

**Name:**

## **Cotton: “America’s Fabric”**

**Connect:** Think of all the ways you use cotton. How many examples can you list below?

**Reading and Questions:** Excerpted from [The 1619 Project](#) Pgs 30-38 by Matthew Desmond

Consider the questions below and as you read, annotate the text looking for relevant details and evidence to answer the questions. If you have questions, please note them in the margin. When you finish, create an [infographic](#) (5 pts) that includes answers to the questions below.

1. Why was cotton an important commodity (good)?
2. How did the US increase the amount of cotton it grew? (name three ways)
3. What evidence shows the increase in cotton production in the US over time?
4. What was life like for enslaved people who grew cotton?
5. How did cotton connect different parts of the US and the world?
6. How did enslaved people contribute to American wealth and power?

**Cotton was to the 19th century what oil was to the 20th: among the world’s most widely traded commodities. Cotton is everywhere, in our clothes, hospitals, soap.** Before the industrialization of cotton, people wore expensive clothes made of wool or linen and dressed their beds in furs or straw. Whoever mastered cotton could make a killing.

But cotton needed land. A field could only tolerate a few straight years of the crop before its soil became depleted. Planters watched as acres that had initially produced 1,000 pounds of cotton yielded only 400 a few seasons later. The thirst for new farmland grew even more intense after the invention of the cotton gin in the early 1790s. Before the gin, enslaved workers grew more cotton than they could clean. The gin broke the bottleneck, making it possible to clean as much cotton as you could grow.

The United States solved its land shortage by expropriating (taking) millions of acres from Native Americans, often with military force, acquiring Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee and Florida. It then sold that land on the cheap — just \$1.25 an acre in the early 1830s (\$38 in today's dollars) — to white settlers. Naturally, the first to cash in were the land speculators (investors). Companies operating in Mississippi flipped land, selling it soon after purchase, commonly for double the price.

Enslaved workers felled trees by ax, burned the underbrush and leveled the earth for planting. “Whole forests were literally dragged out by the roots,” John Parker, an enslaved worker, remembered. A lush, twisted mass of vegetation was replaced by a single crop. An origin of American money exerting its will on the earth, spoiling the environment for profit, is found in the cotton plantation. Floods became bigger and more common. The lack of biodiversity exhausted the soil and, to quote the historian Walter Johnson, “rendered one of the richest agricultural regions of the earth dependent on upriver trade for food.” As slave labor camps spread throughout the South, production surged. **By 1831, the country was delivering nearly half the world's raw cotton crop, with 350 million pounds picked that year. Just four years later, it harvested 500 million pounds.**

Southern white elites grew rich, as did their counterparts in the North, who erected textile mills to form, in the words of the Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner, an “**unhallowed alliance between the lords of the lash and the lords of the loom.**” The large-scale cultivation of cotton hastened the invention of the factory, an institution that propelled the Industrial Revolution and changed the course of history. **In 1810, there were 87,000 cotton spindles in America. Fifty years later, there were five million.** Slavery, wrote one of its defenders in De Bow's Review, a widely read agricultural magazine, was the, “nursing mother of the prosperity of the North.” *{because slaves are picking the cotton which is earning all the money, slaves are contributing to the wealth earned from the cotton}* Cotton planters, millers and consumers were fashioning a new economy, one that was global in scope and required the movement of capital, labor and products across long distances. In other words, they were fashioning a capitalist economy. “The beating heart of this new system,” Beckert writes, “was slavery.”

As the large slave-labor camps grew increasingly efficient, enslaved black people became America's first modern workers, their productivity increasing at an astonishing pace. **During the 60 years leading up to the Civil War, the daily amount of cotton picked per enslaved worker increased 2.3 percent a year. That means that in 1862, the average enslaved fieldworker picked not 25**

**percent or 50 percent as much but 400 percent as much cotton than his or her counterpart did in 1801.**

They picked in long rows, bent bodies shuffling through cotton fields white in bloom. Men, women and children picked, using both hands to hurry the work. Some picked in Negro cloth, their raw product returning to them by way of New England mills. Some picked completely naked. Young children ran water across the humped rows, while overseers peered down from horses. Enslaved workers placed each cotton boll into a sack slung around their necks. Their haul would be weighed after the sunlight stalked away from the fields and, as the freedman Charles Ball recalled, you couldn't "distinguish the weeds from the cotton plants." If the haul came up light, enslaved workers were often whipped. "A short day's work was always punished," Ball wrote.

The violence was neither arbitrary nor gratuitous. It was rational, capitalistic, all part of the plantation's design. "Each individual having a stated number of pounds of cotton to pick," a formerly enslaved worker, Henry Watson, wrote in 1848, "the deficit of which was made up by as many lashes being applied to the poor slave's back." Because overseers closely monitored enslaved workers' picking abilities, they assigned each worker a unique quota. Falling short of that quota could get you beaten, but overshooting your target could bring misery the next day, because the master might respond by raising your picking rate. *{have to be careful to pick just the right amount, because going under or over isn't good}*

Cotton produced under slavery created a worldwide market that brought together the Old World and the New: the industrial textile mills of the Northern states and England, on the one hand, and the cotton plantations of the American South on the other. Textile mills in industrial centers like Lancashire, England, purchased a majority of cotton exports, which created worldwide trade hubs in London and New York where merchants could trade in, invest in, insure and speculate on the cotton-commodity market. Though trade in other commodities existed, it was cotton (and the earlier trade in slave-produced sugar from the Caribbean) that accelerated worldwide commercial markets in the 19th century, creating demand for innovative contracts, novel financial products and modern forms of insurance and credit.