

How slave-picked cotton overtook tobacco as main crop in the South

By American Yawp, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.31.19

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Image 1. This photo shows people putting bales of cotton onto hand truck and was taken in Houston, Texas in 1939. Cotton continued to be an important part of the South's economy into the early 20th century. Photo from: Library of Congress.

Tobacco was the first main crop of the South. Perfected in Virginia but grown and sold nearly everywhere, it was the region's top agricultural product for more than a century. But tobacco plants drained the soil of nutrients. Fields rarely survived more than four or five cycles of growth. The crop left the land dried and barren, unable to grow much more than patches of grass.

Because of tobacco's pattern of growth, farmers moved often. They purchased new lands and developed new methods of production. They cut down forests to create more fields. The constant movement, along with the costs of the land and the large numbers of slaves and laborers required to do the work, made tobacco very expensive to produce.

The Cotton Gin

Cotton was different, with the ability to grow quickly on cheap, widely available land. In 1794, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin. The simple hand-cranked device quickly and easily separated cotton fibers from sticky green seeds. The device allowed southern planters to greatly expand

cotton production. Planters were also aided by banks, which lent them money to buy more land. Thomas Jefferson's vision of a nation of hard-working, self-reliant farmers was coming true.

The South Relied On Slave Labor

But this all came at a violent cost. Slavery was everywhere by the time the American Revolution created the United States in 1776. Soon after, states in the North began to abolish the practice. In the rural South, however, slavery persisted. Southern farmers were expanding their lands, planting more crops, and entering the international trade market. They needed slave labor to increase production. In 1790, two years after the ratification of the Constitution, 654,121 enslaved people lived in the South, which at the time consisted of Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and the Southwest Territory (now Tennessee). Twenty years later, in 1810, the number of slaves had increased to more than 1.1 million.

The massive growth in the South's enslaved population between 1790 and 1810 makes historical sense. During that time, the South grew in size. The region went from five states and one small territory to seven states and three rather large territories. The free population of the South also nearly doubled, from 1.3 million in 1790 to more than 2.3 million in 1810. In 1808, the United States banned international slave trade. After that, the number of slaves in the South increased by *only* 750,000 from 1810 to 1830.

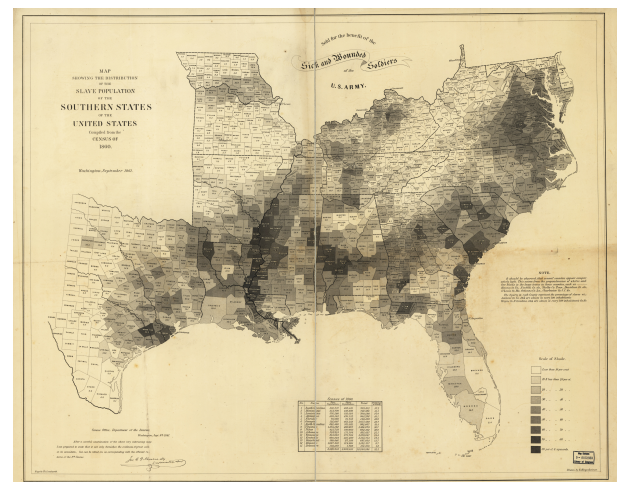
Cotton Belt Often Called The Black Belt

But then cotton came and changed everything. From 1830 into the 1850s, the South became known as the Cotton Belt because of the high production of the crop. Slavery was so common that travelers and writers began referring to the region by another nickname. They called it the Black Belt. They were describing not only the color of the rich land, but also the skin color of those forced to work its fields, line its docks, and move its products.

Slaves As Property, Collateral

Perhaps the most important aspect of slavery was the value placed on the body of the slaves themselves. In many cases, cotton growers put up slaves as collateral to borrow money from the bank to buy more land. They promised to give the slaves to the bank if they did not pay back the loan. As demand for cotton increased, land values started to rise. Property in Mississippi that cost \$600 in 1835 was worth more than \$3,000 in 1850. By 1860, that same land could cost as much as \$100,000.

By the 1850s, nearly all the money lent by banks was tied to the cotton market in some way. Millions of dollars changed hands. Slaves were the greatest expense for any successful cotton grower.



Prices varied drastically. Many factors were considered, such as the slave's skin color, sex, and age. In Virginia in the 1820s, for example, a single female slave sold for an average of \$300 while an unskilled man over 18 sold for about \$450. Children younger than 13 sold for between \$100 and \$150.

Demand For Cotton Grows

In the early 1800s, technology such as steam engines emerged. This increased both the supply of and demand for cotton. Steam-powered textile factories in England and the American Northeast rapidly turned cotton into cloth. Farmers responded by expanding cultivation farther west near the Mississippi River and beyond. Eager cotton planters invested their profits by purchasing more slaves.

Cotton helped make slavery an everyday part of life in the South, but over time, the practice created deep divisions between the South and North. States in the North no longer allowed slavery. By the 1860s, the issue would split the nation in two and cause the Civil War.