The Importance of Cotton Throughout History

The slogan on the commercial for cotton states that it is “the fabric of our lives.” I didn’t know how true that statement was until I started researching for this paper. If you like to hang out in your favorite pair of jeans with a t-shirt on your back, while sitting on the couch with a bowl of potato chips you have the cotton plant to thank for all those things. Cotton is used in so many products virtually everything we use daily has cotton in it.

No one knows exactly how old cotton is. Scientists exploring caves in Mexico found bits of cotton that were proved to be at least 7,000 years old. They also found that the cotton was a lot like the cotton grown in the United States today. In the Indus River Valley in Pakistan, cotton was being grown, spun and woven into cloth 3,000 years BC. At about the same time, natives of Egypt’s Nile Valley, were making and wearing cotton clothing. Arab merchants brought cotton cloth to Europe about 800 A.D. Christopher Columbus found cotton growing in the Bahama Islands on his exploring ventures the same year he discovered America in 1492. By the year 1500, cotton was known generally throughout the world. Cotton seeds are believed to have been planted in Florida in 1556 and in Virginia in 1607. By 1616, colonists were growing cotton along the James River in Virginia.
Cotton was first spun by machinery in England in 1730. The United Kingdom experienced a huge growth in the cotton industry during the Industrial Revolution. Sir Richard Arkwright built the world’s first true factory to produce cotton. The Industrial revolution in England and the invention of the cotton gin in the U.S paved the way for the important place cotton holds in the world today.

With the invention of the cotton gin, the demand for slaves grew to a fever pitch in the South. While Britain was advancing with technology it was dependent on the slave labor of the cotton plantation South. Eighty percent of the raw material required by the British mills came from the South.

The example of the cotton gin shows that Southern farmers would quickly incorporate labor-saving machinery when it appeared. The farmers were also looking for biological improvements. The Southern farmers led the world in developing and diffusing new strains of Upland cotton varieties. The result was a quadruple increase in daily cotton-picking rates between 1801 and 1860. The new varieties had higher yields and were of higher quality than the versions before. This rate of technological advance in Southern cotton was greater than Northern wheat over the antebellum period.

There were no working mechanical cotton pickers in the antebellum period. Until then, there was only slave gang labor. The goal of the slave field gang system was regular intensive labor. Cotton production made Southern plantations labor intensive.
Between 1810 and 1830, cotton production rose from 178,000 bales a year to 732,000 bales, and increase of 311 percent. By 1860, output was 3.8 million bales, and increase of another 435 percent.

After Whitney’s cotton gin (1793) enabled short-staple cotton varieties to be separated on a competitive commercial basis by mechanical means, American cotton quickly dominated world cotton textile production.

A materialistic America was aware of the fact that the price of a slave generally correlated to the price of cotton. Thus, the cotton economy controlled the destiny of the sales in the South. The cotton market supported America’s ability to borrow money from abroad. It also fostered an enormous domestic trade in agricultural products from the West and manufactured goods from the East.

On the eve of the Civil War, cotton provided the economic underpinnings of the Southern economy. Cotton gave the South power — both real and imagined. Cotton dictated the South’s huge role in a global economy that included Europe, New York, other New England states, and the American west. This economic growth exacted a severe and tragic human price through slavery and the prejudicial treatment of free blacks.
After the Civil War the economic lives of the planters, former slaves and the non-slaveholding whites were drastically changed. They needed to come up with a new system of labor to replace the world of slavery that they had been dependent upon.

It was thought that the Civil War caused the Lancashire Cotton Famine, a period between 1861-1865 of depression in the British cotton industry, by blocking off American raw cotton. Some however, suggest that cotton famine was mostly due to overproduction and price inflation caused by an expectation of future shortage.

The planters found it hard to adjust to the end of slavery. Many of them tried to restore their old ways of discipline only to find that those ways would not work anymore. Many of the former slaves believed that their years of labor gave them a claim to some land but without the government enforcing the distribution of land only a small percentage of the freed slaves became land owners.

The South continued to be a one crop economy until the 20th century, when the New Deal and World War II encouraged diversification. Many ex-slaves as well as poor whites worked in the sharecropping system in serf-like conditions.
Boll weevils, insects that entered the U.S. from Mexico in 1892, created 100 years of problems for the U.S. cotton industry. Many consider the boll weevil almost as important as the Civil War as an agent of change in the South, forcing economic and social changes. In total, the boll weevil is estimated to have caused 22 billion dollars in damages. In the late 1950s, the U.S. cotton industry faced economic problems, and eradication of the boll weevil was prioritized.

In 1912, the British cotton industry was at its peak, producing eight billion yards of cloth. During World War I, cotton could not be exported to foreign markets. In 1933, Japan introduced 24-hour cotton production and became the world’s largest cotton manufacturer. Demand for British cotton slumped, and during the interwar period 345,000 workers left the industry and 800 mills closed.

Textile mills have moved from Western Europe to, more recently, lower-wage areas. Industrial production is currently mostly located in countries like India, China, and Latin America. In these countries labor is much less expensive. Companies of today like American Apparel have made a strong commitment to keep the jobs here in America to ensure they are helping the American economy.
In conclusion cotton is still a huge part of our life in America and always will be. Thankfully times have changes and we are not dependent on slave labor to produce the cotton we are so dependent on.
Bibliography

History Channel video: Cotton

“Why Was Cotton King” By Henry Louis Gates, Jr.