



# The Cotton Gin & Slavery

## Overview:

Students will learn how Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin caused a massive growth in the production of cotton in the American South and subsequently led to the expansion of slavery.

## Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

-  **Identify** the different parts of a cotton plant.
-  **Identify** where cotton is grown in the U.S. today.
-  **Explain** why more labor was needed after the invention of the cotton gin.
-  **Describe** the conditions under which slaves worked in the cotton fields.

## Vocabulary:

 bracts	 slavery
 bolls	 industrial revolution
 lint	 mass production
 cotton gin	
 plantation	

## Preparation:

-  Prior to the lesson, discuss with students, colleagues and parents that this lesson can be sensitive as a result of the lasting traumatic effects of slavery in our country. This lesson is intended to give students an overview of the "unintended consequences" of the invention of the Cotton Gin, not to have students simulate picking cotton in the plantations of the Southern U.S.

## Materials:

-  A live cotton plant
-  Cotton bolls with embedded seeds (If you can't grow cotton in the garden, you can get them from the California Cotton Grower's Association.)
-  Visual Aid: "The Stages of Cotton Formation"
-  Photos of a cotton gin
-  USDA Background on Cotton
-  Digital History: How Cotton Was Raised on a Louisiana Plantation

## On the Board:

-  Vocabulary
-  Student Reflection Questions

## Suggested Snack:

-  Collard Greens: <http://allrecipes.com/recipe/51803/kickin-collard-greens/>
-  Corn Bread: <http://www.food.com/recipe/the-best-moist-sweet-cornbread-248806>

## Learning Activities:

1. Warm-Up: Observing a live cotton plant. (5 min.)
  - A. If possible, take students into the garden to view a live cotton plant.
  - B. Have students identify the different parts of the plant: stem, leaf, flower, bracts, bolls, and seeds.
  - C. Define *bract*: the outer shell that opens when ripe to reveal the boll.
  - D. Define *boll*: the round fluffy clumps in which cotton grows.
  
2. Activity: Cotton Ball Game (15 min.)
  - A. Demonstrate how to separate a cotton seed from the lint.
  - B. Divide the class into small groups.
  - C. Give each group a small pile of cotton and instruct them to separate the seeds from the lint. Give them 10 minutes to complete the task. Whichever group finishes first wins.
  - D. Bring the class back together and ask students if they thought it was easy or difficult.
  - E. Discuss the cotton industry in the 1700s and 1800s.
    - Before Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in 1793, slaves had to pick apart the seeds from the lint by hand, like the students just did, sometimes for up to 12 hours a day.
    - Show students a picture of the cotton gin and explain that whole pieces of cotton were put into the machine, the gears were turned, and the seeds were mechanically separated from the lint.
    - Ask students if they think this meant that slaves had to do less work.
    - Tell students that this invention led to the expansion of the cotton industry. Since seeds could be separated faster, this meant that slaves had to pick cotton faster and plant more fields with the crop.
  
3. Classroom Activity and Discussion (20 min.)
  - A. Distribute the Handout: "Working in the Cotton Fields."
    - Have a student read aloud the slave's description of working on a cotton plantation in Louisiana in the 1840s.
  - B. Lead a discussion about the excerpt. Ask students:
    - Do you think you could do this for 8-12 hours a day, like slaves were forced to do?
    - Why was working in the cotton fields a "no-win" situation for slaves?
    - What was the "gin-house?"
  - C. Discuss the impact of the cotton gin. Ask students:
    - to recall what they learned in the previous lesson about manufacturing vs. agriculture.
    - How did this invention impact the country?

- Textiles were a major industry in the North and relied heavily on the cotton grown in the South.
  - The cotton gin allowed these products to be mass produced for the first time.
  - Unfortunately, this also produced a greater need for slaves.
  - They could also export the products they were making at high prices which led to economic growth.
  - Explain to students that cotton is still a major industry in the United States, including California's San Joaquin Valley. (USDA handout)
4. Snack: Collard greens and corn bread. Tell students this was a common meal for slaves in the South, that often went along with Hoppin' John (their snack from the lesson: "Food as Culture: Black-Eyed Peas and African-American Culture"). (5 min.)
5. Have students answer the reflection questions in their garden journals. (5 min.)

### Student Reflection Questions:

1. Describe the challenges of a slave working in a cotton field. Write a diary entry about a long day working in the field.

### Assessment Questions:

1. The invention of the cotton gin meant that:
  - A. Less slave labor was needed as the cotton gin did most of the work.
  - B. More slave labor was needed as there was now a greater demand for cotton.**
2. What was the cotton gin?
  - A. A machine that picked cotton from the fields.
  - B. A machine that separated the cotton seeds from the lint.**
  - C. A machine that spun the cotton into thread to make textiles.

### Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.1

Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.2

Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to supporting ideas; provide an objective summary of the text.

### Acknowledgements:

*How Cotton Was Raised on a Louisiana Plantation.* Digital History.  
[www.digitalhistory.uh.edu](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu)

USDA Economic Research Service: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/crops/cotton-wool/background/>