**King Cotton**

        In 1858 Senator James Henry Hammond of South Carolina replied to Senator William H. Seward of New York:

        "Without the firing of a gun, without drawing a sword, should they [Northerners] make war upon us [Southerners], we could bring the whole world to our feet. What would happen if no cotton was furnished for three years? . . England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her. No, you dare not make war on cotton! No power on earth dares make war upon it. Cotton is King."

Hammond, like most white Southerners, believed that cotton ruled not just in the South but in the United States and the world. Many economists agreed. In 1855, David Christy entitled his influential hook Cotton Is King. Cotton indeed drove the economy of the South, affected its social structure, and, during the Civil War, dominated international relations of the Confederacy through "cotton diplomacy."

**Cotton in the Antebellum Period**

In the early eighteenth century, long-staple cotton was grown in Georgia and on the Sea Islands of South Carolina, but it depleted the soil and proved unprofitable to market. The intensive and laborious hand method of picking out cotton seeds severely restricted the amount of cotton that could be prepared for making into cloth. Cotton could not compete with rice and indigo for commercialization, and Southern colonialists experimented with the crop primarily for domestic use. Despite some increased cotton production during a tobacco depression between 1702 and 1706, few attempted to produce cotton commercially before the Revolutionary War.
        Extensive production of cotton awaited the advent of Eli Whitney's cotton gin in the spring of 1793. To separate the seed from the cotton, gins first used spikes placed on rollers and then saws. The influence of the gin was instantaneous; soon Southern mechanics set up gins as far west as Mississippi. By 1804 the cotton crop was eight times greater than it had been the previous decade. The cotton gin made practical the use of the heavily seeded short-staple cotton, which could he grown in upland areas more readily than long-staple cotton. An increase in market demand growing out of England's textile industry ensured favorable prices and spurred the ascension of the short-staple cotton industry.
        Cultivation of cotton, on both small and large farms, utilized relatively simple methods. Hoe ridge cultivation was developed after 1800 with ridges set apart about three to six feet, depending on the fertility of the land. After 1830 farmers used V-shaped harrows, which were converted into cultivators, side harrows, and double shovels. (Harrows raked soil with metal teeth to remove debris and smoothed out and leveled the soil once it was broken; cultivators turned the soil under; shovels were used as more traditional plows and also turned the soil over while digging deep furrows.) Cultivation procedures changed little throughout the nineteenth century. A bed for the cotton had to be prepared by clearing out the old stalks from the previous crop. Sometimes these stalks were beaten down with clubs, but if they were large (four to five feet), they had to be pulled by hand. Manure or commercial fertilizer was placed as deeply as possible in the furrow. Usually the cotton bed was built up in February and March. The actual planting of the cotton seed in most areas was in April: early planters risked frost; late planters risked dry spells. Planting was done by hand. In about a month, the plants were thinned. The crop was cultivated with a sweep plowed between the rows four or five times and hoed by hand three or four times. In the middle of June, when they were anywhere from six inches to a foot high, the cotton plants bloomed. Around the last of July or first of August, forty-two to forty-five days after they had blossomed, the cotton bolls opened. Picking usually began about August 20. Most of the crop was ginned immediately after picking.
        Cotton prices fluctuated wildly over the years. Prices were high until 1819, then down, up, and down again. In 1837 they hit a crisis low and remained rather low until 1848. Prices rose sharply in 1849 and 1850 but dropped in 1851, though not as low as previously. Throughout the remainder of the 1850s prices rose.
        The average amount of seed cotton used to make a 400-pound bale of lint ranged from about 1,200 to 1,400 pounds. The bales had to be transported from the gins to a local market and then on to larger markets. Cotton was shipped to market continually from September through January. Wagons loaded with bales of cotton often lined roads. The moving of cotton demanded better roadbeds, sometimes even plank roads, near market towns. River transportation to seaports was common from market towns located on rivers or canals. Major cities grew up at railroad stations as rail lines began to link the hinterland to ports and then to the Northeast and Midwest.
        Improvements in the production and transportation of cotton and the new demand for the fiber led to a scramble for greater profits. To reap the most profits and to provide the labor needed for cotton picking, a large number of slaves were imported into South Carolina and Georgia, and slave labor became a valuable market throughout the South. The way into the Southern aristocracy was through the ownership of land and slaves, and the way to get land and slaves was to grow cotton: the crop provided the cash and credit to buy both. At this time, too, the cotton kingdom pushed ever westward with planters searching for new and richer soils to grow more white cotton with the labor of more black slaves. Ironically, just as abolition-1st sentiment was increasing in the United States, the invention of the cotton gin instigated a deeper entrenchment of slavery into the Southern economy and society.
        The Southern aristocracy, which slavery created, dominated Southern society and inhibited the development of efficient methods for soil use. In the face of soil exhaustion, Southern planters needed to extend control into the fresh lands of the western territories. Hence, territorial expansion became a sectional issue as both North and South realized that western lands were essential for the survival of the Southern slave culture.
        Most discussions of cotton dwell on the short period when cotton did rule as king. This "mature" period of cotton and slavery was not necessarily typical of or relevant to the earlier periods of plantation agriculture that accompanied the emergence of the cotton mono-culture. Discussions also tend to treat the South as one unit rather than the large and varied region it was. The cotton kingdom extended west through Texas and north about six hundred miles up the Mississippi River valley.
        Antebellum history often seems dominated by scenes of plantations worked by slaves. Although thousands of large plantations employed slave labor and produced most of the South's cotton, numerically there were more small farmers, mostly whites, who cultivated the upland areas. Many of these yeomen were subsistence farmers and produced only a surplus of cotton for market. Southern farmers who did not grow cotton sold some of their foodstuff to the planters. Cotton could bring prosperity or depression, according to changes in the market, and these fluctuations meant very differing experiences for whites, slaves, and antebellum free blacks of each different region of the South.
        When at its peak, the demanding cultivation and transportation of cotton required the labor of the majority of men, women, and children in the rural South. Most Southern life was regulated by the agricultural economy, and more and more over time, this came to mean the cotton economy. Although free workers and slaves pursued a diversity of agricultural and industrial occupations in the antebellum South, by 1850 the routine of taking care of the white-blossomed, white-bolled, short-staple cotton plants increasingly typified rural Southern existence.
        By 1860, cotton ruled the South, which annually exported two-thirds of the world supply of the "white gold." Cotton ruled the West and Midwest because each year these sections sold $30 million worth of food supplies to Southern cotton producers. Cotton ruled the Northeast because the domestic textile industry there produced $100 million worth of cloth each year. In addition, the North sold to the cotton-growing South more than $150 million worth of manufactured goods every year, and Northern ships transported cotton and cotton products worldwide.

<http://www.civilwarhome.com/kingcotton.htm>