

# Chapter 17: The South

## 1. Agriculture

### Cash Crops

The Virginia Company founded Jamestown in 1607 hoping to find gold and make the colony profitable. Instead, the colony became wealthy growing tobacco and selling it in Europe.

The South had mild winters and long, hot, humid summers making it the perfect place to grow crops such as tobacco, corn, rice, sugar cane, fruit trees, and cotton. **Agriculture** became the leading industry in the South. Southerners believed agriculture was superior to manufacturing and thought Northerners were greedy businessmen.

### King Cotton

In the 1700s, the Industrial Revolution began with textile mills that took raw cotton and turned it into cloth. Southern farmers tried to grow enough cotton to meet demand. Unfortunately, the cotton plant produced seeds embedded inside the soft cotton fibers. For every laborer collecting cotton, it took a dozen or more laborers to remove the seeds. Production remained low.

Northerner Eli Whitney visited the South and spent some time on a Georgia plantation where he saw the difficulty in cleaning cotton. After a brief period of time, he invented the cotton engine or cotton gin and patented the device in 1794.

The cotton gin was a simple box with a crank connected to a drum with teeth that grabbed the cotton fibers from one side of the box and pulled them through narrow slits too small for the seeds to pass through. Clean cotton came

out of the other side and the seeds dropped to the bottom of the box.

Now dozens of people could collect cotton and one person could clean out the seeds. Cotton production soared in the South. It became so valuable that farmers called it white gold. By 1860, cotton earned more **profit** than all other American **exports** combined. Southerners began saying “cotton is king” and the slogan King Cotton could be found throughout the Deep South.



Cotton plant. Source: *Cotton Plant, Texas*. United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service. 1996. Photo.

## 2. Slavery

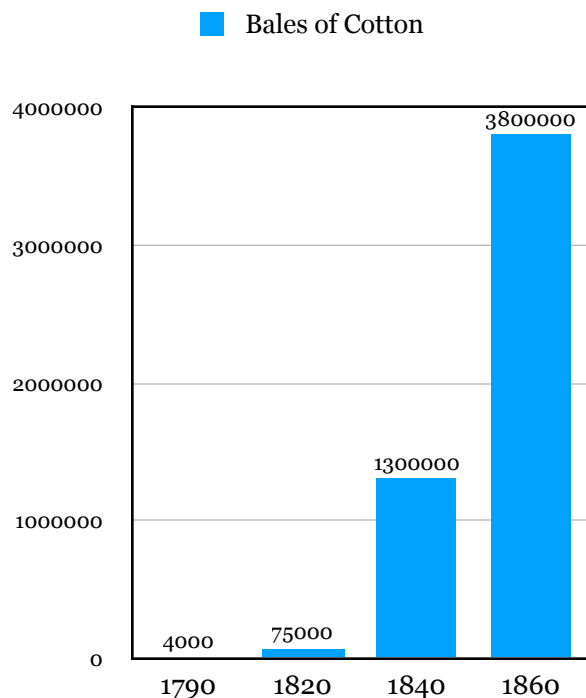
### Cheap Labor

Northern states eventually outlawed **slavery** as it conflicted with the nation’s founding ideas of human freedom. Instead, northern business owners kept costs down by using women, children, and immigrants as cheap labor.

Since most **immigrants** to America had few skills, they often worked as laborers. However, slaves or freemen did most of the labor intensive jobs in the South; therefore, immigrants could not find work. In addition, many immigrants

disliked the institution of slavery. As a consequence, most immigrants went to Northern cities to live. This resulted in slow population growth in the South. By 1860, the white Southern population reached about six million while the enslaved population was at about 3.5 million.

Yet, even in the South for a time, many people began to look toward ending slavery. With tobacco sales in decline, slavery no longer promised to be as profitable. However, with the invention of the cotton gin, cotton became so valuable everyone wanted to plant more cotton. To maximize profits, the demand for cheap slave labor increased. The idea of ending slavery in the South soon disappeared as money became more important than morality.



Amount of cotton produced until the outbreak of civil war in 1861. Source: Worth Robert Miller. Cotton Growth. Missouri State University.

### 3. Society

#### Social Ladder

Southern society had a definite social structure. At the top of the social structure were the plantation owners. They were very wealthy, owned hundreds of acres of land, had at least fifty enslaved people working for them, and held most of the political power in the South.

Below the plantation owner was the largest Southern group, the yeoman farmer. They owned between 50 and 200 acres of land, some owned a few slaves, and they sold a portion of their crops for needed goods.

The next group was the tenant farmer. These people rented land or worked on land owned by others and gave up a portion of their crops to the land owner. A step below this group was the rural poor who lived in poverty in isolated places. They grew corn and hunted and fished for food. Most Southerners looked down upon this group.

About 300,000 freemen or free African Americans lived in the South. Many Southern state governments forbid freemen from owning guns, meeting in large groups, or voting. Finally, enslaved people completed the social structure. They had no freedom and almost no legal rights.

### 4. Internal Improvements

Unlike the North, the South had less need for railroads and canals. In the South, most of the rivers were slow moving so it was easier to travel up and down stream. Riverboats became the main form of transportation. As a result, most cities in the South developed along rivers.