

Cotton Pickin'

Before and After the Civil War

Skills: Social Studies, Language Arts

Objective: Students will examine the importance of cotton to the economy of the South before and after the Civil War.

Background

Cotton is a soft fiber that grows around the seeds of the cotton plant. The seeds are sticky and sometimes difficult to separate from the cotton fiber. Before the invention of the cotton gin, in 1793, the process was extremely labor-intensive.

The cotton gin, a mechanical device which removes the seeds from cotton, could generate up to 50 pounds of cleaned cotton daily. This was double what could be cleaned by hand and helped make cotton production a lucrative business. It contributed to the economic growth of the Southern states of the US, a prime cotton-growing area. By 1860, cotton production represented more than half of all US exports. Some historians believe the invention also reinvigorated the slave economy and added decades to its life.

By the early part of the 19th Century, the Southern economy depended on the labor of African American slaves forced into providing cheap or free labor. In 1810 there were 1.2 million African American slaves in the US. By 1860 there were 4 million. Slaves were concentrated on the large plantations of about 10,000 big planters. Each of these plantations held 50-100 or more slaves.

The principal cotton-growing states in the South were South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas. These were the first seven states to declare their independence from the US, between December, 1860, and February, 1861. Civil War broke out in April, 1861.

After the Civil War, the price of cotton dropped nearly 50 percent. Many freed slaves remained dependent on white landowners because they had no land of their own. They stayed on the plantations and worked as sharecroppers in return for a share of the profits. Cotton plantations required vast labor forces to hand-pick cotton fibers from cotton plants, and it was not until the 1950s that reliable harvesting machinery was introduced into the South.

In the 1890s, the boll weevil moved into the southern US from Mexico and destroyed much of the cotton crop in the South, forcing many southern farmers to switch to other crops. Today there are 17 states producing cotton in the US. The top seven producers in 2006 were Texas, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, California, Tennessee and North Carolina. Although Texas leads in total production, California has the highest yield per acre in the world. China is the world's largest producer of cotton. China, the US and India

P.A.S.S.

GRADE 6

Social Studies—1.1,3
Reading—1.1; 3.1b,2c,3a;
5.1ab
Writing—1.2; 2.4a; 7

GRADE 7

Social Studies—1.1; 4.3;
5.2
Reading—1.1; 3.1a; 5.1ab
Writing—1.1; 2.2b,4b,8

GRADE 8

Social Studies—1.1,3,5;
2.1,2; 6.3,4; 10.2; 11.2
Reading—1.1; 3.1a; 5.1A
Writing—1.1,2; 2.5a,8

Resources Needed

computer with internet connection and slideshow software

encyclopedia

poster board

note cards

map pencils

Vocabulary

boll weevil—a usually grayish or brown weevil that feeds on the squares and bolls of the cotton plant

commodity—a product of agriculture

cotton—a soft fiber that grows around the seeds of the cotton plant

cotton gin—a machine that quickly and easily separates the cotton fibers from the seed pods and the sometimes sticky seeds

cottonseed oil—a brown-yellow oil with a nutlike odor obtained from the seed of the cotton plant.

export—a commodity conveyed from one country or region to another for purposes of trade

fiber—a slender and very long natural or synthetic unit of material (as wool or cotton) usually able to be spun into yarn

labor-intensive—having high labor costs per unit of output

lint—cotton

lucrative—producing wealth

plantation—a large farm or estate on which cotton, tobacco, coffee or sugar cane is cultivated, usually by resident laborers.

sharecropper—a farmer who works land for the owner in return for a share of the value of the crop

textile—cloth, especially a woven or knit cloth

together produce half the world's cotton. Other top producers include Brazil, Pakistan, Turkey, Australia and Uzbekistan.

Cotton is the most common natural textile in use today. The part of the cotton plant used for textiles is called the lint. The seeds of the cotton plant are also a valuable commodity. Cottonseed oil is used to make salad dressings, margarine and cooking oils.

Cotton and cottonseed ranked number seven in value of all Oklahoma agricultural commodities in 2005. It was among the first major crops grown by farmers when our state was new. There are 220,000 acres planted in cotton in Oklahoma.

Activities

1. Read and discuss background and vocabulary.
2. Hand out copies of the US map included in the "Resources" section.
 - Students will use map pencils and develop map legends to show the seven cotton states that seceded in 1860-61 (South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas) and the top seven cotton-producing states in the US in 2006 (Texas, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, California, Tennessee and North Carolina).
 - Which of the seven cotton states that seceded are among the top US cotton-producing states today?
 - Which of the top cotton-producing states in the US today are not Southern states?
3. Students will select one of the topics below and conduct research via the internet or encyclopedia. See "How Reliable Are Your Sources?" in the "Resources" section to review online sources.
 - How was cotton produced and harvested before and after the Civil War? Students use a Venn diagram to illustrate the comparison and present findings in a slide show presentation.
 - Identify at least three turning points in the Civil War, and show how cotton production influenced the economy at each point. Complete a time line on poster board listing the turning points and the impact of cotton production.
 - Describe the impact of the dependence on cotton in the Southern States. Work with a group to create a skit depicting a scenario at the end of the Civil War showing how dependent the society was on cotton production.
4. Review "How to Write a Research Paper" in the "Resources" section.
 - Students will use their research notes to write informative essays on the subjects they have chosen to research above.

Extra Reading

Hopkinson, Deborah, *Up Before Daybreak: Cotton And People In America* Scholastic, 2006.

McMullan, Margaret, *How I Found the Strong*, Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

McPherson, James M., *Fields of Fury: The American Civil War*, Atheneum, 2003.

Williams, Sherley Anne, and Carole Byard, *Working Cotton*, Voyager, 1997.