

Cotton Gin

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INTRODUCTION:

The invention of the cotton gin, a tool that enabled efficient deseeding of short-staple cotton (the type of cotton that grew away from coastal areas), irrevocably changed slavery. As of 1790, planters in the tobacco-growing states of Virginia and Maryland owned 56% of all slaves in America. By 1860, however, after slave-based agriculture refocused its efforts on growing cotton in the Deep South, these same two states owned only 15% of U.S. slaves. Until Eli Whitney's cotton gin appeared, long-staple cotton was the only profitable plant that grew in the United States, but soon after the gin (shortened from "engine") was invented, short-staple cotton became a staple crop in the South, along with rice and indigo (blue dye). This required a massive recommitment of labor and, along with the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1808 (by Congress), planters began to trade and sell slaves from the Upper South, where tobacco was the staple crop, to the Deep South.

This gigantic internal migration occurred in stages, with 155,000 slaves shipped south in the 1820s; 288,000 in the 1830s; 189,000 in the 1840s; and 250,000 in the 1850s. The majority of these slaves were bought, sold, and traded to provide the labor necessary to fuel the expanding cotton trade between southern states -- Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, and Louisiana -- and northern states, as well as European countries such as Great Britain. Southern cotton provided the raw materials for the textile factories in the North that were at the center of the ongoing Industrial Revolution.

The cotton gin dramatically reshaped the lives of slaves. Formerly, slaves had worked for the most part on tobacco plantations in small workgroups where women and men could both be expected to work in the field. As planters refocused their efforts on cotton, more and more slaves were organized into larger workgroups (similar to ones used for rice cultivation) that demanded intensive labor known as the "task system" where individual slaves were assigned tasks for a day. When a task was done, slaves could have the rest of the day to themselves. However, when a task was completed early, a slave would often be assigned a heavier task the next day and, if the task was completed late, the slave was punished. Meanwhile, slaves were surrounded by intense heat and humidity, as well as disease. This also kept whites out of the fields for longer periods of time, enabling slaves on large plantations in the Deep South to develop unique cultural communities. Some slaves even won the right to cultivate their own property by performing well in the fields. For a relatively simple machine, the cotton gin produced remarkable changes in the institution of slavery.

CITATION:

Eli Whitney, "Eli Whitney's Cotton Gin Patent Drawing, 03/14/1794." Record Group 241: Records of the Patent and Trademark Office, National Archives and Records Administration. NAIL Control Number: NWDNC-241-PATENTRES-72X.

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QUESTIONS: Answer the following questions in complete sentences. SKIP ONE LINE between each answer.

1. How does the cotton gin work? Why do you think it was invented?
2. What other machines have produced dramatic changes in society?
3. How did the cotton gin change slaves' lives? Do you think these changes were positive or negative?
4. How do you think the cotton gin changed planters' lives?
5. What impact might such a large migration of people from one part of the country to another have on society?