

King Cotton: The Fiber of Slavery

By Jean M. West

"It was work hard, git beatins and half fed The times I hated most was pickin' cotton when the frost was on the bolls. My hands git sore and crack open and bleed."--Mary Reynolds, Slave Narrative from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938

One of the first images of slavery that leaps into everyone's mind is the scene of slaves stooped over, picking cotton, and hauling huge cotton-stuffed bags behind them. Unlike many first reactions, this one is correct. At the height of the plantation system in 1850, when cotton had become the dominant cash crop of the South, 1.8 million of the 2.5 million slaves in the United States (nearly 75 percent) were involved in the production of cotton. Yet, cotton was a relative latecomer in the story of slavery in America. Between the arrival of the first slaves in Jamestown in August 1619 and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment prohibiting slavery (December 6, 1865), cotton only becomes a significant factor after the invention of the cotton gin in 1793. Nonetheless, during that 72-year period, an estimated one million individuals were enslaved in the service of "King Cotton," either by transatlantic or by domestic slave traders. How did tiny little fibers ensnare Africans and their descendents and bind them to slavery? And, what part did that play in helping cotton to become, as the Cotton Incorporated slogan says, "the fabric of our lives," found in our blue-jeans and bandages, tee-shirts and bed-sheets?

Gossypium

Although botanists are still uncertain about the origins of cotton or when humans first domesticated it and began using it, species of wild cotton grow in tropical zones in Africa, the Americas, and Australia, wherever there are long, sunny days without frost for at least 160 days. Cotton, unlike most of the other crops associated with slavery, was used by civilizations around the world before the exchange of plants and animals, which followed in the wake of Columbus. Archaeological evidence shows that one variety of cotton was cultivated by people of the Upper Nile, in what is now Sudan, around 12,000 years ago; another variety was raised in Coastal Peru 10,000 years ago; while yet another was woven into textiles at Mohenjo-daro in the Indus River Valley of West Pakistan 5,000 years ago.

Cotton Comes to Europe

Cotton was not native to Europe; however, early Greeks, for instance the historian Herodotus, struggled to describe cotton, explaining that it was "wild plant that bears fleece exceeding in goodness and beauty that of sheep." Alexander the Great is credited with first bringing cotton from India to Europe around 300 B.C. In the 11th-13th centuries, Crusaders returning with cotton and silk fabrics stimulated the European appetite for luxury textiles that led, in part, to the age of exploration. Beginning in the 16th century, Europeans imported cotton fabric from India; yet cotton fabric remained rare and extremely expensive, within the reach of only the wealthy. Around the middle of the 18th century, society ladies seized on the fashion of wearing cotton dressing gowns, called *indiennes* after their Indian origin, in preference to satins and silks. Yet, until 1800, the vast majority of people wore either woolen goods or linen made from the flax plant.

The invention of the spinning jenny by James Hargreaves in 1764, the improved carding machine by Richard Arkwright in 1775, and Edmund Cartwright's power loom in 1785 transformed cotton production and, eventually, the textile habits of the world's people. British mills cut the manufacturing costs of cotton textiles drastically, stimulating consumers' demand for their product and bypassing the Indian cotton industry. British ships brought West Indian cotton to the Port of Liverpool for auction to

nearby Lancashire textile mills beginning in 1757. Liverpool handled half of Britain's cotton imports by 1800, and 90 percent by 1830. Yet, up to the late 1790s, demand for raw cotton by Britain's textile industry exceeded supply.

Cotton and the New World

When Columbus made landfall on October 12, 1492, he received gifts that included "balls of cotton thread" of the *G. barbadense* long-staple variety of cotton from the Arawaks of the island of San Salvador. The Virginia Company intended to send cotton plants to Jamestown in 1607, but the rapid emergence of tobacco as the colony's cash crop doomed early cotton cultivation despite efforts to encourage it by both Governors William Berkeley and Edmund Andros. Even the depression in the tobacco economy from 1702-1708 failed to convince planters to switch from tobacco since cotton depleted the soil and required so much hand labor that it was unprofitable. (Cotton cultivation was more successful on Barbados 1627-1644, but was doomed by a different cash crop, sugar cane, introduced in the middle of the 1630s.)

Limited quantities of *G. hirsutum* were raised from Georgia to New Jersey for consumption by small households. Consumers who required larger amounts (for example, George Washington at Mount Vernon in 1773) imported bales of cotton from Great Britain. Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, India and the Orient provided most of the world's cotton, supplemented slightly by *G. barbadense* long-staple cotton produced after the 1740s in the South American colonies of Surinam (French) and Guyana (British and Dutch).

When the Revolutionary War ended the cotton supply by the British, American rebels increased domestic cotton production. By the end of the War, U.S. production grew enough so that in 1784, British entrepreneur William Rathbone IV, who, ironically, was an abolitionist, started importing U.S. cotton into Liverpool. One other consequence of the Revolution was that many southern Tories fled the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida, and relocated in the Bahamas on the island of Exuma. Using slash-and-burn clearing techniques to clear the vegetation from their land grants, the Tory refugees planted long-staple *G. barbadense* cotton. The Bahamian cotton economy flourished, and planters imported West African slaves until 1802, when ruined soil and insect infestation forced the Tories to abandon their cotton fields. Some returned to the United State to grow cotton.

The Cotton Gin

The entanglement of cotton with slavery in the United States begins in the late 18th century but involves only two of cotton's 43 species: *Gossypium barbadense* (Sea Island cotton) and *Gossypium hirsutum* (Upland cotton). Sea Island cotton has black, fuzz-free seeds and superb long staple lint (fibers over two inches in length suitable for spinning) but requires more rainfall and warmer, more consistent temperatures to grow well. Upland cotton, which currently provides 90 percent of the world's cotton crop, has short-staple lint (fibers between 13/16 inches and 1¼ inches) and light, fuzzy green seeds to which the lint is firmly attached, but it may be cultivated in a greater variety of environments.

Planters eager to find something more profitable than tobacco, rice, and indigo began to experiment to fulfill British demand for more cotton. In 1786, Bahamian *G. barbadense* seed was introduced into the new United States. Experimental plantings produced a crop in 1787 coastal Georgia; in Hilton Head, South Carolina; William Elliott sold his 1790 crop for ten and a half pence per pound. Prices for this desirable long-fiber cotton rose to five shillings (60 pence) per pound at Liverpool auctions by 1800.

Since *G. barbadense* grew best on the islands off Georgia's Atlantic coast (Edisto, James, John, and Wadmalaw), it was nicknamed Sea Island cotton.

Before cotton can be spun into thread, its seeds must be removed. The people of ancient India developed a two-roller device through which they would pull raw cotton to separate the seeds from long-staple cotton fibers. In 1788, Joseph Eve patented a machine that used rollers to clean seeds from Sea Island cotton. One person could clean 24-30 pounds each day. Sea Island cotton is a finicky plant that thrives only in a small strip of land 30-40 miles in coastal South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida (which was Spanish until 1823). It was impossible to grow enough in this confined area to meet world demand.

Short-staple *G. hirsutum* cotton could be grown in non-coastal upland areas and was nicknamed Upland cotton. The sturdy plant was already growing over a wide geographical range, but it presented a different problem. Upland cotton was so difficult to clean that the roller gin (short for engine) could not be used to clean the cotton. Instead, it took one person an entire day to tear one-two pounds of cotton from the clinging seeds. African slaves developed a type of comb to speed the process, and South Carolina inventor Hodgen Holmes experimented with a sawtooth device to clean the cotton; but there was nothing widely available that eased the bottleneck between field and factory. Unless someone could invent a machine to clean Upland cotton, it would be impossible to clean all the cotton necessary to meet British mills' demands.

Eli Whitney is widely credited with the invention of the machine meeting that demand, the cotton gin. After graduating from Yale University in 1792, Whitney traveled south to accept a teaching job. While staying near Savannah, Georgia, at Mulberry Grove (the plantation of widow Catharine Greene), he heard Phineas Miller (the manager of the estate), Mrs. Greene, and other planters lamenting their inability to exploit Upland cotton. He applied his familiarity with New England textile machinery to the problem and, in roughly ten days during spring of 1793, developed a model. A wooden roller embedded with wire spikes or teeth was fitted into a box (perhaps inspired by a cat swiping at a chicken through slats and only coming up with feathers). A second cylinder fitted with brushes (inspired by Mrs. Greene's use of a small broom to clear the spikes) revolved in the opposite direction. When Whitney fed the Upland cotton into the machine, the wire teeth pulled the cotton fibers through small slats in a grate, separating the seeds from the fiber. The gin tended to damage the fibers by cutting some short, so the cotton was worth only half the price of undamaged Sea Island cotton. However, the cotton gin enabled a single worker to clean 50 pounds of Upland cotton a day.

Whitney left Georgia to patent his invention and build a cotton gin factory in Connecticut, but a group broke into the workshop of Mulberry Hall plantation and began copying the easily reproduced machine. As Phineas Miller wrote in 1794:

The people of the country are running mad for them, and much can be said to justify their importunity. When the present crop is harvested there will be a real property of at least 50 thousand dollars lying useless unless we can enable the holders to bring it to market.

Within four years, Whitney alone had 30 cotton gins operating in Georgia, his competitors had many more, and use of the cotton gin had spread westward to Tennessee. Hand-cranked gins eventually were replaced by gins operated by draught animals or water capable of cleaning 500 pounds of cotton per day.

King Cotton

No longer limited by the quantity that they could clean, planters began to plant vast amounts of Upland cotton. The yield per acre for Upland cotton in the South ranged from 100-1,500 pounds per acre, with a regional average of 530 pounds. While Sea Island cotton production remained constant at around 1.5 million pounds annually, Upland cotton production skyrocketed from around 150,000 pounds in 1793 to over 6.5 million pounds in 1795. Cotton profits also rose dramatically. By 1860, northern textile mills imported nearly 100 percent of their cotton from the South.

Senator James Henry Hammond of South Carolina declared in 1858: "What would happen if no cotton was furnished for three years? England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her. No, you dare not make war on cotton! No power on earth dares make war upon it. Cotton is King." Hammond's reasoning was hard to fault. Government statistics from 1860 confirmed that the 12 wealthiest counties in the United States were in the South. However, cotton powered the economy of the entire country; the South purchased \$30 million of mid-western food and \$150 million of northern manufactured goods. Northern shipping and banking were also tied to the cotton economy. The South's "white gold" was not marketed directly to Europe; rather it was sent to New York where factors (who loaned money to planters in advance of the crop), commodities futures traders, and merchants shipped it to northeastern textile mills (which produced \$100 million worth of cotton goods) or to Great Britain. Northern banks also provided loans to southern planters to purchase slaves and land. State and local governments also made money by taxing slavery through sales and inheritance taxes.

Furthermore, cotton had made the South a player in the world economy. While cotton exports totaled only \$5 million (seven percent of total U.S. exports) in 1800, they rose to \$30 million in 1830 (41 percent of U.S. exports) and reached \$191 million in 1860 (57 percent of total U.S. exports). By 1850, cotton consumption averaged five and a half pounds per person in Great Britain and the United States, in large part because the price of cotton textiles had fallen to roughly one percent of their cost in 1784. Worldwide, southern cotton dominated two-thirds of the market. Southern cotton accounted for 70 percent of the raw material fueling Britain's industrial revolution, and British experts believed that Indian cotton could not replace it in quantity or quality. At least 16 percent of all Britons' jobs depended on textile manufacturing, while cotton fabric made up half of Britain's exports, and an estimated ten percent of Britain's wealth was tied to cotton. The cotton economy had also contributed to the creation of scores of banks in Great Britain (including Barclays) and the formation of the Stock Exchange of London in 1773.

One consequence of cotton cultivation was the ruination of the land. By 1835, eastern Georgia topsoil was gone and the remaining clay severely eroded. Planters were forced to look westward. Coupled with the appetite of those who sought their fortune growing cotton, this created an enormous appetite for land and the impetus to move west. One immediate consequence was the removal of Native Americans to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River. As the Cherokee traveled the Trail of Tears (1838-1839) and the Seminole resisted in three bloody wars (1817-1858), settlers and cotton cultivation spread westward from South Carolina and Georgia to Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas, and northward up the Mississippi River Valley.

Table 1: U.S. Production of All Types of Raw Cotton, 1790-1860

Year	Pounds
1790	1,567,000
1795	8,359,500
1800	36,572,500
1805	73,145,000
1810	88,819,000
1815	104,493,000
1820	167,189,000
1825	266,457,500
1830	365,726,000
1835	530,355,500
1840	673,116,000
1845	902,111,500
1850	1,066,925,500
1855	1,608,708,500
1860	1,918,701,000

*Source: Adapted from Table 2 in William H. Phillips, Cotton Gin, EH.Net Encyclopedia

In the early days of cotton cultivation, small planters would develop fields, two-thirds of them without using slave labor. In the 1790 census, whites in South Carolina's upland districts averaged five slaves per holding. Over the years, cotton prices varied wildly, further encouraging planters to plant more acreage and purchase more slaves (who were considered a safe investment). During financial panics, such as those of 1819 and 1837 (caused by fluctuations in demand by British mills for cotton), small planters often went bankrupt, and the larger planters snapped up their land and slaves. As the typical acreage of cotton-holdings rose, so did the number of slaveholders and the average number of slaves held. For example, the average slaveholding in Monroe County, Georgia, rose from eight slaves in 1830 to 12 slaves by 1850. In Houston County, Georgia plantation owners (classified as owning 20 or more slaves) concentrated ownership of slaves from owning 30 percent of the slaves in the county in 1830 to owning 75 percent by 1860. Southerners, whether they owned slaves or not, equated wealth, economic security, and power with slaveholding.

Table 2: Price of Cotton Between 1800-1857

Year	Price Per Pound of Cotton
1800	37¢
1801	44¢
1802	19¢
1805	15¢
1818	32 ½ ¢
1819	14¢
1837-1848	Under 10¢
1857	15¢

Slavery and Cotton Cultivation

The only thing that could limit cotton production was the need for labor; consequently, the demand for labor also skyrocketed. As early as April 23, 1795, cotton gin operators placed help-wanted ads in Augusta Georgia's *Southern Sentinel & Universal Gazette* to hire "negro boys and girls ten or twelve years old" to work the machinery. According to the Federal census of 1790, there were approximately 650,000 slaves in the southern states, many working on rice, tobacco, and indigo plantations. By 1850, there were 3.2 million slaves of whom 1.8 million were used to cultivate cotton.

Following the Revolutionary War, prices for the historic cash crops of the South were depressed, in particular tobacco which sustained half of the southern planters. Slave prices, too, were declining as financially-strapped tobacco planters switched to grain production and sold off slaves. In his will of July 1799, George Washington directed that the 123 slaves he had brought into their marriage be freed upon Martha Washington's death. Washington drew up the will, in part, because he wanted to delay the break-up of slave families created when his slaves had intermarried with slaves that Martha Washington had inherited from her first husband, Daniel Parke Custis (and who, by law, would be divided among his Custis relatives). Washington also provided for the manumission of his slaves because he believed that slaves were unprofitable and, as early as 1794, had stated, "Were it not that I am principled against selling negroes, as you would cattle in a market, I would not in twelve months hence be possessed of a single one as slave." With the convergence of economic profitability and moral sentiment, abolitionist leaders succeeded in outlawing slavery entirely in eight northern states between 1777 and 1804 and easing manumission in the southern states.

Cotton changed the dynamics of the southern economy rapidly with dire consequences for people of African origin. Small-scale farmers did not need slaves to grow cotton, but large-scale operations (already accustomed to using slave labor on rice, tobacco, and indigo plantations) immediately resorted to slave labor. While some slave-owners switched the production of their land and labor of their slaves from other cash crops to cotton, many did not. The demand for additional slaves to put acreage into cotton production was met in part by the transatlantic slave trade and mostly by the interregional

domestic slave trade. The United States imported approximately 300,000 slaves between 1778 and the end of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808 (Article I, Section 9, Clause 1, U.S. Constitution), almost as many as had been brought to the British colonies of North America from 1619-1778. In the single year of 1791, British traders carried 38,000 Africans to the United States. Most slaves were brought into the ports of Charleston and Savannah and put to work on cotton plantations. In South Carolina, the average price of slaves rose by nearly 80 percent (from \$215 to \$381) between the 1790s and the decade of 1800-1809.

Nonetheless, the domestic slave trade supplied planters with most of the slaves who worked on cotton plantations. As early as the 1760s, northern states were exporting slaves to the South; by the 1790s, the Mid-Atlantic States also became suppliers of slaves domestically. George Washington was aware of the rising interstate slave trade (already 22,000 sold in the 1790s in Virginia) and, in his will, stated, "I do hereby expressly forbid the Sale, or transportation out of said Commonwealth, of any Slave I may die possessed of, under any pretence whatsoever." Between 1800 and 1860, Virginians sold over 480,000 slaves to other states, primarily to cotton and sugar growing regions to the West. At least ten slave states exported more slaves than they imported; by 1860, an estimated 1.2 million enslaved persons were sold within the United States. Most domestic slaves were sold by marching them overland from market to fair to courthouse as the trader attempted to sell them. Slaves were often chained in "coffles" of 50, although some traders forced "droves" of 300 slaves to trek up to 600 miles for up to two months. Some coffles traveled on riverboats and the railroads in segregated facilities. Ocean-going vessels would carry loads of up to 150 slaves out of the coastal Chesapeake region on voyages of up to a month in duration.

Table 3: Population of the South 1790-1860

Year	Free White Population	Slave Population
1790	1,240,454	654,121
1800	1,691,892	851,532
1810	2,118,144	1,103,700
1820	2,867,454	1,509,904
1830	3,614,600	1,983,860
1840	4,601,873	2,481,390
1850	6,184,477	3,200,364
1860	8,036,700	3,950,511

*Source: Historical Statistics of the United States (1970)

Cotton and the International Slave Trade

Because the full impact of the cotton industry's mechanization occurred at the same time that the United States and Great Britain were halting their participation in the transatlantic slave trade, U.S. cotton was not as significant an element in the transatlantic slave trade as Indian cotton was, and it was far less

important than sugar and tobacco. Still, raw cotton from the United States that arrived in Liverpool and was converted into textiles in British mills would be loaded onto Bristol slave ships. In Africa, captains and slave traders would negotiate which assortment of trade goods (including iron bars, glass beads, rum, tobacco, and cotton textiles) they would exchange for slaves. Then, the slave ships would bring enslaved Africans to the United States to work on tobacco, rice, and ultimately sugar and cotton plantations. As northern mills in the United States entered the cotton textile trade, cheap American cottons found their way to the east coast of Africa, to Zanzibar. Nicknamed *americani* by the Africans, the textile was used to acquire ivory (then legal) by captains, such as William "Zanzibar" Smith in the mid-1830s, or to acquire slaves.

Slave Labor in Cotton Country: "Incessant Throughout the Year"

Cotton, as cultivated in the 19th century, required a great deal of human labor. Slaves could not pick as much cotton as they could cultivate; therefore, slave owners typically grew corn as well as cotton. Corn and cotton have complimentary growth cycles, so slaves would plant and harvest corn around the slack seasons in the cotton cycle, midsummer when cotton required no more weeding, and winter prior to the start of plowing. In 1802, A. Michaux, a traveler visiting North Carolina described a plantation:

In eight hundred acres of which it is composed, a hundred and fifty are cultivated in cotton, Indian corn, wheat and oats ... Seven or eight negro slaves are employed in different departments, some of which are only occupied at certain periods of the year. Their wives are employed under the direction of the mistress in manufacturing cotton and linen of for the use of the family.

In 1820, the *American Farmer*, an agricultural magazine, estimated that a single slave could tend six acres of cotton and eight acres of corn; by the time of the Civil War, most slaves worked ten acres of cotton and ten acres of corn.

For field workers, this meant a life of endless toil. John Brown, a runaway slave from Georgia, recalled being roused by a bell in February at four a.m. to pick cotton, while Mary Reynolds remembered from Louisiana that the "conch shell blowed afore daylight and all hands better git out for roll call." Solomon Northrup declared, "An hour before day light the horn is blown. Then the slaves arouse, prepare their breakfast, fill a gourd with water, in another deposit their dinner of cold bacon and corn cake, and hurry to the field again." When the day's work in the field and weighing house was finished, there was still work to be done. Solomon Northrup, kidnapped and forced to work on a Louisiana cotton plantation, recalled in his narrative:

Each one must then attend to his respective chores. One feeds the mules, another the swine--another cuts the wood, and so forth; besides, the packing is all done by candlelight. Finally, at a late hour, they reach the quarters, sleepy and overcome with the long day's toil. Then a fire must be kindled in the cabin, the corn ground in the small hand-mill, and supper, and dinner for the next day in the field, prepared.

Overseer John Evan's entries for Chemonie plantation for 1851 illustrate the never-ending work cycle:

June 23 1851. Rain hard, win S. E. 2 confined, Martha and L. Mariah 1 spinning,

2 to mill for meal 14 ploughing cotton in gin house field 14 hoeing cotton

1 sick, Ben Mungin Give Jacob Flogging for telling lies

August 12, 1851. Fair and war, win north 2 Hawling leaves 2 sick, Fanny and Esau 6 working in gin house 24 picking cotton, commenced this day

1 runaway, England

As the 1800s advanced and planters attempted to apply "scientific management" to their crop, the "task system," where slaves were assigned daily tasks and could, upon completion, hunt, fish, garden, or work at some craft, was replaced by the "gang system." There were too many instances during cotton cultivation where all hands were needed to work as long as they could, for instance at harvest time when a cloudburst might knock cotton into the dirt, ruining it. Accordingly, slaves were divided into gangs by the type of work, such as "hoe-gangs" and "plow-gangs," under the direction of an overseer. Only "full hands," those who had the strength to produce all-out, worked the plow gangs. Weaker field hands, including most women, older men and children 6-12 years of age, worked the hoe-gang. Hoe-gang overseers, called "drivers," forced the gang to move as quickly as possible, while plow-gang foremen allowed their workers to move at the mule's pace, although they would make slaves move the mules through the row-end turns quickly. Some overseers allowed slaves to whistle or sing as they worked, but one Florida slave-owner insisted "no drawling tunes were allowed in the field, for the motions of the Negroes were almost certain to keep time with the music."

The use of force was more typical. Overseers whipped slaves to maintain control over a larger group and to punish those who worked too slowly, damaged the cotton or tools, or injured farm animals. Unlike rawhide whips, overseer's whips (advertised as "fancy whips to be used on black backs") were designed to discipline or "sting" the slave without injuring the slave's skin. Runaway slave John Brown described in his 1854 narrative:

For every pound that is found short of the task, the punishment is one stroke of the bull-whip ... the "licks" are always regulated to an extreme nicety, so as only to cut the flesh and draw blood. But this quite bad enough, and my readers will readily comprehend that with the fear of this punishment ever before us at Jepsy James', it was no wonder we did our utmost to make up our daily weight of cotton in the hamper.

Solomon Northrup recalled the precise punishment schedule of his plantation:

The number of lashes is graduated according to the nature of the case. Twenty-five are deemed a mere brush, inflicted, for instance, when a dry leaf or piece of boll is found in the cotton, or when a branch is broken in the field; fifty is the ordinary penalty following all delinquencies of the next high grade; one hundred is called severe: it is the punishment inflicted for the serious offence of standing idle in the field ... and five hundred, well laid on, besides the mangling of the dogs, perhaps, is certain to consign the poor, unpitied runaway to weeks of pain and agony.

However, the brutality of the system meant that many slaves were permanently scarred. In addition to whippings, some used the oak "cobbing board" with holes drilled into it to raise blisters during paddling. Slaves who ran away would be punished and then worked with the added burden of manacles, chains, iron collars, or apparatus around the head.

Most cotton was cultivated using plows, shovels, and hoes until the advent of mule-drawn implements (harrows, scrapers, skimmers, and swipes) in the 1830s. Recently-cleared land was planted in corn rather than cotton for a couple of seasons. Starting in February or March, existing cotton fields and cornfields that were to be converted to cotton were prepared by clearing out old stalks, beating stubble down with

clubs or pulling them by hand, and fertilizing the fields with manure. Planting usually took place in April after the last freeze but before the mid-spring drought. Light furrows were plowed three-six feet apart, the seeds "drilled" (planted) at the rate of 100 pounds of seed per acre and covered by hand or with a harrow. Solomon Northrup recalled in his narrative, "The women as frequently as the men perform this labor, feeding, currying, and taking care of their teams, and in all respects doing the field and stable work, precisely as do the ploughboys of the North."

In May, the slaves "barred" the cotton by running furrows along the rows of young plants, sending the soil to the "middles" to make the first "chopping" or "scraping" easier. Chopping involved splitting the "middles" by hoeing the earth back onto the ridges where the cotton plants grew. Seedlings were reduced to a "double stand" leaving paired plants 12"-18" apart; two weeks later, the weaker plant was chopped leaving a "single stand." Through May and August, as the plants grew, slaves would keep the fields clean of weeds and grass by using hoes or shallow plows called "sweeps," taking care not to damage the plant's roots. The last hoeing took place around the first of July, and a deep water furrow was plowed in the center between rows. Cotton bolls ripen from center outwards to the bottom and finally to the top, but usually enough was ready for picking at the rate of 50 pounds a day sometime in August.

All slaves, regardless of whether they were field slaves, house servants, or artisans would be pressed into picking the main crop. The cotton was contained in four-five compartments in the boll, and an experienced picker could empty a boll completely with one grab; some slaves could pick cotton with both hands simultaneously without including leaves or plant litter. Each slave would fasten around his or her neck a strap attached to a cloth bag that reached almost to the ground. When the bag filled, slaves would empty the contents into large split-oak baskets at the end of the rows; these baskets would be weighed at day's end. Although individuals might pick over 300 lbs. of cotton a day, the average for all workers seems to have been closer to 120 lbs.

John Brown recalled in his narrative, "I picked so well at first, more was exacted of me, and if I flagged a minute, the whip was liberally applied to keep me up to the mark. My being driven in this way, I at last got to pick a hundred and sixty pounds a day" South Carolina ex-slave John Andrew Jackson recalled, " ... each night there were two hours' whipping at the "ginning house," corroborated by Solomon Northrup, who remembered:

After weighing, follow the whippings; and then the baskets are carried to the cotton house, and their contents stored away like hay, all hands being sent in to tramp it down. If the cotton is not dry, instead of taking it to the gin-house at once, it is laid upon platforms, two feet high and some three times as wide, covered with boards or plank, with narrow walks running between them.

Late blooming remnants would be picked through the fall and early winter.

Picked cotton was stored tightly packed, allowing it to warm up, diffusing oil from the seeds into the fibers, thereby adding to its weight and making it more marketable. Next, the cotton was taken to the gin house and cleaned, preferably at a moderate speed. Former slave Louis Hughes recalled in his narrative:

The cotton was put into the loft ... dropped from the loft to the man who fed the machine. As it was ginned the lint would go into the lint room, and the seed would drop at the feeder's feet ... lint baskets were used in removing the lint from the lint room to the place where the cotton was baled. A bale contained 250 pounds, and the man who did the treading of the cotton into the bales would not vary ten pounds in the bale, so accustomed was he to the packing.

At some plantations, ginned cotton would be packed into a wooden box beneath a baling press; and draft animals would compact the contents with a giant screw. This work was done whenever possible during damp or rainy weather so the cotton would pack better and, again, weigh more. Although the cotton was bagged loosely, the bags were roped tightly to keep the bale from expanding too much. Improvements in the baling apparatus caused average bale weight to increase from 250 in the early 1800s to 400 pounds by 1860.

During the winter, slaves drove six-mule teams or yokes of oxen hauling wagons filled with baled cotton to the warehouses and to market. Wagons might travel in a group along with those from nearby plantations. Plantations closer to rivers might send the cotton to market stacked 12 bales high on keelboats. Although slave Wagoner's, carters, and teamsters had greater mobility, they were slaves nonetheless, required to carry passes and worried about leaving their vulnerable families unprotected. Few were able to convert their distance from the plantation into freedom.

Nearly 75 percent of enslaved persons worked as field hands. The remainder worked as house servants (butlers, maids, cooks, and launderers) or as skilled laborers, such as carpenters, blacksmiths, millers, masons, and coopers. Some slaves worked as overseers or bosses, such as Charles Thompson who recalled in his 1833 biography:

I had the cotton of each hand to weigh, three times each day, and had to keep the weights of each hand separate and correctly in my mind to report to Wilson every night. I dare not let Wilson or any of the slaves know that I knew anything about figures or could read or write, for a knowledge of those rudiments of education was considered criminal in a slave.

On cotton plantations, some slaves were directly involved in making the split oak baskets used by pickers, spinning cotton thread, weaving cotton fabrics, and sewing cotton garments. South Carolinian ex-slave George Fleming recalled to a WPA interviewer in 1937, "De looms – boom! boom! Sho could travel ... Dey peddled dem looms, zip! zap! Making de thread rise and drop while de shettle zoom twixt it. Hear dem looms booming all day long 'round de weaving shop." Elderly slaves tended stock and poultry, cooked for other slaves, watched very young children or nursed the sick, sewed and repaired clothing, and also might spin or weave. Children began work around the age of seven by carrying water to field hands and clearing stones out of the plow's path.

By 1820 and for the rest of the antebellum era, slave owners showed a preference for initial investment in female slaves. Solomon Northrup recalled that a woman who was a fellow slave of Louisiana, "Patsey, of whom I shall have more to say, was known as the most remarkable cotton picker on Bayou Boeuf. She picked with both hands and with such surprising rapidity, that five hundred pounds a day was not unusual for her." Women cost less, offset their lack of brawn with more dexterous picking as field hands, wove textiles, produced children, and were considered easier to control. Former slave Mary Reynolds recalled in her WPA narrative, "They was a cabin called the spinnin' house and two looms and two spinnin' wheels goin' all the time an' two ... women sewing all the time. It took plenty sewin' to make all the things for a place so big."

Slaves depended on their masters for shelter, clothing, and food; yet they provided the labor that created the shelter, clothing, and most food. Slave quarters typically were very basic structures built by the slaves themselves. Slave houses usually were occupied by family groups although some housed members who were not related, as well. On some plantations, slave quarters clustered near the planter's residence and work buildings, often in rows. Former slave George Fleming recalled:

All de things we had in de house was home-made, but we sho had good beds ... over dese we laid bags; den feather or straw ticks. We had plenty kivvers to keep us warm. We had shelves and hooks to put our clothes on. We had benches and tables made wid smooth boards.

When planters' properties sprawled, field hands might be housed closer to new fields adjacent to the overseer's dwelling for added control but far from the plantation's other slaves. Clothing was made from the cotton picked and cleaned by the slaves, spun into thread, woven into cloth, and sewn into clothes, again by slaves. One South Carolina plantation owner specified:

Each woman gets in the fall six yds. of woolen cloth, six yds. of cotton drilling and needle, skein of thread and one-half dozen buttons. In the spring six yds. of cotton shirting and six yds. of cotton cloth similar to that for men's plants, needle, thread, and buttons. Each worker gets a stout pr. of shoes in the fall, and a heavy blanket every third year.

One staple food of slaves' diet was corn, raised by slaves, and ground into cornmeal each night after their day's labors in the fields. The other staple food, salt pork (sometimes called fat back), came from pigs tended, slaughtered, and cured by the slaves. As former slave Austin Steward recalled:

The slaves on our plantation were provided with very little meat. In addition to the peck of corn or meal, they were allowed a little salt and a few herrings. If they wished for more, they were obliged to earn it by over-work. They were permitted to cultivate small gardens and were thereby enabled to provide themselves with trifling conveniences.

Solomon Northrup recalled getting his weekly allowance each Sunday morning at the smokehouse, three and a half pounds of bacon and enough corn that would make a peck of meal ground. Slave cooks would prepare meals such as "loblolly" (a soup of potatoes and corn meal) or bake cornbread for field hands and carry the food to the fields, so that the noon break wouldn't take too long.

Slave families struggled to stay together, powerless over the circumstances that might force them apart. The death of an owner or marriage of an owner's child often led to separation of husbands from wives and parents from children. A downturn in the owner's economic fortunes usually led to the selling of slaves. New Year's Day was traditionally a day when owners disposed of troublesome or nonproductive slaves. Slaves would work as hard as they could on New Year's morning until noon, when the owner announced which slaves would be kept and which would be sold.

Some plantations organized nighttime cornshuckings or cotton pickings, often bringing in slaves from neighboring plantations. Former Alabama slave Mingo White recalled in a WPA narrative, "All uv dis went on at nights. Dey had jack-lights in de cotton patch fer us to see by. De lights wuz made on er forked stick and moved from place to place as we picked cotton." The slaves were divided into two teams and competed for prizes, such as a ration of whiskey or cup of sugar. Teams listened to music, sang work songs, ridiculed each other and sometimes their owners, and socialized, even as they worked extended hours. Former slave Carrie Hudson remembered that afterwards they were allowed to dance and were provided with good food to eat.

Epistle of Condolence from a Slave-Lord to a Cotton-Lord

In 1833, poet Thomas Moore wrote a mocking poem that condemned both southern planters and British mill owners for the cruel use of slave labor to raise cotton and child labor to operate mill machinery:

Alas! My dear friend, what a state of affairs!
How unjustly we both are despoil'd of our rights!
Not a pound of black flesh shall I leave to my heirs,
Nor must *you* any more work to death little whites.
Both forced to submit to that general controller
Of Kings, Lords, and cotton-mills – Public Opinion;
Nor more shall *you* beat with a big billy-roller,
Nor *I* with the cart-whip assert my dominion.
Whereas, were we suffered to do as we please
With our Blacks and our Whites, as of yore we were let,
We might range them alternate, like harpsichord keys,
And between us thump out a good piebald duet.

Moore's observations raise questions about the responsibility of consumers and entrepreneurs in a global economy that remain as troubling today as these in questions were in 1833. It was difficult for consumers to get much information about the products they consumed in the 19th century, except in a general way. But today, there is so much available that the consumer may be overwhelmed by the prospect of having to research every product. Yet, with slavery and peonage a growing problem in today's world, all consumers--whether teen or adult--are finding themselves in the same position as their cotton-consuming ancestors. What have we learned from the past?

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