

Cotton in America: The Role of Cotton in Early America, The Civil War and Beyond

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The role of cotton in America and the world was radically transformed by the invention of the cotton gin by the American Eli Whitney in 1793. Before the development of cotton gins, the cotton seeds had to be pulled from the fibers by hand. By the late 1700s a number of crude ginning machines had been developed. However, to produce a bale of cotton required over 600 hours of human labor, making large-scale production impractical in the United States, even with the use of humans as slave labor. The gin that Whitney invented reduced the time down to just ten hours per bale.

The invention of the cotton gin caused massive growth in the production of cotton in the United States, especially in the South. Cotton production exploded from 750,000 bales in 1830 to 2.85 million bales in 1850. As a result, the region became even more dependent on plantations and slavery, with plantation agriculture becoming the biggest sector of its economy. As the production of cotton increased so did the number of slaves. In 1790 there were around 700,000 slaves, this grew to around 3.2 million by 1850. The South would grow the cotton, and then send it to textile mills in New England, or across the Atlantic to Europe. By 1860, the Southern states were providing over 60% of the world's supply of cotton.

On the eve of the American Civil War, cotton was America's leading export, and raw cotton was essential for the economy of Europe. The cotton industry was one of the world's largest industries, and most of the world supply of cotton came from the American South. The cotton industry generated huge sums of money for the United States and influenced the nation's ability to borrow money in a global market.

When the southern states seceded from the United States to form the Confederate States of America in 1861, they relied cotton to provide revenue for its government, arms for its military, and the economic power for a diplomatic strategy, they called "King Cotton."

Cotton's Role in the Civil War

King Cotton was the name given to the diplomatic strategy used by the Confederacy to demonstrate the feasibility of secession and show that there was no need to fear a war by the United States. The idea was that with control over cotton exports, they would make an independent Confederacy economically prosperous, ruin the textile industry of New England, and force Great Britain to support the Confederacy militarily because their industrial economy depended on Southern cotton.

To demonstrate the power of King Cotton, Southern cotton merchants decided to refuse to ship out their cotton in early 1861. By refusing to ship out the cotton, they hoped that the British would be forced to intervene and help the Confederacy. By that summer, the Union Navy blockaded every major Confederate port and shut down almost all exports. British mills were not impacted by the boycott however, because they had large stockpiles of cotton. In fact, the value of their stockpiles actually soared.

Despite the blockade, the Confederacy was still able to use cotton as a bartering tool to fund the purchase of weapons, ammunition, and ships from British manufacturers. The transport of the armaments to the Confederacy was made possible by tempted blockade-runners, who if they were able to pierce the Union blockade, could earn potential profits of 300 percent to 500 percent

per voyage. The blockade-runners would offload cotton at the British islands of Nassau and Bermuda, off the Confederate coast, in exchange for weapons. Although the Union increased its number of blockaders, especially steam vessels, their effectiveness was hampered by the lack of coal and maintenance problems. It was the Union capture of southern ports, more than the blockade, that reduced the Confederate cotton-arms trade.

King Cotton did not have the intended effect for the Confederacy. Britain did not feel the pain of a cotton shortage due to their stockpiles, and the Confederate economy was severely crippled. Furthermore, if Britain were to intervene it would have meant war with the U.S. and a cutoff of food supplies. About one fourth of Britain's food supplies came from United States, and American warships could destroy much of British commerce, while the Royal Navy was convoying ships full of cotton. Consequently, the strategy proved a failure for the Confederacy. King Cotton did not help the new nation, but the spontaneous blockade caused the loss of desperately needed gold. Most important, the false belief led to unrealistic assumptions that the war would be won by European intervention if only the Confederacy held out long enough.

How The Civil War Impacted the Cotton Industry

After the war ended in 1865, the future of cotton land remained under white southern control. Northern Republican businessmen were firmly opposed to confiscation of lands from southern plantation owners, and actively supported the resumption of cotton production by means of large plantations under the management of landowners.

Former slaves continued to work in cotton production as sharecroppers, where they retained 30 to 50 percent of the crop for themselves, and delivered the rest to the owner of the land they rented. The system was only marginally fairer than the one it replaced, and most of the former slaves became trapped in poverty.

The economic importance of cotton had not diminished after the war. In fact, the federal government and northern capitalists were well aware that restoration of cotton production was critical to the financial recovery of the nation. Cotton exports were needed to help reduce the huge federal debt, and to stabilize monetary affairs in order to fund economic development, particularly railroads.

America regained its sought-after position as the world's leading producer of cotton. By 1870, sharecroppers, small farmers, and plantation owners in the American south had produced more cotton than they had in 1860, and by 1880, they exported more cotton than they had in 1860. For 134 years, from 1803 to 1937, America was the world's leading cotton exporter.

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