

# Invention of gin led to 'King Cotton'

**B**efore the invention of the cotton gin in 1794, this area had no staple crop. Neither rice nor indigo could be grown profitably in Piedmont soil.

In 1790, the typical farmer of York, Chester or Lancaster county might have 200 or 300 acres of land, of which no more than 30 acres was likely to be cleared.

On this acreage he grew a variety of grains, including corn, and cultivated a sizable vegetable garden. He also was likely to have a small orchard and a patch or two of cotton, flax and tobacco. He was also likely to have a few head of cattle, hogs and sheep.

Even with the hands of a wife and children, it was not an easy life. Many failed to master the variety of skills required. Often, the most the poor white could hope for was an overseer's job, and there were few such positions.

The 1790 census for York County, for instance, showed a population of 6,604, with 923 listed as slaves. A quarter of all the slaves were owned by four men. William Hill employed 84 at his ironworks on Allison Creek. Credit the cotton gin with increasing the ratio of slaves to whites to three to five.

Chester's leading slaveholder in 1790 was James Knox with 29 slaves. The 1830 census recorded Hyder Davie, son of Gen. William R. Davie, as owner of 160 slaves. The 1860 census showed Chester with 19,936 slaves in the hands of 124 owners. Cotton cultivation accounted for nearly all of the increase.

The cotton gin dramatically changed

the life of the small farmer. It introduced a new crop for which there was a huge overseas demand. The small farmer who had enough ahead to invest in a few slaves was sure to make a profit. Soon, grains and meat were being imported from the mountain areas where cotton wouldn't grow.

Dr. David Ramsey in his 1808 history of South Carolina observed that "By the introduction of the new staple (cotton) the poor (white men) became of value, for they generally were or at least might be elevated to this middle grade of society. Land suitable for cotton was easily attained, and in tracts of every size either to purchase or rent.

"The culture of it entailed no diseases; might be carried on profitably by individuals or white families without slaves, and afforded employment for children whose labor was of little or no account on rice or indigo plantations."

Ramsey also observed that as the formerly poor became "more easy in their circumstances, they became more orderly in their conduct." Other old accounts confirm Ramsey's view.

It seems odd now that cotton culture was once looked upon as morally uplifting and was encouraged for more than mere economic reasons.

Early inventories of estates seldom mentioned cotton other than perhaps a basket of cotton lint waiting to be spun for household use. With the invention of the cotton gin came many demands. Especially needed was a transportation system to carry the bales to market. Canals were constructed.

The arrival of the railroad, much cheaper and far more convenient, was a great boost to the economic value of land—at least equivalent to the present-day advantage of owning land along an

interstate highway.

In Lancaster, by 1796, there was a cotton gin at the present-day Main Street site of the Lancaster County Courthouse. The town was then known as Barnettsville and boasted of little more than the cotton gin.

The cotton gins of the time were small and crude, but they were destined to replace the gristmill (often inheriting the buildings themselves) as the major source of economic activity.

Cotton introduced slavery to the area on a much larger scale than previously. There were cases of men of wealth from Charleston, Georgetown and Camden moving their households to the Upcountry.

Ralph Izard of a prominent old Charleston family had a huge plantation on the Chester District side of the Catawba river at Landsford near Hyder Davie's equally large plantation.

Cadwallader Jones of Eastern North Carolina built a huge plantation near Rock Hill he called Mount Gallant. His plantation home was on the same spot as the present-day Rock Hill School District 3 headquarters at the terminus of Mount Gallant Road.

As the plantation system of large cotton acreage worked by slaves took over, most of the small farmers moved west to Georgia, Tennessee and beyond.

Belief in the invincibility of "King Cotton" and the slave system that accompanied it, more than anything else, led South Carolina to rashly secede from the Union in 1860.

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**NEARBY HISTORY**

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