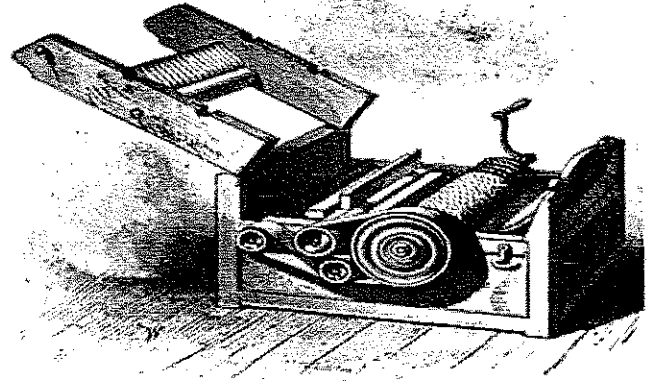


The Cotton Gin & the Southern Economy

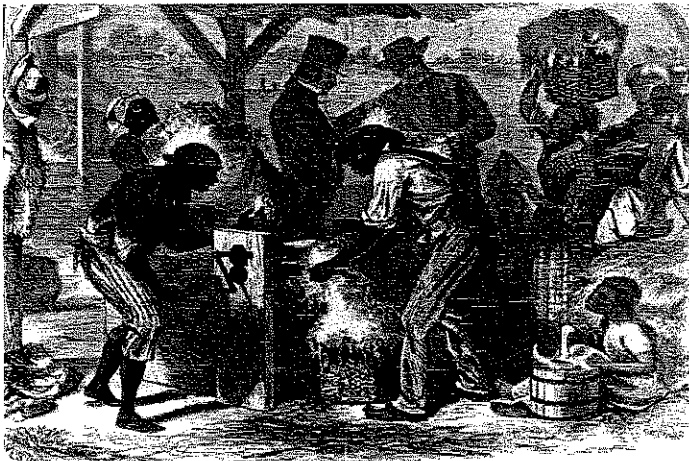
Sometimes the smallest invention can have an enormous impact far beyond anything ever imagine by its inventor. That was certainly the case when Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin. His invention made cotton a more economically viable cash crop and insured that the economy of the Southern states continued to rely on slavery. Thus, Eli Whitney probably was more responsible for setting up the circumstances for the Civil War than any other single individual.

As Eli Whitney left New England and headed South in 1792, he had no idea that he would invent a machine that would profoundly alter the course of American history. A recent graduate of Yale, Whitney had wanted to become a lawyer. But, like many college graduates of today, he had debts to repay first and needed a job. Reluctantly, he left his native Massachusetts to assume the position of private tutor on a plantation in Georgia.



There Whitney quickly learned that southern planters were in desperate need of a way to make the growing of cotton profitable. However type of cotton grown in the south had sticky green seeds that were time-consuming to pick out of the fluffy white cotton. Whitney was encouraged to find a solution to this problem. The story goes that Whitney got the idea for the design of his engine (gin) when he saw a cat trying to pull a chicken through a fence. The chicken would not fit, so the cat only got some feathers. Whitney realized that if could invent a device to do something similar for cotton, it would take much less time to de-seed. The device he invented was a wooden drum with hooks that pulled the cotton through a mesh. Since the seeds could not fit they became separated from the cotton fibers. Using his gin, Whitney could de-seed fifty-five pounds of cotton per day. This was over fifty times more cotton than a worker could de-seed by hand in the same amount of time.

The gin's effect on the economy and on the lives of southern slaves was profound. The cotton gin freed slaves from the time consuming labor of separating seeds from the fibers by hand. However, the lowered cost of *processing* cotton fiber resulted in a dramatic increase in the demand for more slaves to *pick* cotton, since Whitney succeeded in making the sale of cotton valuable. As a result, the slave population in the South grew from 700,000 before Whitney's innovation to more than three million in 1850—striking evidence of the changing Southern economy and its growing dependence slavery. Prior to this, most thoughtful Southerners, including Washington and Jefferson, had seen slavery as an evil that must eventually be swept away. But with the southern economy now reliant on cotton, these beliefs were seen as old-fashioned, and slavery now was seen as an institution to be protected.



After the invention of the cotton gin and subsequent growth of slavery, the yield of raw cotton doubled each decade after 1800. Demand was fueled by other inventions of the Industrial Revolution, such as the machines to spin and weave it and the steamboat to transport it. By midcentury America was growing three-quarters of the world's supply of cotton, most of it shipped to England or New England where it was

manufactured into cloth. At midcentury the South provided three-fifths of America's exports -- most of it in cotton. That COTTON WAS KING was now well understood in the south. It became the foundation of southern economy, southern culture, and southern pride.

Cotton and the Southern Economy

1. Why can historians make the argument that Eli Whitney helped create the Civil War?

2. Prior to Whitney, why was cotton NOT a viable cash crop?

3. Was the south the only region that benefited from the cotton gin? Explain your answer.

4. How did the invention of the cotton gin change attitudes regarding slavery?

5. Examine the maps below. Explain how they prove the cotton gin had a dramatic effect on the institution of slavery.

