

“Choppin Cotton”

William Tolliver (1951-2000)

**Cotton Plantations**

Cotton Plantations were established using a system of agriculture in which large farms in the Southern colonies used the enforced labor of slaves to plant and harvest cotton for trade and export. Cotton Plantations crops were planted on a large scale and dependent on a large labor force. The system and economics of the Plantations were based on 'cash crops' in which cotton was sold for profits in distant markets.

The vast majority of the slaves in the Deep South were involved in agricultural labor on large plantations. This is where the living and working conditions were often horrendous. The principal crop was cotton and slaves were used to plant, hoe, and then pick the cotton balls. Picking was called "choppin cotton.” This was back breaking manual labor. Few of the slaves on these plantations were taught or developed skills. Except for the household slaves, few plantation slaves had peroneal relations with their owners. Some plantation slaves did learn trades to facilitate the plantation's operations, but this was a small minority. The slave owners were primarily focused on maximizing cotton production. Slaves in the Border States were much more likely to be owned on small farms or small-scale property like black smiths or carpenters. They were thus more likely to have a closer working relationship with their owners. They were also more likely to have been taught trades and other skills. While slavery was an economic system primarily centered on agriculture, slaves were also used as servants to make live more pleasant. Another occupation for slaves, always slave women, is child care.

These facts about cotton plantations in the Southern colonies provide a fast overview of this particular system of agriculture. The facts provide answers to many questions raised about the invention of the cotton gin, the introduction of the spinners, the climate required to successfully establish plantations, the necessity of a large, cheap labor force to maximize profits on plantations, the use of slaves on cotton plantations and the significance of foreign trade and exports on plantation economy.

**Facts about Cotton Plantations**

Fact 1

Cotton was planted on a large scale which was labor intensive - the cotton plantations were reliant on slave labor

Fact 2

The economy of Cotton Plantations was based on agricultural mass production requiring a large labor force and the ability to produce large quantities of cotton as a cash crop

Fact 3

The Southern colonies who established Cotton Plantations were the Maryland Colony, Virginia Colony, North Carolina Colony, South Carolina Colony and the Georgia Colony

Fact 4

The fertile soil of the Southern colonies was highly suited to the growth of the plants on the plantations.

Fact 5

One of the reasons that the system of Cotton Plantations sprang up in the South was due to the climate of the regions. The Plantations required a tropical or subtropical climate. Mild winters and hot, humid summers made it possible to grow cotton plants throughout the year which was ideally suited for these Plantations

Fact 6

Typical Plantations ranged from 500 to 1,000 acres. Each acre produced about 5,000 plants

Fact 7

Cheap labor was essential for the plantations to become profitable. The use of slaves in the plantations in the Southern colonies was extensive. After the initial cost of purchasing a slave little expenditure was required to support the slaves. The successive generations of slaves born on the slave plantations ensured that their masters gained new workers at no cost

Fact 8

The use of slaves kept the costs down on the Cotton Plantations - slaves were not well fed, well housed or well treated. Slaves were sometimes expected to work 18 hours a day. Paid workers would have significantly reduced the profits made from the Plantations

Fact 9

Cotton plantation homes: Most slaves lived in basic, crude wooden cabins consisting of one or two rooms, often with a dirt floor, in the slave quarters. The owners lived in the “The Big House” which in many cases were Georgian style mansions often featuring frontages with Grecian style columns and large verandas.

Fact 10

Agriculture and the plantation system: Cotton is a shrub plant with cream-colored fluffy fibers surrounding small cottonseeds called a boll. The bolls contain seeds with many long hairy fibers. The cotton fibers need to be separated from the seeds - a slow, time consuming process if done by hand.

Fact 11

Vast areas of land had to be cleared for planting and crops had to be sewn and harvested by hand - this was only made possible with a large labor force.

Fact 12

Two developments spurred the cultivation of cotton via the plantation system: the cotton spinners and the cotton gin

Fact 13

The invention of the cotton gin: Cotton was not grown on the Southern plantations until 1793 when Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin - refer to the Eli Whitney Cotton Gin

Fact 14

Cotton plantations were not established until the 1800's. The growing number of slaves over time allowed plantation farming to expand to farm different plantation crops.

Fact 15

The invention of the cotton gin: The cotton gin was a machine that separated the cotton fibers from the seed ten times faster than the slaves could do by hand

Fact 16

The invention of the cotton gin had a huge impact on slavery in the Southern colonies. It meant that another highly profitable cash crop could be introduced, using the slave plantation system of farming

Fact 17

The cotton was put through the cotton gins, then pressed and finally baled before being shipped for market and export.

Fact 18

The cotton spinners: In the late 1700s water-powered spinning machinery was introduced which was a massive improvement over hand-spinning

Fact 19

Samuel Slater set up Slater Mill, the first American textile mill, to utilize machine spinners which maximized the profitability of the cotton industry

Fact 20

De-seeded cotton is cleaned, carded (fibers aligned), spun, and woven into a fabric that is also referred to as cotton

Fact 21

Cotton was shipped from the Southern Colonies to New England mills in huge quantities. As a result of machine spinning, weaving, and printing, colonists could cheaply purchase calico which became universally worn

Fact 22

The mass production of cotton required a suitable transport system to transport the cotton to market. The waterways of the South provided an efficient, natural transport system

Fact 23

The sheer size of the land covered made the cotton plantations to large degree, self-sufficient and similar to a small village with the main house, slave quarters, a dairy, blacksmith's shop, laundry, smokehouse and barns

Fact 24

Plantations required minimum input from the owners - overseers were hired to manage the slaves and cotton production. The overseers were under considerable pressure from the plantation owners to maximize profits.

Fact 25

Environment: Cotton Plantations involved the deliberate introduction and cultivation of this economically desirable specie of tropical plant and resulted in the widespread replacement of the original native and natural flora.

Fact 26

The labor-intensive system of the Southern Cotton Plantations declined abruptly in the United States with the abolition of slavery

http://www.landofthebrave.info/cotton-plantations.htm