

**Efficiency**

One not often addressed question is efficiency. Slavery at the time the Constitution was written was widely seen as inefficient and a dying institution (1789). Northern states had already begun ending slavery in various ways. This was not yet occurring in the South, but many believed that the South would follow. Only a few years after ratification, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin (1793). This revolutionized southern agriculture. Cotton rapidly became a far more valuable crop than tobacco which had been the most important southern crop. Cotton plantations run with slave labor became highly profitable. In fact, much of American exports earning were from cotton shipments during the first hlf of the 19th century. Essentially cotton produced with slave labor financed the firt stage of American industrialization. Now there is no doubt that slavery was both inhumane and brutal. It should be mentioned that American cotton plantation slavery was different than Caribbean sugar plantation slavery. Slavery in the Caribbean was unbelievably brutal, approaching genocide. American slavery however inhuman it was, was not genocidal. Unlike any other slave society we have studied, slaves in American had a high and sustained natural increase in the slave population for a more than a century and a half. And this continued even after the slave trade was abolished (1809). As the abolition movement developed, many Americans began to see it as immoral. But profitable is not the same as efficient, although the two are related. Profitability deals with individual returns on investment. Efficiency deals with the wider social impact. The profitability of slavery has long been established. The economic efficiency of slavery is just beginning to be addressed. Historians have generally assumed that forced labor is less efficient than free labor. Shoddy workmanship is often cited as more likely with forced labor. The issue has, however, not been well studied by economists. One of the most important assessments was made by a noted journalist just before the Civil War. [Olmsted] His assessment was that slavery was highly inefficient. Economists have begun to study the efficiency of slave labor in the antebellum South. Jeff Hummell at San Jose State University wrote about this issue. Liberal historians make statements like, "Obviously less efficient than regular capitalism."

**Restraints**

Plantations manned by slaves proved the most efficient method of growing cotton. It was also the cruelest agricultural system. A variety of control and discipline devices were used on slaves. Many such devices were also used on Russian serfs. Some of the best known devices were collars, shackles, and chains. There were also slave bridles. One report describes their use in Brazil during the 18th century. Similar bridles were sometimes applied in Russia to the serf boys and serf girls (shepherds) so that they could not drink milk from the animals that they were caring for.

**Sources**

Olmsted, Frederick Law. *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (1856).