

Cotton Gin and Slavery

Although there was some hope immediately after the Revolution that the ideals of independence and equality would extend to the black American population, this hope died with the invention of the cotton gin in 1793. With the gin (short for engine), raw cotton could be quickly cleaned; Suddenly cotton became a profitable crop, transforming the southern economy and changing the dynamics of slavery. The first federal census of 1790 counted 697,897 slaves; by 1810, there were 1.2 million slaves, a 70 percent increase.

Slavery spread from the seaboard to some of the new western territories and states as new cotton fields were planted, and by 1830 it thrived in more than half the continent. Within 10 years after the cotton gin was put into use, the value of the total United States crop leaped from \$150,000 to more than \$8 million. This success of this plantation crop made it much more difficult for slaves to purchase their freedom or obtain it through the good will of their masters. Cotton became the foundation for the developing textile industry in New England, spurring the industrial revolution which transformed America in the 19th century.

From 1790 to 1810, close to 100,000 slaves moved to the new cotton lands to the south and west. From 1810 until the Civil War, 100,000 slaves were forced westward each decade -- a half million in total. As cotton cultivation spread, slaveholders in the tobacco belt, whose crop was no longer profitable, made huge profits by selling their slaves. This domestic slave trade devastated black families. American-born slaves were torn from the plantations they had known all their lives, placed in shackles and force-marched hundreds of miles away from their loved ones.

The spread of slavery westward led to bitter debate in Congress, as new states entering the Union could tip the balance between pro-slavery and free voting blocs. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 resolved a crisis over the admission of Missouri as a slave state, and for a while, established a boundary for slave lands westward across the Louisiana purchase territories. But as the century progressed, the spirit of compromise would prove increasingly fragile.