

How Did the Cotton Gin Shape Georgia's Economy?

Cotton has always played an important role in both the history and economy of Georgia. By 1820, Georgia was the world's leading producer of cotton. On the eve of the Civil War in 1861, cotton **exports** from the southern United States were twice that of the rest of the world. Cotton was indeed "king." But that had not always been the case.

In 1790, the only profitable cotton grown in the United States was the long-staple variety grown on the Sea Islands off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. Sea Island cotton produced a long, strong fiber that was easily separated from the seed. But Sea Island cotton could only be grown along the coast. **Short-staple cotton** grew inland, but its fibers covered the entire seed, making it difficult to separate. Short-staple cotton could only be separated by hand, which was slow and inefficient.

Most Georgians at the beginning of the nineteenth century lived in or near the cities of Savannah and Augusta, along the Savannah River. With populations growing, farmers began moving westward, drawn to the rich soil of interior Georgia. However, cotton was still too **labor-intensive** to be profitable. With Georgia's tobacco industry in decline, a new technology was desperately needed for short-staple cotton to flourish.

The new technology came from an unlikely source. Eli Whitney was born in Massachusetts in 1765. His father was a farmer with a small manufacturing business on the side. In this shop, Eli learned mechanics. By age 14, he ran a profitable nail-manufacturing business.

In 1793, ten years after the Revolutionary War, Whitney left the North and set sail to work as a tutor on a plantation in South Carolina. There, he saw cotton growing for the first time and devoted himself to finding a way to **gin** the fibers. In a letter to his father, he wrote that "if a machine could be invented which would clean the cotton with expedition, it would be a great thing both to the country and the inventor."

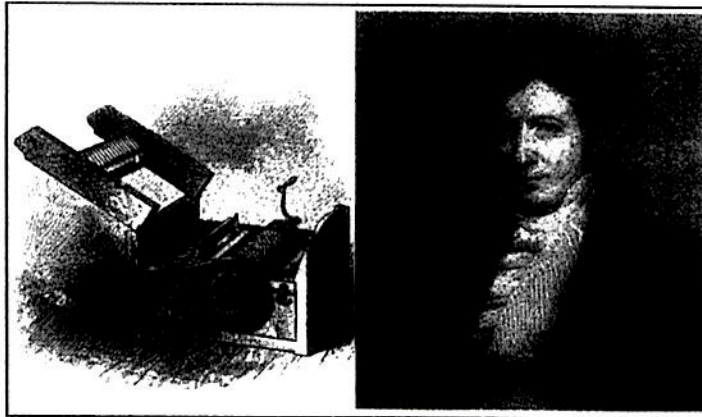
Whitney's cotton gin was simple. Wire hooks attached to a cylinder pulled cotton

through a mesh screen. Because the seeds could not pass through the filter, the fibers were easily separated. His device allowed a person to "clean" fifty pounds of cotton per day rather than just one pound. Growing

cotton was still labor-intensive, but the labor shifted from ginning to growing and picking cotton.

Eli Whitney never made much money from his cotton gin. Its simple design made it easy to copy. Between 1794 and 1803, nine **patents** for improvements to the gin were granted to people other than Whitney. In 1812, Whitney's own application for renewal of his cotton gin patent was denied by the US government.

Throughout history, inventions and new technologies have changed the way humans live. Perhaps no other development affected life in the South and in Georgia in the first half of the nineteenth century more than the cotton gin. Its impact was far-reaching. This Mini-Q asks you to examine the economic effects of the cotton gin and answer the question, *How did the cotton gin shape Georgia's economy?*



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Background Essay Questions

1. What state was the world's leading cotton producer in 1820?
2. Where did most Georgians live at the beginning of the 1800s?
3. Why was short-staple cotton so difficult to process?
4. How did Eli Whitney's childhood influence his development of the cotton gin?
5. Why did the cotton gin encourage people to grow cotton across the South?
6. Define these terms:

exports

short-staple cotton

labor-intensive

gin

patents

Timeline

1788 – Georgia becomes the fourth state to ratify the Constitution

1793 – Eli Whitney invents the cotton gin

1803 – The Louisiana Purchase doubles the size of the US

1808 – The US bans the importation of slaves

1820 – Georgia is world's largest cotton producer

1861 – Georgia secedes from the Union; the Civil War begins

Document A

Source: David Williams and Christopher C. Meyers, *Georgia: A Brief History*, 2012.

Cotton Is King

Whether it was trade, manufacturing, or transportation, much of Georgia's economic activity was directly or indirectly driven by cotton. Towns depended on the plantations and served the needs of planters. Local cotton fed the cotton mills that were beginning to spring up in the state. Workers at train depots and river docks loaded cotton. Carpenters and masons built cotton warehouses. Merchants and manufactures sold their goods to townspeople and to the plantations. Cotton brokers, for an average 2.5 percent commission, provided planters with access to the textile mills of the North and Europe.

With cotton leading the nation's exports, it is little wonder that so many planters thought of cotton as "king" and themselves as something of an aristocracy. One visitor to Georgia's cotton belt vividly described the planters' obsession with cotton: "People live in cotton houses and ride in cotton carriages. They buy cotton, sell cotton, think cotton, eat cotton, drink cotton, and dream cotton. They marry cotton wives, and unto them are born cotton children." Cotton was, as this writer put it, "the great staple, sum and substance" of life for Georgia planters.

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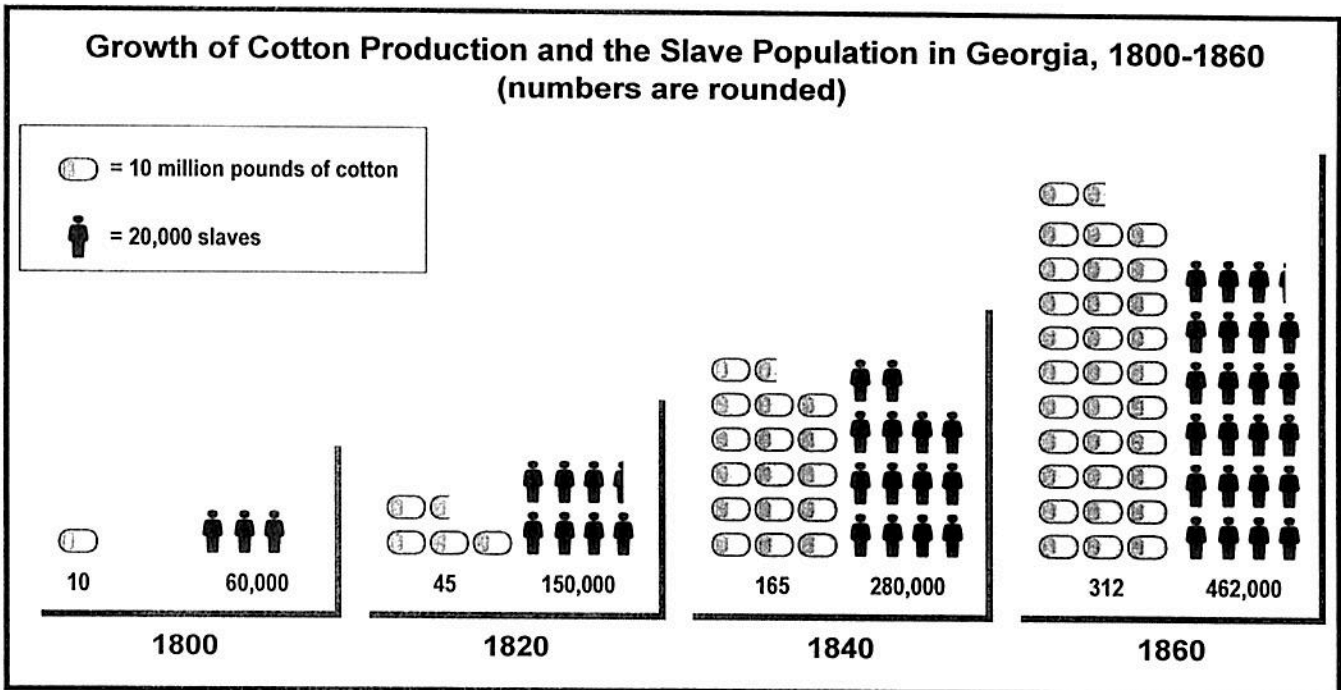
Document Analysis

1. What three parts of Georgia's economy were driven by cotton?
2. What types of jobs were created by cotton?
3. What is a cotton broker? How did he make money?
4. What does the writer mean when he says that cotton was "the great staple, sum and substance" of life for Georgia planters?
5. How does this document help answer the question, How did the cotton gin shape Georgia's economy?

Document B

Source: Compiled from various sources, including *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy: 1790-1860* by Stuart Bruchey, 1967.

Note: In 1790, before the cotton gin, Georgia produced only 500,000 pounds of cotton and had just under 30,000 slaves.



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Document Analysis

1. How much cotton was produced in Georgia in 1800? In 1860?
2. What was Georgia's slave population in 1800? In 1860?
3. What generalizations can be made regarding cotton production and the slave population in Georgia?
4. How does this document help explain how the cotton gin caused the expansion of slavery?

Document C

Source: Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains; or, The Life of an American Slave*, 1860.

Note: Charles Ball was born into slavery in Maryland sometime around 1780. In 1806, Ball was given as a wedding present to his owner's daughter and forced to relocate to a new plantation in Georgia. This passage from his autobiography describes his introduction to slavery in Georgia.

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The landlord assured my master that at this time slaves were much in demand, both in Columbia and Augusta; that purchasers were numerous and prices good; ... Cotton, he said, had not been higher for many years, and ... prime hands were in high demand, for the purpose of clearing the land in the new country - that the boys and girls, under twenty, would bring almost any price at present.... My master said he would ... sell a portion of us in Carolina, but seemed to be of opinion that his prime hands would bring him more money in Georgia, and named me, in particular, as one who would be worth, at least, a thousand dollars.... I therefore concluded, that ... I was likely to become the property of a Georgian, which turned out in the end to be the case.

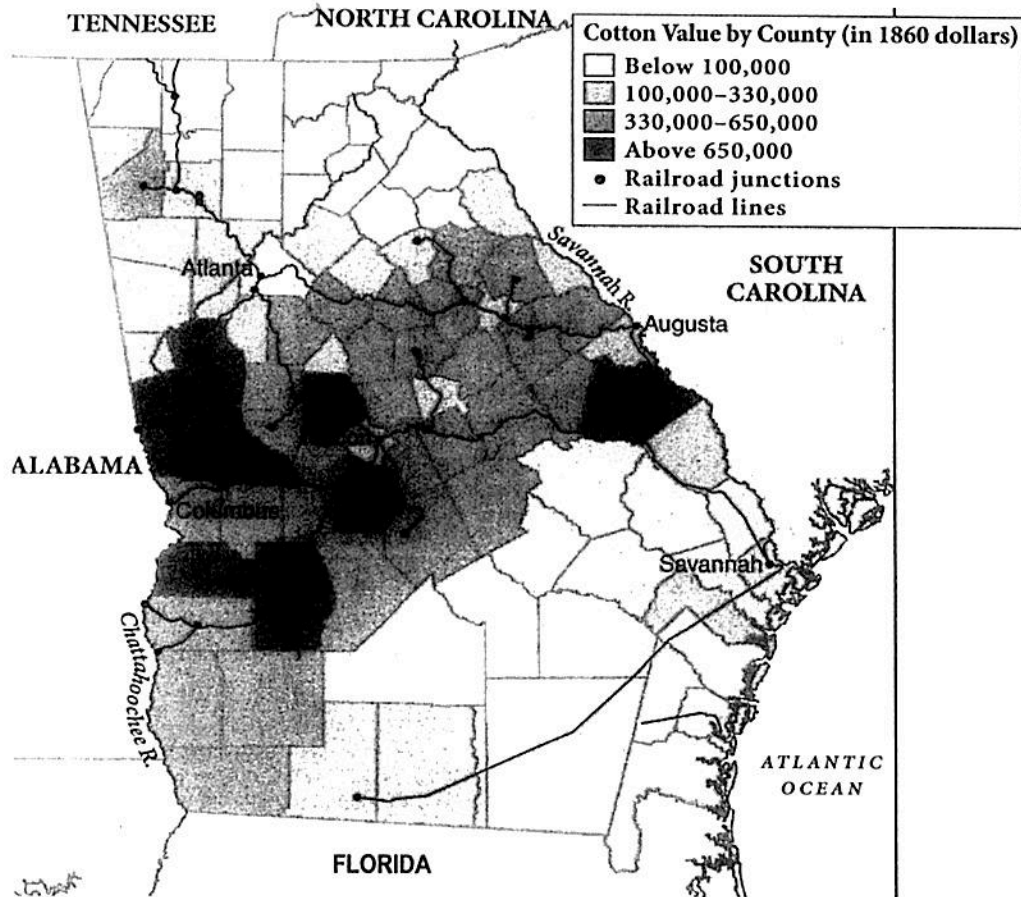
Document Analysis

1. Who was Charles Ball? What happened to him in 1806?
2. According to Ball, why were slaves in high demand in Georgia?
3. Which slaves brought the highest prices at market?
4. Why do you think younger slaves were more desirable?
5. Does this document support the argument that the cotton gin was responsible for increasing the number of slaves in Georgia? Explain.

Document D

Source: "The Growth of Slavery and Southern Railroad Development," University of Nebraska Digital History Project, 1999.

Note: Railroads came to Georgia in the 1830s. They were seen as cheaper and safer than mules and wagons. By 1860, Georgia had 1,200 miles of track, more than any other southern state.



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Document Analysis

1. North, central, or south: Which region of Georgia had the highest cotton production in 1860?
2. Which region of Georgia had the most railroad track?
3. What probably explains why central Georgia had the most railroad track?
4. How might Savannah have benefited from cotton production?
5. How can this document be used to answer the question, How did the cotton gin shape Georgia's economy?