The Cotton Gin: The Invention that Changed America Forever

Alex Mascoli

“Cotton is king!” This was James H. Hammond’s argument in front of Congress in 1858, 65 years after the invention of the cotton gin (Hammond). Cotton was America’s greatest export, he said, and it was an integral part and the largest section of the United States’ economy (Hammond). But how did cotton become so important? In the late 18th century, cash crops and plantations were becoming less profitable. As a solution, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin and plantation owners looked to cotton farming as a quick way to get rich. The cotton gin did its job and led the way towards an economic boom in America, with the emergence of cotton farming and textile industries. Unfortunately, these enormous plantations required more slaves than ever, leading to conflict between the north and south. Ultimately, the cotton gin led to tension between the North and South and played a role in the Civil War.

Before the invention of the cotton gin, tobacco, rice, and sugar, three of the South’s most profitable crops, were in decline (Wyveen 1). Plantations in general were not as profitable as they had previously been. Because of this, there were also fewer slaves in America (Gray 352). In the North, there were many abolitionist citizens who had freed their slaves. With less farming success in the South, slaves were not needed as much there either. The abolitionists were in favor of freeing all of the slaves, and some Southern plantation owners were beginning to free their slaves as well (Gray 352). The total slave population in America was generally shrinking (Evans).

Unfortunately, many southern plantation owners were not as quick to abandon their plantations and continued to look for a new cash crop to keep agriculture in the South alive (Evans). Capitalist Eli Whitney saw cotton as the answer (Whitney). In the southern states, there were two types of cotton. One grew along the coastline. This long-seeded cotton was easy to farm and very profitable. Unfortunately, very few farms were able to farm this because it only grew along the coast (Lakwete 52). Inland farmers were forced to grow green, sticky-seeded cotton (Brodsky). This type of cotton required the separation of the fibers from the seed by hand, which took a very long time. This tedious work required the labor of slaves working for hours on end just to harvest a small amount of cotton. It could take one slave an entire day to collect just a single pound of cotton (Philips). Because this process was so slow, there was no way to make a profit from cotton farming. However, cotton was in high demand in England, and Eli Whitney believed that if cotton were easier to harvest it could become profitable. He thought his idea for a cotton gin could help America produce enough of this cash crop to be able to provide Great Britain with what it needed, and also to supply textile makers in the northern states (Cotton NY Times).

Eli Whitney saw an opportunity for a brilliant inventor like himself (Whitney). Even future president Thomas Jefferson was interested, writing to Whitney that he had “considerable interest in the success of [his] invention” (Jefferson). Whitney went on to design the first model of his cotton gin in 1793 and had it patented shortly afterward (Evans). His machine quickly separated the sticky cotton seeds from the rest of the plant in large quantities and only needed a couple of operators. His machine used spikes to separate the important cotton fibers from the sticky seeds, requiring fewer people to produce large amounts of cotton (Philips). His concept made cotton farming more efficient and extraordinarily profitable, and eventually led to dramatic changes in the United States.

The cotton gin fulfilled its goal and led to great economic success in America. Immediately after the invention, the southern states began producing more cotton than anywhere else in the world. With one person operating the gin, ten times more cotton could be produced than when the cotton was being picked and separated without a gin, and nearly 50 pounds could be harvested in a day by just a few slaves (Hamner). American cotton production increased by 800% in the next decade after the invention of the cotton gin (Aboukhadijeh). The United States could produce enormous amounts of cotton every day and sell it to England, and also maintain enough to manufacture their own textiles (Cotton NY Times). At this spectacular rate, America was producing three quarters of the world’s cotton. This meant that they nearly had a monopoly. No other country could rival this production, and this led to Americans manipulating their prices to make an even greater profit than they previously had. England and other countries were forced to buy this valuable crop from the United States because it was the only country producing enough cotton to meet their demand (Cotton NY Times). With such a steady stream of cotton from America, Great Britain became dependent upon this material, as America exported almost 80% of its cotton to England. Three quarters of Britain’s cotton came by way of America, so the United States made huge profits at the hands of England (Aboukhadijeh).

Much of rest of the South’s cotton was shipped to the northern states (Kelly). At around the same time as the cotton boom in the South, mills were being built in the North, especially in New England (Lowell). Previously, there was not enough cotton for northern textile mills to be useful. Therefore, when Americans wanted textiles, they would have to trade cotton to Britain where it would be processed into textiles. After this operation, it would be traded back to America (Cotton NY Times). This entire process made textiles very expensive for the US and they needed a solution. With the cotton explosion, the South was able to provide more than enough raw material to the North to support the growing textile industry there. This provided a reason for more and more textile mills to spring up (Lowell). There were so many of these mills that textiles became an important commercial product in America (Lowell). Both cotton and textiles were able to be exported, making America an international power in the trading market.

Although the invention of the cotton gin marked a great change in the economy of America, it also led to another huge change in the United States. The South’s economy became dependent on cotton (Wynveen 4). The cotton gin was invented because other crops were in decline. So when cotton became extremely profitable, many southern plantation owners stopped growing other crops altogether. These farmers made their plantations bigger and planted mostly cotton. As a result, cotton soon accounted for 60% of total United States exports (Brodsky). Because of this, the southern states needed to do everything they could to make sure cotton would not stop being produced. Without it, the American economy would not have another crop to fall back on. To help ensure cotton’s success, the southern states began to smuggle thousands of slaves to work on their plantations despite the government’s restrictions on slave importation. (Aboukhadijeh).

Extra slaves on every plantation started adding up very quickly and the southern states became dependent on slave labor. By 1859, America was home to almost two million more slaves than before the invention of the cotton gin, with hundreds per plantation (Philips). This was also around the time that the northern states were reducing their slave ownership, so the majority of these new slaves were brought in for extra help on the enormous cotton plantations in the South. By 1860, one out of every three southerners was a slave (Brodsky). With these huge plantations, plantation owners needed more people to work on their land, so they smuggled even more slaves than ever (Hamner). Seventy years after the invention of the cotton gin, there were fifteen slave states compared to a pre-cotton gin amount of six (Brodsky). This invention that had been made to reduce the amount of slaves needed to produce cotton had done the complete opposite. With so many states allowing slavery and dependent on its labor, it seemed it would be impossible to rid the South of slavery.

The fact that slavery became so widespread became a huge conflict between the northern and southern states. Many of the northern states were against slavery, and had outlawed it themselves. In a letter to his friend, President Abraham Lincoln, an abolitionist, wrote that he hated to see the slaves “hunted down, and caught, and carried back to their stripes, and unrewarded toils” (Lincoln). He recognized that the entire slavery business was terrible and was in favor of abolition. Lincoln and many leaders of the northern states believed that the South should also abolish slavery, but with slaves operating their cotton plantations, slavery was an invaluable part of the southern economy. Southern politician James H. Hammond hoped that “slave labor will go over every foot of this great valley” (Hammond). With the North hoping to abolish slavery and the South dependent and hoping to expand it, enormous conflict arose in the United States. Eventually, this conflict over slavery led to the Civil War, which still affects America today (Gray 353).

Even as the Civil War started, King Cotton was still affecting America. With cotton so profitable, the South was extremely rich and the Confederate Army was able to buy large amounts of weapons and other supplies for the war. Unlike the North, they did not have many factories and therefore could not produce things like guns themselves, so buying them was necessary (King Cotton). Because of the wealth brought by the cotton gin, the Southern states were able to finance the Civil War and prolong the conflict.

Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin to make plantations more profitable. It did its job, making cotton the world’s most profitable crop, enriching the South as well as stimulating the northern textile industry. Unfortunately, this invention also led to a huge increase in slavery and was a major driving force that led to the Civil War.