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Cotton and Race in the Making of America: Global Economic Power, Human Costs and Current Relevance”

The relationship between cotton and the African American experience has been central to the history of the republic. Cotton was arguably the single most important determinant of American history in the nineteenth Century. It prolonged slavery and slave-produced cotton caused the American Civil War, our bloodiest conflict which came close to destroying the nation. When cotton production exploded to satiate the nineteenth century textile industry’s enormous appetite, it became the first truly complex global business and thereby a major driving force in U.S. territorial expansion and sectional economic integration. Both before and after the Civil War, blacks were assigned the cotton fields while a pervasive racial animosity and fear of a black migratory invasion caused white Northerners to contain blacks in the South.

A broad survey of the cotton’s role from 1787 to the 1930s encompasses finance, international trade, global business, race, migration and immigration, government subsidy and regulation, technology, industrialization, global shifts in manufacturing, mechanization, supply and demand dynamics, displacement, labor shortages, price mechanism, legal adaptation, environment, territorial expansion, war, international diplomacy, monopoly, economic growth, geography and economic and cultural determinism. King Cotton was truly an empire builder and gives us insights into issues which confront the world today.

“Cotton and Race in the Making of America: Global Economic Power, Human Costs and Current Relevance”

The story of cotton in America is a dramatic economic tale whose fundamental importance in the nation’s history has been largely ignored. Because of its connection with race, cotton is uniquely tainted in American history. “It is the melancholy distinction of cotton,” wrote David Cohn in 1956, “to be the stuff of high drama and tragedy, of bloody civil war and the unutterable woe of human slavery. . . . [Cotton was] a ‘map-maker, trouble-maker, and history maker.’” To put it less poetically, slave-produced cotton was shockingly important to the destiny of the United States; it almost destroyed the nation. In many ways this book is also about America’s overwhelming attachment to material progress at whatever the human cost. Once we begin following the money trail, we realize that it leads us to the heart and soul of America.

The story begins at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and ends in the 1930s, when technology finally broke the link between cotton and race with the first successful trials for a mechanical cotton picker. In 1787 cotton production was virtually nonexistent as the delegates met in Philadelphia. The Constitution would have been quite different if it had been written a few years later, after the nascent force of cotton was realized.

The Founding Fathers were truly blindsided by cotton. Thus the Constitution protected race-based slavery, cotton’s eventual labor pool, because slavery was thought to be already receding. But slavery in America survived and expanded to satiate the

international commercial interest in one crop, cotton. Its primary social byproduct, the subordination of black men and women to the cotton economy, shaped the plight of African Americans throughout U.S. history. And as cotton shaped the nation's economic landscape, racial oppression shaped its social landscape. A people and a crop became bonded.

A force of enormous proportions was needed to keep millions of people enslaved at a time when slavery was, as Carl Degler wrote, a "moral anachronism" in the Western world. Only a commercial hurricane could have created the fundamental paradox of the American nation: the simultaneous story of dynamic economic growth and the prolonged devastations of the African-American experience. Cotton was that force and thus the chief cause of commerce's most destructive creation, slavery in its nineteenth-century iteration. Slavery, however, is only the first chapter of the tale. Beginning in 1800, slaves cultivated cotton for sixty years; but *free* blacks were cotton laborers for nearly a hundred years after emancipation. Only the African-American migration to Northern cities where they were restricted to ghettos during World War I and the mid-twentieth-century technological revolution in cotton production ultimately separated cotton from race.

Cotton stimulated economic growth in antebellum America more decisively than any other single industry or crop. From 1803 to 1937 it was America's leading export, a

reign that will likely never be surpassed. On the eve of the American Civil War, cotton comprised fully 60 percent of all American exports. These stunning statistics were wrought primarily from the hands of slaves and later of free blacks— generations of men, women, and children who “chopped” the weeds that surrounded the young stalks, guided the mules through the endless rows of cotton, and stooped to pick the ever-valued crop for market.

Cotton was also the foundation of the Industrial Revolution and thus transformed the economic world. Its significance was not lost upon the twenty-two-year-old political economist Karl Marx, who wrote in 1846 that “without cotton you have no modern industry.” For Marx, the relationship between cotton and slavery was similarly unambiguous: “Without slavery, you have no cotton.” Cotton brought wealth, power, and prosperity to both America and Europe. Affordable textile garments woven from American cotton improved the quality of life for people throughout the world. But this material progress came with a human cost, for cotton production played the leading role in a tragedy of epic racial proportions.

Cotton and race, in this paper, is viewed from a racially tinted economic and financial perspective, rather than through a moral lens. This story is told from a national and international perspective, seeing cotton for the “history-maker” it was, rather than just a Southern regional phenomenon. Not surprisingly, the cotton epic unfolded in

what Europeans viewed as the most commercial of nations, the United States. The quest for money determines what people do and why they do it, and the American pecuniary obsession has remained constant throughout the nation's history. The slaveholder and the slave before the Civil War, and the plantation owner and the sharecropper afterward, were all—each in his own way—pawns in the hands of finance.

While one may dwell on the moral and social debacle of slavery and its aftermath, it is important to remember that slavery's existence was based on racially influenced economic facts. Simple concepts such as labor shortages, profit or the expectation of profit, the ability to finance, supply and demand imbalances, monopoly, and the price of cotton combined to form a commercial juggernaut. Cotton offered potential wealth; black slavery solved the labor problem. In the first half of the nineteenth century, cotton was primarily responsible for the enslavement of four million African Americans. Slave-produced cotton connected the country's regions, provided the export surplus the young nation desperately needed to gain its financial "sea legs," brought commercial ascendancy to New York City, was the driving force for territorial expansion in the Old Southwest, and fostered trade between Europe and the United States. No other American commodity achieved such regal status. The moral justification and the political and legal defense of slavery followed in the wake of cotton's march across America.

Northerners played a leading role in the cotton economy of the South and its accompanying racial disaster. Racial animosity and hypocrisy have been an underappreciated but fundamental aspect of the white North, both before and after the Civil War. This racial hatred severely impeded black mobility—physically, economically, and intellectually. To examine racial attitudes in the white North from 1800 to the 1930s will disabuse any wishful thinking about the possibility of black equality after the Civil War. The actions of white Northerners provide a near-perfect guide for the dismal future of the freedman. If the one to two percent of a population of blacks in the North could not be assimilated, it would be hopeless to assume that larger numbers would be accepted. Social control would ensue. By creating an inhospitable and exclusionary environment, the North helped entrap blacks in the cotton South. Had the North been otherwise, 90 percent of black Americans would not have lived in the South on the eve of World War I.

In 1930 cotton production bore a striking resemblance to the methods of the antebellum era. Within a few years, successful development of the mechanical cotton picker would render black farm labor useless by the 1950s. The cotton price collapse of the Great Depression toppled King Cotton, which forever after would depend on government subsidies. The beginning of an effective attack on America's firmly entrenched system of legal segregation would come a few years later, and World War II would soon inspire African Americans to challenge America's racial system. The civil

rights movement of the 1960s would put an end to legal segregation but not to America's racial dilemma.

Cotton has long since vanished as an economic powerhouse in America, but the relics of cotton—a black underclass in the North and South, with its destructive behavioral characteristics—remain long after slavery, sharecropping, and legal segregation have disappeared. The tale winds through the interconnected worlds of finance, politics, diplomacy, and technology, and is built upon powerful personalities, the hunger for money and power, and the maelstrom of race.

### The Silent Issue at the Constitutional Convention

*I know of no country, indeed, where the love of money has taken stronger hold on the affections of men [than in the United States]. . . . The love of wealth is therefore to be traced, either as a principal or accessory motive, at the bottom of all Americans do. . . . [The white Northerner's] acquisitive ardor surpasses the ordinary limits of human cupidity; he is tormented by the desire for wealth, he boldly enters upon every path that fortune opens to him . . . , and the avidity in the pursuit of gain amounts to a form of heroism. . . .*

—Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835

BY MANY ACCOUNTS the Constitutional Convention of 1787 was a profound manifestation of the American passion for liberty and freedom, a hunger that animated the country literally from the beginning. This depiction is easy to accept. Who doesn't wish to believe in the moral, egalitarian, and democratic origins of one's country? But in this rose-colored tale, we have left out a great deal. The Constitutional Convention, far from being an exalted meeting of the minds,

was often a fractious struggle where lofty ideals were subsumed beneath the deep anxieties of America's founders. Here we look past the rhetoric—so far removed from today's politicians and celebratory historians and thus easily romanticized—to focus on the far more mundane but revealing realities of the convention. What we find, again and again, is a desire for economic development that trumped almost all else. For this hodgepodge of not often “united” states, the need to make money demanded a semblance of unity and collective purpose. And toward this end, enormous compromises were made, agreements that would make America an economic powerhouse but one with serious social ills. Economic self-interest and national growth complemented each other from the start.

The Constitutional Convention affords an appropriate beginning for the story of cotton and the black experience in America. While there was no cotton production to speak of at the time, within decades the cotton boom would radically redirect the country and become a virulent example of the oft-repeated American pattern of land speculation, settlement, commerce, and economic vitality. In contrast to cotton, the importance of race was apparent right from the nation's colonial beginnings. North and South alike profited from the importation of African men, women, and children. By the time of the convention, many of the delegates believed that slavery was an essential feature of their state, even if some of them claimed to despise the institution and others believed that the sale of persons would eventually disappear. Thus cotton was not even a part of the consciousness of the new nation while the bondage of human beings soon was very much embedded in the American brain (and ledger sheet). Before long, an insignificant crop would become the engine of the American economy, and the thorny



practice of slavery, far from dying out, would become even more vital for the expansion of King Cotton.

At the convention the issue of slavery was subordinated to union as the delegates confronted a choice: a nation with slavery, or no nation without slavery. While Americans are taught to revere the Founding Fathers as statesmen with exalted ideals, these men were earthbound and very much concerned with business and economic survival. The convention was largely provoked not by ideals but by the need to impose order on the commercial chaos that resulted from the government under the Articles of Confederation. At the time of the convention, foreign intervention, squabbling among states, Indian occupation, confusion over land ownership, the lust for more land, and a shortage of settlers hampered economic viability. Despite some prosperity, the Federalists who initiated the convention saw the advantages of a strong central government and the perils of state sovereignty. The priorities, fears, hopes, visions, and obligations of the delegates and the states became clear as the Constitution was forged through debate and compromise.

Nothing on the economic horizon in 1787 suggested a massive demand for slave labor. Accordingly, while the price of slaves might be volatile for years at a time, eventually the price would be determined by the profit earned from their forced labor. Without profit or the expectation of profit, slavery could not be maintained exclusively as a social system. Some of the delegates assumed and hoped that slavery would therefore wither away over a period of time. Connecticut's Oliver Ellsworth cautioned against interference, for "Slavery in time will not be a speck in our country." His Connecticut colleague Roger Sherman thought that "the abolition of slavery seemed to be going on in the U.S." and that the "good sense of the several States" would mean the end of the institution. Later, at the Pennsylvania ratifying convention,

James Wilson expressed a similar opinion about the eventual demise of slavery: “and though the period is more distant than I could wish, yet it will produce the same kind of gradual change for the whole nation as was pursued in Pennsylvania.” This notion of slavery’s eventual death, plus the lack of any immediately foreseeable stimulus for slave expansion, gave the anti-slavery delegates comfort in their decisions to compromise.

At this point we must ask not only what Americans thought about slavery, but also what they thought about black people. The racial attitudes of the Founding Fathers were to influence the destiny of blacks in the cotton fields. The delegates’ thoughts about slavery are well known, their attitudes toward race much less familiar.

Benjamin Franklin opposed slavery, but his attitude toward blacks could be harsh. It is generally recognized that he owned household slaves for thirty years, even though as an old man he was president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Interestingly, Franklin’s belief in black inferiority contributed to his disdain for the slave trade. Franklin thought that “the importation of blacks . . . might ‘darken’ the superior beings, namely, ‘the lovely white and red.’” He never quite conquered his “fear and loathing of a people of different color” and did not relish the prospect of an “ever-blacker America.

On October 26, 1789, Franklin issued his plan for a committee of twenty-four Pennsylvania Abolition Society members who would oversee four subcommittees to deal with emancipated blacks. Franklin, who feared the consequences of masses of former slaves unleashed on American society, recommended that a special “branch of our national police” supervise emancipated slaves. “A committee of inspection” would “superintend the morals, general conduct, and ordinary situation of Free Negroes.” “ “A committee of Education”

was formed to “superintend the children” of “Free Blacks” who would be trained for the necessities of “future situations in life” and taught “moral and religious principles.”

“A committee of employ” would find “constant employment for those Free Negroes who are able to work, as the want of this would occasion poverty, idleness, and many vicious habits.” The jobs contemplated would “require but little skill.” Apprehensive white abolitionists like Benjamin Franklin wanted comprehensive white regulation of the lives of free blacks after emancipation.

### The Engine of American Growth, 1787-1861

In 1860, The antislavery unionist William Henry Seward, New York senator and governor and Abraham Lincoln’s right hand, identified the unanticipated cataclysmic events that had led to both astounding growth and the saga of cotton and race:

“The circumstances which the [founding] fathers did not clearly foresee were two, namely: the reinvigoration of Slavery consequent on the increased consumption of cotton, and the extension of the national domain across the Mississippi, and these occurred before 1820.”

SEWARD’ S TWO “circumstances”—cotton and land expansion—linked black America and cotton in a spiral that led to the fulfillment of his prophecy: the “irrepressible conflict” that was the Civil War. The sheer force of cotton’s bruising impact altered the dynamic of America’s economic, social, and political future. In the process, cotton and race-based slavery connected England, the American North, and the American South. Slave-produced cotton would

eventually engulf the country in a Civil War that left 700,000 Americans dead and hundreds of thousands permanently maimed or injured. Without cotton the South, and eventually the Confederacy, would never have been taken seriously by itself, the North, or any foreign power. Without slave-produced cotton, there would have been no Civil War. One cannot separate slavery from cotton.

Its story rests on a confluence of events: the revolution in the English textile industry, the invention of the cotton gin, the availability of massive American acreage suitable for cotton cultivation, and the existence and experience of a black slave labor force that could be moved about at will. These elements coalesced in the first decades of the nineteenth century and, along with an aggressive materialism and an intense racial prejudice, enabled cotton's emergence as a dominant force in the development of America.

Nowadays we see cotton mainly in its manufactured products— T-shirts, blue jeans, and towels—and in editorial-page rants about subsidies to cotton farmers. Although long absent from the center stage of business and economics, cotton continues to remind Americans of the stain of slavery and its legacy, and is generally allowed a brief appearance in historical narratives. Among American agricultural and industrial pursuits, only cotton still evokes a sad association. Despite harsh conditions, raising cattle, growing wheat or corn, mining coal, silver, or gold, or building railroads suggests energy, perseverance, and independence. The image of a black worker dragging a cotton sack through rows of cotton conjures up images of slavery or sharecropping.

Labor shortages—a clinical term—created slavery in colonial America. In order to exist over a long period of time in America, slavery needed an economic rationale. Psychological and social foundations alone could not sustain a slave culture. White-supremacy palaver was a mere rationalization of an economic system, not the basis of slavery. With no profitability or expected profitability, slaves in the North were gradually emancipated or sold south. The non-cotton border states, faced with no economic justification for slavery, also began selling slaves to the cotton South. In the nineteenth century, only cotton, white gold, provided the ideal medium for the growth of a vast slave culture. And so cotton, slavery, and race became intertwined. Responsibility for the system of slavery was pervasive—in the North, the South, and on the American frontier. Practically, pigmentation allowed slavery to exist on a large scale because black slaves could be distinguished from free whites.

The cotton empire of the nineteenth century became a truly integrated national and international operation, perhaps the first complex global business. Cotton connected the South with the North, the West, and Europe. Finance, politics, business structure, transportation, distribution, and international relations were all parts of the cotton web. A sophisticated business apparatus developed to service cotton production and the cotton textile industry. And because slavery was a crucial part of the cotton business, slaves could be bought and sold at a public market controlled by commercial law; slaves, a tragic form of collateral, could be financed.

The physical substance of cotton shifted as it left the hands of the men and women who weeded and picked it. Once cotton left the plantation, it became sanitized; quotidian balance sheets, receipts, and bills of lading obscured the taint of slavery. The amoral laws of supply

and demand and the natural laws of weather, pests, and soil fertility combined to create a new, powerful, but risk-filled reality: cotton's price per pound. The price of cotton, or the optimistic expectations for the price of cotton, in turn became an important determinant of America's destiny, influencing and even overcoming individual will and ethical behavior. When cotton was selling at four cents a pound in the 1840s, the price of slaves plummeted. When cotton hit ten cents, slavery expanded. At two dollars per pound during the Civil War, the Union army was besieged by cotton-induced corruption. At forty cents after the Civil War, white Union army veterans moved south to grow cotton and implement a new labor system for freedmen. With cotton at eight cents, and faced with battalions of cotton-destroying insects, white Northerners declared their venture a failure and went home.

At the time of the Constitutional Convention, Britain imported no cotton from the United States. Her textile industry received three-fourths of its cotton from colonies owned by Britain, France, Holland, and Portugal. The rest arrived from Smyrna. By 1807, America shipped 171,267 bales of cotton to her former mother country, more than half the cotton that landed at English ports. Between 1787 and 1807, America's share of the British cotton import market went from zero to 60 percent. But America's cotton story—its unassailable monopoly—was just beginning.

Here we concentrate on the role that money played in the development of cotton and the subsequent story of America's development. America's production revolution paralleled the cotton textile revolution in Britain. Both were sparked and fostered by inventions and technological improvements. The price of a pound of spun cotton yarn dropped by a staggering 90 percent from the time of the Constitutional Convention to the 1830s; this sparked a

gigantic consumer demand whereby European clothing switched from 75 percent wool to 75 percent cotton clothing. Despite the usual roller coaster supply and demand cycles, cotton prices remained remarkably stable during the antebellum period. Great Britain, the most powerful nation in the world, was dependant on its cotton textile industry. Although we may not wish to acknowledge it, the cotton boom was a perfect example of how machines and technology control human destiny. It also showed how the absence of technology—that is, the inability to replace humans for the cotton production tasks of weeding and picking—exacerbated the need for black labor. Over the course of the nineteenth century, human behavior adjusted to these new machines, resulting in a combustible combination of staggering economic growth, material improvement, and human misery.

The cotton business spread from the farm, to the merchant, to the mill, and to the consumer. Cotton influenced national politics and expansion policies, and spawned a vast and diverse network of interconnected relationships. Individuals migrated or were forced to migrate because of cotton. Commercial ties bound the North, South, and West while Europe was brought into the cotton web directly and indirectly through trade, finance, and diplomacy. Cotton demanded envy, fear, and respect.

From 1800 to 1860, cotton production provoked human and territorial expansion at a blistering pace. While it was not the sole factor in America's rise to economic power, the staple export commodity was, according to Douglass North, "the major independent influence on the evolving pattern of interregional trade. . . . In short, cotton was the most important proximate cause of expansion."

During this period, the lure of cotton and the anticipation of wealth generated a significant internal migration into the new cotton states— Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas. The scope of the slave migration was enormous; the hardship was manifest and the separation of slave families devastating. A smaller but important migration of whites also followed the cotton trail. Some Northerners settled in the coastal cities where they became cotton middlemen. Others became planters, or educators, or entered the commercial world. The migration—black slaves, Southern and Northern whites—all moved predominantly to areas in which cotton could be grown or traded. Properly run cotton farms were very much businesses, with trappings similar to Northern commercial ventures.

Cotton may have been powerful, but cotton production was risky. The statistics charting cotton's rise do not capture the very real perils that cotton planters faced. Potential failure was everywhere for a planter: price, weather, insects, debt, supply and demand, management, soil depletion, racial strife, and labor shortages. The result was an increase in American cotton production from virtually nothing in 1787 to over 4,000,000 bales weighing five hundred pounds on the eve of the American Civil War. The number of slaves increased from 700,000 to four million. Sixty-five to seventy percent were directly or indirectly involved with cotton production. Slavery only spread where cotton could be grown. Slaves were so valuable that they could not be used in dangerous work such as constructing levees on the Mississippi River.

The union of cotton and slavery was never successfully challenged by other enterprises. Southern manufacturing and mining enterprises could not compete with cotton for slave labor. Efforts to use slave labor in industry in the early part of the nineteenth century succumbed to



the price of cotton, as the upward surge of cotton prices—from ten cents a pound in 1811 to thirty-four cents in 1817, and from nine cents in 1830 to fifteen cents in 1838—drove slave values higher. Slaves were more valuable in the cotton fields than elsewhere.

As a result, the instances of small-scale industrial slavery were limited and generally unsuccessful. Although it was theoretically possible for industrial activities to absorb more slave labor, it would be highly speculative to think that slave labor could have been used on a large scale in urban industrial ventures over a long period of time in the United States. The real question is whether a significant number of slaves could have been absorbed in enterprises other than cotton production. Ultimately the answer was no.

America dominated the export trade to Great Britain:

British and American Raw Cotton Trade (Pounds)		
	BRITISH COTTON IMPORTS	AMERICAN COTTON EXPORTS TO BRITAIN (with % of total British cotton imports)
1800	56,010,000	16,180,000 (28%)
1830	263,961,000	201,947,000 (77%)
1840	592,488,000	477,521,000 (81%)
1850	663,577,000	474,705,000 (72%)
1860	1,390,939,000	1,230,607,000 (88%)

The numbers reveal an absolute dependency of the most powerful nation in the nineteenth century world, Great Britain on American slave-produced raw cotton.

Indeed, the power of cotton in the nineteenth century was fully comparable to that of oil in the twentieth century. As early as 1839, Americans in the North not the South threatened Great Britain by deliberately withholding cotton. .

The cotton linkages—between North and South, South and West, and the United States and Europe—can be seen clearly through the prism of New York City. Although geographically a Northern metropolis, New York was the nineteenth-century hub for much of America's

commerce, and cotton was no exception. A look at New York's role in the cotton trade reveals fascinating alliances and deep bonds between North and South, built on profit and personal relations. Southerners claimed, with a certain chagrin, that 40 percent of all cotton revenues landed in New York. The mundane commercial aspects of the cotton business were available for all to witness; the players—the financier, the shipper, the insurer, the factor, the broker, the mill owner, the mill worker, the merchant—were exempt from the taint of slavery. New York City's overwhelming anti-black attitude reinforced its rewarding Southern orientation.

### The North: For Whites Only, 1800-1865

*The North has nothing to do with the negroes. I have no more concern for them than I have for the Hottentots. They are God's poor; they always have been and always will be so everywhere. . . . The laws of political economy will determine their position and the relations of the two races. Congress can not contravene those.—William H. Seward, Secretary of State, 1866*

THE CASE for Northern white complicity in the cementing of cotton and race may be proved beyond a reasonable doubt. In order to understand why freed slaves lacked mobility after the Civil War and were virtually chained to the cotton fields, it is necessary first to look thoroughly at antebellum racial animosity in the North. There whites simply did not want blacks in their society. White Northern racial attitudes are generally dismissed with a cursory reference to racism and prejudice. In reality the blatant racial bigotry of the North played a vital role in consigning blacks to a life in the cotton fields by impeding and even curtailing their physical and economic mobility, thus furthering the entrapment of most blacks in the South

after the Civil War. White America's true racial attitudes and its hypocrisy were fully on display in the North. The roots of pervasive racial animosity there were historically deep, with profound economic consequences for the post-Civil War period. The actual living conditions and the political and social status of blacks in the antebellum North thus deserve important attention; they complete our vision of the devastating difficulties of being black in America before the Civil War, and they foreshadow the postwar period in which blacks were emancipated but cotton remained king.

For all the differences between the white North and the white South, they shared a fundamental sense that the black population was an unwanted source of trouble. And the root of this shared racial animosity was simple: money triumphed. The relationship of economics and race in America was driven by profit. Blacks were brought to America as slaves to make money for their owners. When there was no money to be made, they were sold south to be used as laborers in staple agriculture—the only real alternative. Before black slaves were used on a large scale, there had to be at least the expectation of an urgent economic need. Race-based slavery was suitable for plantation work, as we have seen, because of the pigmentation distinction, the financing characteristics of cotton farming, and the assumption of cultural inferiority.

When it had no more slaves, the North wished to rid itself of its remaining free black population. There was no compelling economic need for free blacks in the North because of the influx of millions of white immigrants. White Northern workers could easily say that they did not want black workers competing for jobs and thereby lowering wage scales. This racial reasoning existed in tandem with a firmly held white Northern conviction that blacks were lazy, profligate, shiftless, and immoral—a conviction that, ironically, would have rendered

blacks uncompetitive. This contradiction was never fully tested because of the lack of economic necessity. When a temporary but immediate economic urgency occurred, as in the case of a white labor strike, white Northern employers quickly reacted by hiring racially detested blacks. Only when white immigration was curtailed during World War I was the North forced to “import” millions of black laborers. This is economics, with a racial twist.

All too often our simplified vision of American history goes something like this: the North, led by Abraham Lincoln, fought the Civil War first to preserve the Union and later to end slavery. Because of the virtually complete association of slavery and race as an exclusively black people. But the truth is far more hopeless. We forget that antislavery for the most part also meant anti-black. White Americans have decoupled the horrors of slavery from the condition of free blacks. In a fit of national self-congratulation, Americans have applauded emancipation and relapsed into historical amnesia with respect to the condition of blacks in the North.

Following the Constitutional Convention, most Northern states abolished existing slavery within the next three decades. But after slavery was banned, these states and new ones too instituted a wide range of “black laws” aimed to suppress and limit the roles of blacks. These ranged from denial of the right to vote to outright exclusion from the community. In the nineteenth century, even where few free blacks lived in the North, they were largely detested and subject to discrimination. Even in the new territories of the West, where there were small numbers of slaves or free blacks, whites enacted exclusion laws and harsh “black codes.” In both the old North and the new West, whites were enormously fearful of a black migratory invasion; they passed legislation favoring impractical colonization schemes and were outspoken about

keeping free blacks, as well as slaves, out of the new territories. During and after the Civil War, white Northerners created a “containment policy” which effectively condemned blacks to the cotton fields of the South.

Yale’s president Timothy Dwight’s attitude was pervasive. In 1810, Timothy Dwight wrote:

[T]hese people (free blacks) . . . are, generally, neither able, nor inclined to make their freedom a blessing to themselves. . . They have no economy; and waste, of course, much of what they earn. They have little knowledge either of morals or religion. They are left, therefore, as miserable victims to sloth, prodigality, poverty, ignorance, and vice.

The racial proclivity of the antebellum white North provides the clue as to why 90 percent of all blacks in America lived in the South on the eve of World War I, despite oppressive conditions, and why there was no mass movement of free blacks to the North after emancipation. Blacks constituted only 2 percent of the North’s population. The white North’s fear of a large-scale black migration was tantamount to an obsession.

### King Cotton Buys a War

*If slavery was the cornerstone of the Confederacy, cotton was its foundation. At home its social and economic institutions rested upon cotton; abroad its diplomacy centered around the well-known dependency of Europe, especially England and France, upon the uninterrupted supply of cotton from the southern states.—Frank L. Owsley*

COTTON provided the South with the determined mind-set, the financial credit, and the fearsome gravitas needed to initiate the conflagration that was the American Civil War. And fundamentally embedded in cotton power was race-based slavery. The consequences of the cotton-and-race connection were profound. Any discussion of cotton’s ability to generate revenue and credit, buy arms, or influence politics is directly and unambiguously linked to race.

The South's only economic resource was slave-produced cotton. The other slave-produced staples—tobacco, sugar, and rice—were not relevant. Without cotton, Southern leaders had nothing to back up their increasingly fiery secessionist rhetoric. In the long war years, cotton would provide credibility for the government, arms for the military, a basis for tax revenue, and a diplomatic strategy for the fledgling Confederate States of America.

The North, too, had to confront the power of cotton, and had to grapple with the crop's black labor force both during and after the Civil War. Even before the bloody conflict had ended, the North had formulated a policy that would retain former slaves in the cotton fields. Northern politicians and military officials would accept no other solution for the millions of black men and women across the South. While the story of cotton's role in the Civil War lacks the human drama of the battlefield or the Emancipation Proclamation, the economic, financial, and strategic importance of cotton was very much a part of the war's tragic saga. From the beginning of the war, cotton formed the basis of the South's overarching strategy to force Great Britain into open recognition of the Confederacy. Although we think of the Civil War as being confined to bloody battlefields, the struggle's foreign policy ramifications loomed large, including American, Canadian, British, and French priorities. Cotton was of course vital to Britain, but her attitudes toward slavery, race, commerce, Canadian security, and American aggressiveness also became factors. Britain's support of the Confederacy lengthened the war considerably; her own imperial and economic interests reduced humanitarian feelings about slavery to relative insignificance. Canada, much praised as a haven for fugitive slaves, proved to be just as exclusionary for free blacks as the American West. British and Canadian

racial policies before, during, and after the war further reinforced the entrenched racial antipathy of white America. Moreover Britain's failure to reconstruct its slave colonies foreshadowed America's relegation of its former slaves to the Southern cotton fields.

Clues to the continuing link between cotton and race may easily be discerned during the Civil War. Cotton's brute commercial influence and irrepressible attractiveness were highly in evidence throughout the war. Although Britain technically remained neutral, its bald need for cotton shaped an involved and mutually advantageous relationship with the Confederacy. Afterward, the indispensable product would demand a free but subservient black population dedicated to its cultivation.

Cotton's role was quite significant during the war. It did not bring Great Britain to its knees because of a surplus of cotton in Great Britain in 1861. This prolonged the time necessary for British mills to feel the pinch a cotton shortage. The resulting unemployment and social unrest became apparent in the fall of 1862 when Union forces had stopped the Confederate advance at Antietam. The Confederacy paid an extraordinary price for ignoring the fundamental rules of supply and demand. But, cotton was critically used to as barter for arms from Great Britain. In addition, cotton was ultimately used as a financing tool by 1863. The epitome of cotton-backed financing was the deservedly famous Erlanger cotton bond of March 1863. This bond paid large commissions, raised only a limited amount of money, and failed to hold its value, but the concept behind it remains prescient and brilliant. The Erlanger bond was the most imaginative financing instrument of the Civil War and has remained relevant as a sophisticated international security designed to trade on multiple European exchanges. The bond underscored the importance of cotton and the interconnectedness of the cotton world. The Erlanger cotton bond was, in many ways, the forerunner of modern finance.

While the Civil War put ended slavery and fundamentally changed the nation, we must also acknowledge that the war did not alter two foundational aspects of American history: the subordinate status of African Americans and the pivotal position of cotton. As the historian Harold Woodman wrote, “If the war had proved that King Cotton’s power was far from absolute, it did not topple him from his throne, and many found it advantageous to serve him.” In the years to come, those who had fought in the Civil War, white and black, Northern and Southern alike, would have to adjust to new relationships to the still indispensable commodity, cotton. The guideposts for the future—an ever-increasing demand for cotton, the reluctant need for a black labor force, the abhorrence of white Northerners for blacks living in their midst, and America’s relentless commercial priorities—would in many ways look much like the guideposts of the past.

### The Racial Divide and Cotton Labor, 1865 – 1930

*White ingenuity and enterprise ought to direct black labor. Northern capital should flow into these rich cotton-lands on the borders of the Atlantic and Gulf. . . . The negro race . . . would exist side by side with the white for centuries being constantly elevated by it, individuals of it rising to an equality with the superior race. . . . [Cotton production requires] the white brain employing the black labor. . . .—New York Times, February 26, 1865*

*We cannot produce cotton enough for the wants of the world. We should be in the position of South Africa . . . but for the faithful, placable, peaceful, industrious, lovable colored man; for industrious and peaceful he is compared with any other body of colored men in the world—not up to the standard of the [white person] in the colder North. . . . It is certain we must grow more cotton to meet the demands of that indispensable product. We cannot afford to lose the Negro. We have urgent need of all and more [to produce cotton]. . . .—Andrew Carnegie, 1903*

W. E. B. DU BOIS may have called Reconstruction a “splendid failure,” but it was a failure nevertheless. The former slave gained mobility to move from cotton farm to cotton



farm in the South, but not to move to the industrial North until the exigencies of World War I. The white North experienced no conversion to racial tolerance during the war; indeed it was relieved that blacks would remain in the South rather than move north. Despite emancipation and a brief phase of political enfranchisement, America's pattern of racial animosity remained constant.

Now that the Union had not been sundered by the Civil War, now that the country had been saved from the brink of self-destruction, the question arose, What happens next? Who would assist the freedmen to end their bondage in the cotton fields? Would their committed, long-term ally be Congress, the president, the Supreme Court, the Republican party, the white soldiers of the Union army, the white Northern business community, white Northern philanthropists, or Northern state governments? As white Southern resistance to black equality immediately sought to create a racial caste system, each of the white Northern groups continued to view the black population as inferior and as second-class citizens, undeserving of the rights taken for granted by white Americans. Each group, in effect, helped create a subordinate role for black Americans in the cotton fields. In addition, Americans were preoccupied with new commercial goals that excluded black America. The underlying, and often underappreciated, assumption of Reconstruction was that blacks would remain in the South and cultivate cotton. In the years leading up to the Civil War, more than 90 percent of African Americans lived in the South. Fifty years later, nothing had changed: 90 percent of all black Americans still lived in the South. If conditions were so deplorable in the South, why was there so little movement north of a growing black population? Now that they were free, why didn't blacks flee the lands to which they had been chained for generations? Why didn't they flock to Detroit, New York, and Chicago?

The story is terribly simple. Although they were no longer bound to a plantation, they were stuck between a white North that didn't want them and a white South that desperately needed them. African Americans were contained in the South by a web of forces that included the amoral economic imperatives of cotton, white Northern racial antipathy, and the process of reconciliation between North and South.

While political turmoil over Reconstruction found Radical Republicans, moderate Republicans, and Democrats at loggerheads in 1865, the real economic adjustment was occurring on countless Southern farms and plantations even before the war ended. Cotton seeds were planted in the soil of a newly surrendered South. As it had for several generations, the surviving large plantation system required black labor. A series of attempts were made to adjust to a new financial environment. Experiments begun during the war in the Sea Islands, Georgia, and in Davis Bend, Mississippi, succumbed to the fierce postwar desire to return to normal. And on the cotton fields, normalcy was simple: a return of private property to Southern owners, and to the belief that whites could best manage cotton production (and the lives of African Americans). White Northerners during and after the war flocked to the South, hoping to share in the most basic of American pursuits: growing rich. As the Freedmen's Bureau sought to monitor and manage the relationship between black labor and white plantation owners, a new caste labor system evolved to accommodate the peculiarities of cotton and the dictates of finance. After the Civil War, the economic fate of African Americans remained irrevocably intertwined with cotton. The former slaves, now called freedmen, had no choice. As the war ended, demand for cotton was high and so was its price. Indian and Egyptian crops may have been given a boost by the Civil War, but they had not displaced the preeminence of American cotton, as America soon

regained three-fourths of the world cotton export market. Much of America, from Wall Street bankers to poor farmers, was still ruled by that seemingly timeless calculation, the price per pound of cotton. Cotton at forty cents a pound in 1865 was a multiple of the ten to eleven cents a pound before the war. This amount a reflection of the laws of supply and demand and a complex determinant of American history—led multitudes of white Northerners to undertake cotton cultivation.

The federal government knew that the crop would play a vital role in getting the nation back on its financial feet and in deciding what to do about the surrendered South. The North's only means of economic retribution against the former Confederacy—in the absence of any Southern manufacturing capacity or other profitable endeavor—was a tax on cotton.

Eastern financiers coldly calculated the importance of the restoration of cotton production. Their goals were two: repayment of the war debt and buttressing of the financial system. These same businessmen also enthusiastically organized and invested in rail links between Northern cities and Southern cotton-producing areas. Private property was sacrosanct to white Northerners, so it was natural for plantations to be restored to their prewar owners. It was also conventional wisdom that the newly freed slaves needed to be supervised by white men. The white North endorsed free labor as a replacement for slavery but left white control firmly in place.

But simultaneous to American's eager return to cotton production, another American tradition had abruptly come to an end. Slavery was over. Following the South's capitulation, the system that most of the Founding Fathers had hoped would "wither away" was now officially

dead. What was to be done with the former slaves? Frederick Douglass rhetorically posed the question, “What shall we do with the Negro?” His answer, “Do nothing. . . . Give him a chance to stand on his own legs! Leave him alone!” Douglass feared that state intervention might raise the specter of blacks as “wards of the state.” He thought that ensuring suffrage, civil rights, general property rights, and the end of discrimination was sufficient protection. Radical Republicans, who wanted a drastic reformation of the South to protect the freedmen, sought a deep government involvement, even land redistribution. As early as January 1863 the *New York Times* asked, “If the [Emancipation Proclamation] makes the slaves actually free . . . there will come the further task of making them work. . . . All this . . . opens a vast and most difficult subject.” Almost all Northern and Southern whites considered blacks an inferior race; at best they might improve under the guardianship of whites. But neither the federal government nor ordinary Americans had come to any consensus on how to treat the seceding states or the freedmen. The nation pondered how they might become part of the free-labor system. There was no model to emulate. Would the plantation system be replaced by smaller agricultural units? Would the freedmen be given land? Would these men and women work as wage laborers, or would a new system emerge? What political and civil rights would they be given? Despite the confusion, two things were clear: whatever system evolved, freedmen would remain in the South, and they would cultivate cotton. The containment policy of keeping freed slaves in the South during the Civil War had relieved the anxiety of white Northerners. Superficial attempts to move freedmen north had foundered. Legislation designed to encourage dispersal of freed blacks in the North was met with disapproval. In April 1864, Kentucky senator Garrett Davis proposed that Congress redistribute blacks to Northern states in “proportion to their white population”; the Senate “scorned” his plan. In June 1864 a “milder form” of dispersal

was presented by West Virginia senator Waitman T. Willey and met with an equally negative response. Willey wanted to give the Freedmen's Bureau permission to contact Northern governors and city leaders about sending freedmen north. This, Senator Willey thought, would relieve labor shortages and provide guidance for the freedmen. Radical Republican Charles Sumner thought the dispersal was "entirely untenable."

The Republican Party had managed a requisite degree of unity in conducting a war over the survival of the Union, but the complicated challenge of readmitting the seceding states and dealing with freedmen created enormous strains within the party. Expediency proved to be a powerful force in party machinations. The issue of black suffrage was tempting to political opportunists who could portray themselves as idealists. The black vote in the South, Republicans thought, could be instrumental in perpetuating Republican ascendancy.

In theory the white North could have dictated terms and conditions to the utterly defeated South, which it occupied. In just four years of fighting the white South lost 265,000 men; 25 percent of its white men "of productive age were dead or incapacitated." In Mississippi alone, of the 78,000 soldiers and officers that the state provided for the Confederacy, 35 percent perished; 12,000 died in battle and 15,000 succumbed to disease. Transportation and infrastructure throughout the South were disrupted as the war destroyed towns and cities, roads, railroads, and bridges. Farms were in disrepair. Large numbers of freedmen were destitute. Despite the North's dominant position, no firm plan for Reconstruction existed—nor could one have existed.

Reconstruction witnessed the passage of an impressive amount of legislation that supported the rights of freedmen. With these laws the federal government (still dominated by white Northerners) attempted to impose rules and values that its own constituencies—even with their tiny black communities—had not accepted. The legislation had to be tested locally, not in

Washington. It had to be interpreted through the judicial process; the new laws would require enforcement. Abstract concepts of freedom and citizenship, embedded in Reconstruction legislation, were crushed when applied to the real world of nineteenth century America. In the end, the North had not and would not shed white blood in order to accomplish black equality. Within this environment the standard story of the postwar years, the North wished to get on with business; the reconciliation of white America was seen as a far better alternative than Reconstruction, which had become a nuisance. America's aggressive materialism remained the most important determinant in post-Civil War America. Reconstruction has even been called a "Yankee euphemism for capitalist expansion." Areas of agreement, especially cotton-based commercialism, were much stronger than areas of disagreement.

The national need to reestablish cotton production, its priority among white Northerners and Southerners, and the unambiguous preference to cultivate a cash crop meant that cotton would continue to be paramount. It would defeat any attempts toward self-sufficient diversification in the agricultural South. Farmers would grow cotton to make money while they neglected food crops; private credit would be available only for cotton production, thus reinforcing the singular obsession with cotton cultivation.

It is critical to remember that all roads from the cotton fields led to the credit markets, and the credit markets led to New York. King Cotton was chained to the financial world. The creditor would lend only to produce a revenue stream that would pay off the debt. The world of cotton conformed to the financial structure that accounted for the risks. Certainly no ameliorating circumstances were available in the nineteenth-century world. In 1899 a Georgia cotton planter and merchant succinctly summarized the financial process in testimony before the U.S. Industrial Commission:

Question: How do they [Southern farmers] get supplies?

Answer: Through merchants.

Question: And the merchants?

Answer: Through the banks.

Question: And where do the local banks get money?

Answer: New York.

The backbone of the credit system was the notorious crop “lien” laws, which codified antebellum practices. Before the Civil War, planters had at times resorted to loans that were based on pledges of a crop or a crop about to be planted. In other words, the crop was mortgaged to the lender in return for a loan. After the war, too, a farmer would pledge his crop to a lender in return for credit—sometimes to more than one lender. But state governments soon introduced the crop lien law, hoping to encourage lending in order to stimulate much-needed cotton production. This law dictated that a lender was entitled to a creditor’s crop before anyone else or before any other claim. The infamous crop lien was not specifically designed as a conspiracy to defraud farmers. The crop lien arose because it was needed; it evolved because lenders had no choice. If a repayment problem occurred, the crop lien made it clear that the lender with a crop lien would have first right to the cotton crop. Because of the fragmented nature of cotton farming, the terms of a crop lien—interest rate, amount, marketing terms for the cotton, and payment date—were flexible because no one knew how much cotton would be produced, when the cotton might be sold, or what expenses would be. Mississippi enacted the first crop lien law in 1867; it was optimistically called “An Act for the Encouragement of Agriculture.” Most Southern states followed suit with similar legislation.

The stringent conditions of the South's postwar financial system came into being because, as C. Vann Woodward argued, there "was no other means of getting credit." Finance is amoral; it will respond to the theoretical opportunity to make money within an existing legal and cultural framework. Retrospective criticism of the South's credit system is without substantive alternatives that could have met the problems of a once-a-year payment to farmers, the risks of cotton production, the small-farm fragmentation of cotton cultivation, and the overwhelming priority of white America to reestablish cotton production. How could cotton laborers be paid weekly or monthly if the farmer had his money only once a year? What creditor would lend money if other creditors had a prior claim? The economic demand for cotton allowed a viable but harsh system to develop. Interest rates may have seemed high and the legal system may have seemed exploitative, but no alternative presented itself. Cotton was too important to discard, so the crop-lien system prevailed. As we shall see, technology, not morality or politics, would finally revolutionize the cotton production system.

The invisible hand of finance played a crucial role in dictating the conditions of cotton production. The crop lien was merely a logical extension of the financial system. It was easy to mock this device as "one of the strangest contractual relationships in the history of finance." The humor vanishes under the matter-of-fact reasoning of a South Carolinian in 1880: "A mortgage given in January or February on a crop [that is] not to be planted until April is not taken as a first-class commercial security, and consequently the charges on the advances are heavy." A traditional banker would have been perplexed at the thought of loaning money for an unplanted crop, pledged for a loan whose amount was unspecified. After the Civil War the increase in cotton supply and the moderating of demand exacerbated the risk profile of



cotton production. The foreordained path of the cotton economy was due to financial logic, not Northern design.

The equally infamous sharecropping system evolved naturally from the dynamics of cotton production—expenses, revenues, credit requirements, management control, and risk. If we look at it purely as a financing device, the sharecropping arrangement would be considered a normal transaction appropriate for risky ventures. A straightforward loan either is unobtainable because of credit risk or, if obtainable, would have a prohibitively high interest rate. The lender wants a greater return to compensate for an abnormal or high incidence of risk. The borrower, in this case the black tenant, generally had no choice, because he had neither the money to purchase land nor supportive infrastructure. Cotton farming would certainly qualify as a business that demanded some form of equity or higher return.

But it was the cotton economy and America's racial attitudes, not the sharecropping system, that created black poverty. At its worst, abusive administration of the sharecropping system caused unimaginable hardships on blacks. The cotton world, slavery, segregation, and sharecropping have been blamed for a host of stereotypical behavioral problems that have plagued black America even after the Great Migration. Indeed, the sharecropping system was arbitrary and highly susceptible to exploitation. It was also a logical development of the power of cotton within the financial, technological, social, and racial context of white America. With cotton production as the goal, sharecropping was a predictable outcome. To leave cotton production for factory work would have been a solution for blacks, but that alternative was not available until the labor shortages of World War I. Mechanization and chemical herbicides, not morality or justice, determined the fate of black farm labor.

Was it possible for a black person or a black community to succeed in the cotton South if white oppression and a white-administered labor system were removed? Here we must look to a near-perfect test case, the Mississippi Delta town of Mound Bayou, an all-black community established by freedmen. If there was any chance for a successful black cotton-farming enclave to exist in a white world, it could be observed at Mound Bayou. It was populated by blacks and governed by blacks, and the surrounding land was cultivated by blacks, with no white Southern intervention.

Mound Bayou failed. The fluctuations of the cotton market severely bruised Mound Bayou. Its shallow, fragile, and short-lived prosperity has been exaggerated. Because of national publicity, Mound Bayou became a symbol of black hope, but it never developed into a healthy economic community. The town became economically moribund in the early 1920s. Both its bank and its loan company failed. Great swings in the price of cotton were a large factor in the community's demise. The white Delta towns were subject to much of the same trauma caused by the cotton economy, but a more secure financial infrastructure allowed them to survive for another forty years.

In terms of production, the system worked. America maintained a dominant three-fourths share of the world export market, as cotton output increased from four million bales on the eve of the Civil War to over seventeen million bales in the 1920s.

## The Long-Awaited Mechanical Cotton Picker

The earliest patent for a mechanical cotton picker was issued in 1850 to Samuel S. Rembert and Jedediah Prescott for a machine that used spindles to pull the cotton from the bolls, thus leaving the cotton plant unharmed. (Ninety years later, the spindle became the basic design element for a workable machine.) Between 1850 and 1930, enterprising inventors and promoters received 750 patents for mechanical cotton pickers. Many were fakes.

Finally, the International Harvester Company developed the first practical mechanical cotton picker. In 1942, Fowler McCormick, chairman of International Harvester and a scion of Cyrus McCormick and John D. Rockefeller, publicly announced that Harvester had developed a commercially viable mechanical cotton picker. He emphasized the enormity of the task of developing the machine:

The International Harvester Company has been experimenting with mechanical cotton pickers for approximately 40 years. It has proved to be the most difficult designing and engineering job in the modern history of agricultural machinery. Up to now we have never said that we had a successful cotton picker.

The cotton world changed forever. Black and white farm labor was displaced. Cotton farms became truly corporate.

This journey through the vicissitudes of the cotton world has demonstrated again and again that the near fateful power of economics in human history cannot be denied. The destiny of most black Americans was tied to the cataclysmic explosion of cotton production in nineteenth century America. The pursuit of money saw no bounds in solving labor shortages created by the demands of cotton production. The connection between cotton and race began to unravel only when another labor shortage, this time during World War I, trumped prevailing white Northern racial animosity. The complete decoupling came only with two technologically

driven events, the practical advent of the mechanical cotton picker in the 1940s and the successful adoption of herbicides in the 1950s.

The consequences of this productive but unholy marriage of cotton and race were twofold: a powerful American advantage gained by a virtual monopoly of world cotton exports, and American's most serious social tragedy—slavery and the racial caste system endured by black America. Before cotton went the way of all monopolies, it had a profound social, economic, and political impact on America. Once considered royalty, cotton now survives on government handouts.

The mid-twentieth century technological revolution reinforced cotton's inevitable tendency toward large-scale farming operations. Expensive machines, chemicals, and irrigation required major investments that could be provided only by large producers. In an historical irony, the cotton states, America's most conspicuous adherents to the political theory of states' rights, now are able to produce cotton only because of support from the federal government. In another irony, American cotton producers, now armed with technologically advanced equipment and agricultural chemicals, face stiff competition from primitive cotton producers in countries like China, India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and those in West Africa. In America a ten-thousand-acre farm that might have required the labor of a thousand black families in the 1930s would require only a few workers today. Foreign cotton-producing countries today successfully compete with America, for the most part because of their own subsidies, tariff barriers, proximity to textile mills, and often harsh labor practices.

Few sympathize with the modern dilemma of the American cotton farmer, whose federal subsidies are lambasted by editorial pages as ideologically diverse as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. One may recall the glory days when the *New York Times* in 1865 expressed

a common sentiment that critical restoration of cotton production after the Civil War called for black labor managed by white brains. But cotton's demise in the last seventy years has left in its wake many rural Southern communities in dire economic and social straits. Large areas like the Mississippi Delta, once hailed as a cotton kingdom, are now characterized by large-scale farm operations, decrepit towns, a majority, often struggling black population, and economic hopelessness. In the last few years cotton has suffered a further blow as the surging price of corn has prompted a shift from cotton acreage to corn production.

Of course, cotton farming has been declared dead before—especially when synthetic fibers became competitors in the 1930s. If the price of grains drops precipitously, cotton farming may yet again rise. The 2011 floods in Pakistan and drought in China caused a short-lived spike in cotton prices and numerous breached contracts from Asian and Latin American mills.

What is the legacy of cotton for African Americans? Slavery and its descendants—legal segregation and sharecropping—are blamed for persistent black poverty, educational shortcomings, and destructive behavioral traits, from high rates of illegitimacy and single-parent families to a disproportionate incidence of crime. Even when the prerequisites of black plight did not exist in the North, the devastating inheritance remained for many Northern urban blacks. We must ask why do those cities today with major black populations and no (or minimal) history of slavery, legal segregation or sharecropping have the same racial issues as those cities and regions that did have them.

After generations with no connection to the cotton field, African Americans may be found among the elite in almost every aspect of American life. A large African-American middle class has developed. But a tragic, seemingly permanent underclass of African Americans continues to inhabit our nation's cities and rural areas.

For more than 150 years, America benefited enormously from cotton picked by African Americans. The economic world of cotton needed a workforce, and white America designated African Americans for the role. America no longer needs cotton, but it still bears cotton's human legacy.

# Appendix

## 1. COTTON PRICES IN CENTS PER POUND, WEIGHTED AVERAGE, 1800–1860

1800	44.0	1839	7.9
1802	14.7	1842	5.7
1805	23.0	1844	5.5
1811	8.9	1847	7.0
1815	27.3	1850	11.7
1817	29.8	1851	7.4
1822	11.5	1856	12.4
1830	8.4	1859	10.8
1835	15.2	1860	11.0

Source: Stuart Bruchey, *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy, 1790–1860: Sources and Readings* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967).

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## 2.. COTTON PRICES PER POUND IN NEW YORK AND LIVERPOOL, 1860–1865

NEW YORK (CENTS)				LIVERPOOL (PENCE)		
Season	Low	High	Average	Low	High	Average
1860–	1861	10 22	13.01	6.5	11.625	8.5
1861–	1862	20 51.5	31.29	12.25	29	18.37
1862–	1863	51 92	67.21	20	29.25	22.46
1863–	1864	68 189	101.5	21.5	31.25	27.17
1864–	1865	35 182	83.38	13	26	19.11

Sources: James L. Watkins, *King Cotton* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969); Harold D. Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers: Financing and Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800–1925* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990).

## 3. AMERICAN COTTON EXPANSION

	COTTON (bales)	ACREAGE COTTON PRODUCTION	AVERAGE PRICE (cents per pound)
1880	15,921,000	6,606,000	9.83
1890	20,937,000	8,653,000	8.59
1900	24,886,000	10,124,000	9.15
1910	31,508,000	11,609,000	13.96
1920	34,408,000	13,429,000	15.89
1930	42,444,000	13,932,000	9.46
1931	39,110,000	17,097,000	6

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C., 1960); Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers*; C. Wayne Smith and J. Tom Cothren, eds., *Cotton: Origin, History, Technology and Production* (New York: Wiley, 1999); Timothy Curtis Jacobson and George David Smith, *Cotton's Renaissance: A Study in Market Innovation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2001).