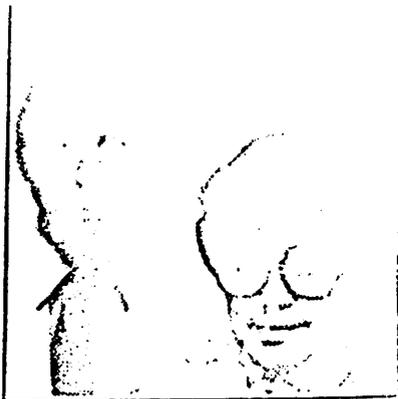




South Carolina's Story

The making of a state

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Was Eli Whitney the inventor of the cotton gin? Or should Capt. James Kincaid of Fairfield County receive the credit?

An 1832 article in the "Southern Christian Advocate" stated that Capt. Kincaid, who was a privateer in his youth, had observed Caribbean natives using a machine to take husks off coconuts. Kincaid then described the machine to his mechanically talented overseer, Hodgen Holmes. Holmes made the machine about 1789, and used it to clean cockleburs out of sheep's wool.

The article continued with the statement that Whitney visited Kincaid's plantation in Kincaid's absence and copied Holmes' contraption.

Historians can find no evidence to validate the article's claim. Kincaid, who was a member of the South Carolina Legislature, himself never made any assertion that he was the inventor. All evidence definitely favors Eli Whitney as the inventor, in 1793, of a crude contraption with wire teeth set in a wooden cylinder.

As crude as the first cotton gin was, it would do the work of 10 men attempting to separate, by hand, the tightly clinging lint from the seed hulls. After horsepower was added, the cotton gin could do the work of 50 men.

The state of South Carolina was quick to recognize the value of the new engine, or "gin." In 1801, the state Legislature appropriated \$50,000 to Whitney and Hodgen Holmes, now his partner, for rights to the use of the cotton gin within the state. The Whitney-Holmes

patent could not be protected, however. Any journeyman of skill could duplicate it--and did.

Interestingly, Capt. Kincaid did win a first: he set up the first saw gin in South Carolina in his grist mill on Mill Creek, Fairfield County. In later years nearby Winnsboro boasted one of the largest cotton gin factories in the South.

During the pre-Revolutionary War period cotton was imported to South Carolina. Rice and indigo were much more profitable crops. The growth of sea-island cotton was stimulated by the Revolutionary War, which cut off imports.

At first, cotton was home-spun on the plantation and then sent out to weavers. The first cotton factories were the result of a well-to-do individual introducing water power to carding and spinning machines. The first operatives were usually slaves. A pound of cotton lint would make 12 yards of cloth. The profit potential of a well-run factory was tremendous.

Two of the earliest known factories built in the 1780s were at the plantation of Benjamin Waring at Stateburg in Sumter County and on the Tar Kiln Branch holding of Col. William Hagins on the Lancaster County, S.C., and Mecklenburg County, N.C., borders.

The cotton gin created a social revolution in South Carolina. The Piedmont area, with its small diversified and self-sufficient farms operated with few slaves, was swiftly transformed into the one-crop slave labor plantation

system.

In 1790, before the invention of the cotton gin, the upcountry population was about 20 percent slaves. In 1830 slaves made up almost 50 percent of the population.

Cotton was immensely profitable in the early years. In 1801 the price of cotton was 44 cents a pound. The cost of production was a little less than 10 cents a pound. That year, the first Wade Hampton raised 600 bales on 600 acres. The crop was valued at \$90,000.

Wealthy plantation owners like the second Wade Hampton expanded their holdings into the "western" states of Alabama and the rich delta

lands of Mississippi during the 1830s and 1840s. While some planters maintained dual residences, other families, often with their neighbors, picked up stakes and all moved west as a unit. Cotton planters quickly rob the soil of its vital minerals.

For those who remained cotton planting had its risks. Prices fluctuated dramatically as the South became dependent upon a world price system that responded to crises and events over which the planter had neither control nor foreknowledge.

The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 unalterably shifted the course of South Carolina history.