The Cotton Kingdom

The Gin, the Lash, and the Loom · 1793–1850

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

> **Content note:** This chapter includes accounts of slavery and of people killed, injured, or held captive. Preview these stories before class: The Second Middle Passage; The Hands That Picked.

GUIDING QUESTION

How responsible were Northern mills and consumers for the expansion of slavery in the Cotton South?

PART 1

Before you read

1. Read the guiding question. Write down what you already know, or think you know, about it.

2. Predict one way your answer might change after reading the sources.

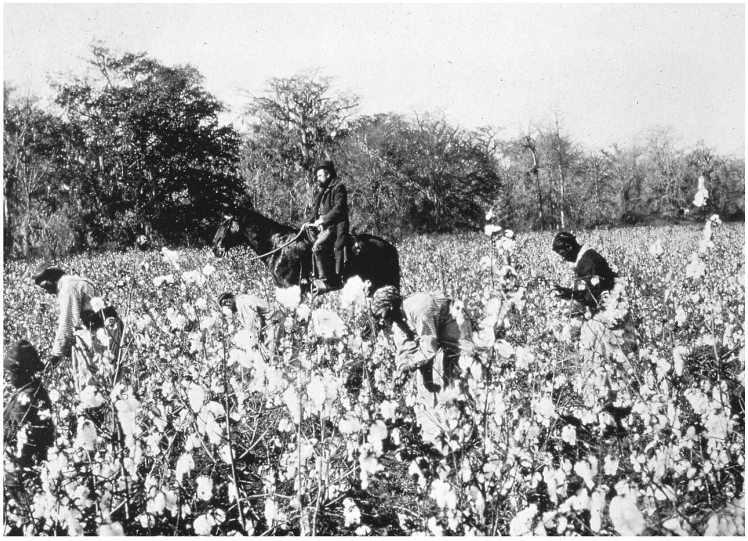
PART 2

Read

The 'efficiency' of the Northern mills was fed by the brutality of the Southern cotton field. The rise of the American textile industry was inextricable from the expansion of slavery, and the spindles of Massachusetts spun fiber picked under the lash in Mississippi.

Eli Whitney's cotton gin (1793) made short-staple upland cotton commercially viable. Within a generation it helped transform the American South into the leading supplier of the raw material of the world's first industrial economy. The 'Cotton Kingdom' expanded westward through Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and beyond, fueling the 'Second Middle Passage'—the forced removal of roughly a million enslaved people from the Upper South to the Deep South between 1790 and 1860. Cotton was the nation's leading export from about 1803, and by 1840 it accounted for more than half the value of all American exports. Northern mills did not merely buy this cotton: Northern merchants, shippers, insurers, and banks

financed, carried, and insured the crop, and Northern politicians tied to the trade resisted measures that threatened it.



African American laborers picking cotton under a white overseer on horseback-a system of field labor carried over almost unchanged from slavery. Unidentified photographer, cotton pickers and a mounted overseer, southern United States, c. 1880 (date uncertain). Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

PART 3

Timeline

For each event, write one sentence on why it mattered.

1793 — **The Cotton Gin**
Eli Whitney builds a gin for short-staple cotton and applies for a patent, granted in March 1794; he boasted that one man and a horse could do the work of fifty hand-cleaners.

1808 — **Transatlantic Slave Trade Ends**
The federal ban on importing enslaved people takes effect, intensifying the domestic slave trade as cotton demand explodes.

1840 — **Cotton Becomes King**
Cotton, the nation's leading export since about 1803, now accounts for more than half the value of all U.S. exports, feeding the mills of New England and Lancashire.

1850 — **Three Million Enslaved**
The census counts more than 3.2 million enslaved people in the United States; by now most enslaved agricultural laborers in the Deep South work in cotton.

PART 4

Key terms

Write the letter of the matching definition beside each term.

_____ **Quota**

_____ **Gin-house**

_____ **Second Middle Passage**

_____ **Short-staple cotton**

_____ **WPA slave narratives**

A. A required amount of work; on cotton plantations, the weight each enslaved person was forced to pick daily under threat of punishment.

B. More than 2,300 interviews with formerly enslaved people recorded by the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project in 1936–1938.

C. The plantation building where the cotton gin separated seeds from fiber and where each day's picking was weighed.

D. The forced movement of about one million enslaved people from the Upper South to new cotton lands in the Deep South between 1790 and 1860.

E. Upland cotton with short fibers that grew across the interior South once the cotton gin made it profitable to clean.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

These excerpts are quoted word for word, including the spelling and language of their time.

DOCUMENT A

Twelve Years a Slave

Solomon Northup, 1853

> When a new hand, one unaccustomed to the business, is sent for the first time into the field, he is whipped up smartly, and made for that day to pick as fast as he can possibly. At night it is weighed, so that his capability in cotton picking is known. He must bring in the same weight each night following. If it falls short, it is considered evidence that he has been laggard, and a greater or less number of lashes is the penalty. An ordinary day's work is two hundred pounds. ... a slave never approaches the gin-house with his basket of cotton but with fear.

Context: Northup, a free Black man from New York, was kidnapped in 1841 and enslaved on Louisiana cotton plantations for twelve years. His account describes the quota-and-whip system that drove the enormous rise in cotton output feeding Northern and British mills.

Source: Solomon Northup. Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup. Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 1853. https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/northup.html

Historical context

What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience

Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose

Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view

Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

DOCUMENT B

Interview with Sarah Ashley

Sarah Ashley, interviewed by the Federal Writers' Project, c. 1937

> I used to have to pick cotton and sometime I pick 300 pound and tote it a mile to de cotton house. Some pick 300 to 800 pound cotton and have to tote de bag de whole mile to de gin. Iffen dey didn't do dey work dey git whip till dey have blister on 'em. Den iffen dey didn't do it, de man on a hoss goes down de rows and whip with a paddle make with holes in it and bus' de blisters. I never git whip, 'cause I allus git my 300 pound.

Context: Ashley, born in Mississippi and sold to a Texas planter as a child, was interviewed in her eighties by the New Deal's Federal Writers' Project. The dialect spellings were chosen by the mostly white interviewers and reflect their assumptions as well as her speech.

Source: Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 1, Adams-Duhon. Library of Congress. 1936–1938. https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn161/

Historical context
What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience
Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose
Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view
Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

Corroborate
Compare "Twelve Years a Slave" (Solomon Northup, 1853) with "Interview with Sarah Ashley" (Sarah Ashley, interviewed by the Federal Writers' Project, c. 1937). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. According to both narrators, how was the amount of cotton an enslaved person had to pick decided, and how was it enforced?

2. Northup published his book with a white editor in 1853 to influence the national debate over slavery; Sarah Ashley was interviewed by a government writer in the 1930s. How might each setting shape what was said and how it was recorded?

3. Using the chapter narrative, trace the path of a bale of cotton from a Louisiana gin-house to a New England loom. Who profited at each step?

4. The United States now bans imports of cotton linked to forced labor in China's Xinjiang region. Should companies and consumers be held responsible for labor conditions far down their supply chains? Use the nineteenth-century evidence to support your argument.

PART 7

Write: claim, evidence, reasoning

Answer the guiding question in one paragraph, using the documents and the reading.

Claim	Answers the guiding question directly in one or two sentences.
Evidence	Cites at least two primary sources by name and at least one fact from the reading.
Reasoning	Explains how each piece of evidence supports the claim.
Sourcing	Notes at least one limitation of a source: who made it, when, and why.

PART 8

Exit ticket

1. In one sentence, how would you answer the guiding question now?

2. What piece of evidence would most change your mind?

Keep exploring

TRAGEDY

The Second Middle Passage

The forced migration that built the Cotton Kingdom.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/the-second-middle-passage

IMPACT

Lords of the Loom, Lords of the Lash

The political alliance between Boston mill owners and Southern planters.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/lords-of-loom-lash

BIOGRAPHY

Eli Whitney's Patent Trap

The inventor of the gin made little from it.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/whitneys-patent-trap

TRAGEDY

The Hands That Picked

The enslaved people who grew the cotton, as named individuals and as the largest financial asset in the American economy.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/the-hands-that-picked

Places: Georgia

SOURCES AND CREDITS

Patent for Cotton Gin (1794). U.S. National Archives. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/patent-for-cotton-gin

Ira Berlin. Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves. Harvard University Press. 2003

Gene Dattel. Cotton, the Oil of the Nineteenth Century. The International Economy-
. https://www.international-economy.com/TIE_W10_Dattel.pdf

Sven Beckert. Empire of Cotton: A Global History. Alfred A. Knopf. 2014

Image: Unidentified photographer, cotton pickers and a mounted overseer, southern United States, c. 1880 (date uncertain). Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Threading America, presented by Anatar. Read the full chapter at https://www.threadingamerica.com/chapters/cotton-kingdom. This edition was generated on November 9, 2026.