

Cotton Pickin’

Before and After the Civil War

Objective

Students will read and discuss the role of cotton production in the Civil War, trace cotton production on a map of the US and research topics related to cotton and 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.

Procedures

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 2015 (Texas, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, California,

Oklahoma Academic Standards

GRADE 6

Speaking and Listening:
R.1,3; W.1,2. Research:
R.1,2,3; W.1,2,3,4

GRADE 7

Speaking and Listening:
R.1,3; W.1,2. Research:
R.1,2,3; W.1,2,3,4

GRADE 8

Speaking and Listening:
R.1,3; W.1,2. Research:
R.1,2,3; W.1,2,3,4
US History: 4.3,4

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

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.
 - 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.