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Tom Murphy VII took this picture of a cotton gin on display at the Eli Whitney Museum (in Hamden, Connecticut). Tom has released his photo into the public domain but would appreciate attribution for its use. Online via Wikimedia Commons.

Agriculture was the basis of society in antebellum South Carolina. The headright method, along with the easy availability of buying slaves from the slave market, allowed the plantation systems to thrive in South Carolina.

In 1860, right before the Civil War started, South Carolina had the highest percentage of slaveholders in the nation. This led to many large plantations in South Carolina. Most farmers in South Carolina, however, lived on family or subsistence farms and many did not own slaves at all.

The majority of slave owners owned one or two slaves and worked side-by-side with their slaves. The large plantations were few in number, when compared to the rest of the state. It was slavery, however, that was the

basis for the economic, social and political systems that existed at this time.

In 1793, the cotton gin was invented by a man named Eli Whitney and, because of that invention, cotton became the new "King" cash crop. The cotton gin was a machine that easily removed the seeds from the lint of the cotton plant. No longer would a person have to do that job by hand. The cotton gin made cotton a profitable crop and transformed Southern agriculture.

This invention also revolutionized the growing of cotton and caused the need for more slaves. The Upcountry land was very favorable to growing cotton and this increased the need for slaves in the Upcountry. The more cotton a farmer could grow, the more profit the farmer could achieve.

The end result was that the elites, in the Lowcountry, now had many individuals in the Upcountry who agreed with them about slavery. With agreement on slavery, the elites in the Lowcountry no-longer had to fear how the Upcountry citizens would vote.

Since cotton could be mainly planted in the Upcountry, this change-of-events forced the Lowcountry planters to shift political and social power to the Upcountry planters.

In 1810, an amendment to the South Carolina Constitution gave one vote to "every free white man of 21," but this was limited to the man's place of residency. No longer would a man be able to vote in every district where he owned land—and—no longer did a white male have to own property in order to vote.

This change in the voting law made South Carolina the first state to give the right to vote to all white males over the age of twenty-one. This was another way that the cotton gin had a major impact on the lives of slaves and the political rights of the white males in South Carolina.

Although the International Slave trade—and slave importation—had been outlawed in 1808, slavery continued to grow as a direct result of the cotton gin. There were textile mills in the north, and in England, demanding more and more cotton. Planters were able to sell the cotton at good prices, and this led to many southern planters and northern mill owners becoming wealthy as a direct result of the slavery system.

When farmers overused the land, causing cotton crops to become less prolific, planters acquired (or moved) to new lands where they could cultivate their crops. This need for more lands—instead of planting different crops—became a main argument for southern planters who wanted to expand slavery into America's western territories.

South Carolina's plantation system required self-sustaining communities and depended on the institution of slavery for the production of goods and services needed to support plantation life. Slaves worked in the fields and in the plantation houses.

The plantation house, or the Big House, was where the (owners)—the master and mistress—lived:

- The Plantation Master was the male owner of the plantation; he made all business decisions and managed the slave population.
- His wife was the Plantation Mistress, but she could also be the closest female relative of the owner if the owner was not married. She was in charge of running of the house and taking care of sick slaves.
- The overseer was the person in charge of the work slaves did on a daily basis. This meant the overseer was responsible for "seeing" that slaves performed their tasks.
- The driver was usually a slave who forced slaves to work.

The slaves were owned by their master and could be sold.

It was the duty of many slaves to clear the land, plant, cultivate, harvest and process the crops:

- Slaves worked six days a week, from sunrise (dawn) to sunset (dusk).
- Women and children of the slaves would also work in the fields.
- If a slave had a valuable skill, that slave could be hired-out to work for others, but the owner of the slave usually collected the wages and kept the money.

House slaves worked inside the house and did the cleaning, cooking, laundry, child-care and other household chores.

Since the slaves were a financial investment for the slave owners, most treated their slaves comparatively well. Others, however, could be brutal to their slaves.

Slaves, who were constantly denied their freedom:

- Could not leave the land;

- Worked long hours, six days a week;
- Had little time for being with, and raising, their own families;
- Had little time to grow their own food if an owner gave them a small plot of land.

The marriage of slaves was not recognized by the law, so:

- A slave could be sold;
- Families could be (and were) separated if an owner's finances changed; and
- Slaves could not learn to read and write (because that, too, was forbidden by law).

Slaves lived in small cabins with dirt floors. Usually the slave quarters were located near the big house so that the owners could keep a watchful eye on the slaves. Slaves were watched so that they would not run away.

A slave could only leave a plantation if he/she carried a pass. There were patrollers, whose job it was to make sure that slaves carried a pass. If a slave was caught trying to escape, he or she would be punished severely.

There were a few slave revolts, but most slaves protested their condition by means of working slower, being sick or carefully damaging the owner's property.

Slaves had a vast network of family ties, since a loved one could be sold, and they also found great comfort in their religion. Many African Americans converted to Christianity and attended the white-controlled churches. It was there that they would hear the preacher tell them what the Bible said about slavery and how to be content with their place in the world.

It was in their secret prayer meetings, however—and in their spiritual songs—where the slaves placed a strong emphasis on freedom.

The Plantation system dominated every aspect of life in the South—in politics and in society. The social structure was based on slavery. The planter-elites enjoyed great wealth, social status and power as a result of slavery.

The plantation owners did have to work hard to oversee all the goods that were produced on their plantations. Business decisions, including how to market the crops and how to manage the slaves, were the responsibility of the master. The mistress of the house oversaw the work in the house and the slaves when they became ill. This caused many plantation owners to justify slavery as a positive good and to assert that their slaves were better cared-for than the free factory workers in the North.

This view led to Sectionalism in the 1800s, consisting of:

- Different economies
- Different social structures
- Different customs
- Different political values of the North, South and West.

This sectionalism is what led to the divisions which resulted in America's Civil War.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Events-Leading-to-the-U.S.-Civil-War-South-Carolina-History)

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Media Stream



### Washington City as the Slave Market of America

Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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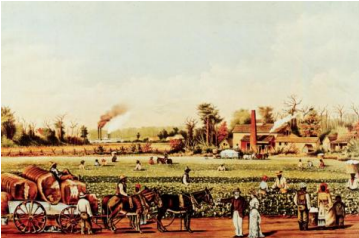


### Invention - Plantation Cotton Gin

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### Cotton Fields in the Antebellum South

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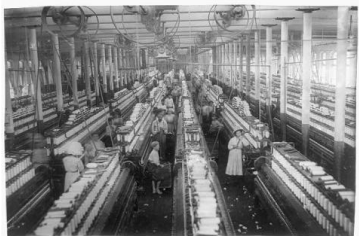
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### Slaves - Preparing Cotton

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### Textile Mills

Photograph as described from the Library of Congress.

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### An Antebellum Plantation Home is Abandoned

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### Plantation Slave Quarters - South Carolina

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