Cotton
The Fabric Of Georgia...

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Cotton...

Perhaps nothing has defined the economy and culture of the south more than cotton. From the struggles and challenges associated with it...to the products produced from it, and the economic impact generated by it... cotton takes its place as “King” among crops. It is interwoven with our country’s history and played a significant role in defining the South.

Often called “White Gold,” cotton was Georgia’s most successful commercial row crop, from the first planting in 1733 until the beginning of the Civil War.

1733  First Planted in coastal Georgia
1793  Eli Whitney invented the Cotton Gin, while visiting a Georgia plantation
• Prior to the Gin it took 10 hours of hand labor to separate one pound of cotton fiber from the seed.
• The Cotton Gin could separate 50 pounds in a one day, claiming to replace the work of 50 men, thus transforming the American South.
• Popular thought says it was called a “gin” which was short for engine, although the word “gin” is from a Middle English word meaning to trap or snare.
**Sea Island Cotton:** Cultivated in coastal areas, this type of cotton has long, strong fibers and the seeds can easily be removed by hand. It was the first commercially grown cotton in Georgia.

**Upland Cotton:** Yields short-staple cotton. This type can be cultivated inland, but has seeds that are difficult to remove by hand.

As settlers began to move inland from Georgia’s coast, they found fertile farmland. However, the labor intensity of cotton made it still too costly to grow. This demand for labor caused the enslavement of men, women, and children who were used to clear the land, plant, chop and pick cotton, in addition to household duties and other labors that were demanded of them.

**Cotton Gin Leads To Greater Productivity**

The invention of the Cotton Gin would forever change the production of cotton in America and throughout the world. It allowed the farmers who had enough land and manpower to grow the upland variety of cotton commercially. Flat, rich soil across Georgia was rapidly being turned into cotton fields. In successful cotton-producing areas, entire towns emerged, with many of the successful professional and business people owning cotton fields. By 1849, cotton ruled as the greatest export value of any American agriculture commodity.

**Civil War Destroys The South’s Cotton Farms**

Cotton would figure heavily into the Civil War as the South’s economy was so dependent on this crop. In 1860 Georgia’s cotton crop resulted in more than 700,000 bales. In 1865 at the end of the Civil War, the cotton crop was at a low of 50,000 bales, and fields were in a state of ruin. White landowners struggled to ready the fields for crops and to find workers from freed slaves and poor whites.

**Sharecropping**

After the Civil War, the contract labor system was to negotiate deals between the land owners and the former slaves, but this failed. The much heard “40 acres and a mule” for freed slaves proved a false hope as most farmland was returned to the original owners. For former slaves and poor whites, this would be a critical time as they hoped to become self-sufficient. Sharecropping developed throughout the South, lasting into the mid-20th century. This system called for laborers with no land of their own to work on farms owned by others, being paid in a “share” of the crop. If workers brought no assets other than the ability to work into the agreement, their share of the crop was usually smaller than that of a worker who might also own a mule or other asset - they would be paid in a bit more of the crop. Not just land was part of this system, but the supplies needed (fertilizer, seed, etc.) would also be taken into account. If the sharecropper did not make enough to get out of debt to the landowner in that season, he would be bound for another season. In many cases the sharecropper was illiterate and could not read (even if given the opportunity) to check over his accounts, nor was he allowed to find buyers for his cotton. This system also proved to be unfair, increasing riches for the large land owners while doing little or nothing for freed slaves and poor whites who worked the land. Thirty-two percent of Georgia’s farms were operated by sharecroppers by 1880, rising to 37% by 1910.
Around 1900, an insect would enter the U.S. from Mexico, through Texas and work its way to Georgia, filling farmers’ hearts with despair as it destroyed crops in its path. This long snout beetle fed on the young cotton buds and flowers, thus destroying its growth and eliminating entire crops. By the 1920s this small insect had devastated the cotton industry and those who relied on it.

Immortalized in folk, country, blues and even rock ‘n roll songs, the boll weevil became a cult figure symbolizing the farmers’ fight for survival. Every cotton-producing county in Georgia reported boll weevils by 1917. Some believe that the boll weevil aided the beginning of the Great Depression of the 1930s. In Georgia alone it was responsible for millions of dollars in damage, as cotton production dropped dramatically when entire fields were destroyed.

Controlling the insect was vitally important. It wasn’t until World War II that DDT as well as other chlorinated hydrocarbon pesticides were found to eliminate or decrease insect populations. DDT had been used successfully by the military to control mosquitoes that spread malaria and the lice that transmitted typhus to the troops. After the war it was made available commercially to use on agricultural crops. Farmers liberally used the pesticide to control insects, including the dreaded boll weevil. Between 1943 and 1972 it was the most widely used pesticide by American farmers. DDT was capable of killing many different kinds of insects at once, but this also meant that it eliminated beneficial ones as well. By 1955 there was concern that the boll weevil and some mosquitoes were developing a resistance to the pesticide and researchers were becoming alarmed about the environmental hazards it was said to cause. In 1972 DDT use was banned by the U.S. The South still struggled to find a solution. By 1987, the Boll Weevil Eradication Program was actively working to solve the problem and by 1994 the boll weevil had lost its place of prominence in Georgia, joining the list of “economically insignificant” pests.
Cotton still has the reputation as America’s most popular fabric, but it is more than fabric: For every 100 pounds of fiber produced, there will be about 162 pounds of cottonseed produced.

**Seed & Fiber**

- The cotton is harvested
- Lint is separated from the seeds & baled: this is used in producing textiles.
- Cotton seed is crushed to make oil, which is used in cooking, shortening, salad dressings and margarines.
- Cottonseed meal and hulls are used in the production of livestock feed.
- After the ginning process, the cellulose — the short fuzz remaining on the cottonseed hulls — is used in a variety of products from plastics, cushion coverings, ice cream, paper currency, photography papers and more.
- Stalks and leaves are plowed under to enrich the soil

**Georgia’s Cotton Industry:**

- Farming – planting, growing and harvesting the crop
- Ginning – the process of separating the lint and seed
- Cottonseed Oil Milling
- Textile Mill Processing
- Warehousing
- Selling

**Some Historic Uses of Cotton:**

- Thomas Edison used charred cotton filament for the light bulb
- The Wright brothers stretched cotton muslin to cover the wings of their first airplane
- Samuel Morse used cotton to insulate the telegraph
- Cotton was used in early tires cords, helping put America on wheels
- During World War I, the short fuzz on cottonseed (called linters) was an important source of cellulose and used to make smokeless gun powder.
- Cotton is used in the production of the dollar bill.
Some Roswell Farms

Some of the farms in the area supplied cotton for the Roswell Mills. Many have fallen to progress and the lands have been sold to developments – either residential or commercial – while some are being preserved and available for tour.

Hembree Farm

Hembree Farm is one of the oldest settlers’ farmsteads still existing in North Fulton County. Hembree Farm grew cotton for the Roswell Manufacturing Company, along with other crops. The Roswell Historical Society accepted the generous gift from a Hembree heir and today a portion of the original farmstead and some of the outbuildings are being preserved for future generations.

Archibald Smith Plantation Home

This farm home was constructed by one of Roswell’s founding families. In 1838, the Smith family and nearly 30 of their slaves left their two plantations along the southern coast of Georgia to make a new start with some 300 acres of cotton farm-land just north of Roswell’s Town Square. Perfectly preserved is the two-story farm house, complete with outbuildings, including slave quarters, cook house, corn crib, barn, well, and spring house. Three generations of the Archibald Smith family lived in this home and saved all of their belongings. The home and grounds, now owned by the City of Roswell, are open for tours, 7 days each week.
Mansell Farm

The Mansell Family Farm was located on what is now Mansell Road. Although the farm itself is no longer there, members of the Mansell family are still active in the community. Family records reference the Roswell Bank and the Roswell Gin, while family photographs show references to cotton being produced by the Mansell family in Roswell and other areas of Georgia.

Williams Farm

The Williams Farm is now owned by the Lonnie Mimms Family. Located near a neighborhood setting, the view from this property takes one back in time to an earlier Roswell and what once was, as evidenced by the aerial photograph of the land.
Please visit www.visitroswellga.com for a downloadable:

- Selection of Curriculum Guides for grades: 2, 3, 4, 5, 8
- Downloadable Audio Walking Tour of Roswell’s Mill Village

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References:
Georgia Cotton Commission, www.georgiacottoncommission.org

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