



11

The Cotton Revolution

I. Introduction

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, the southern states experienced extraordinary change that would define the region and its role in American history for decades, even centuries, to come. Between the 1830s and the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, the American South expanded its wealth and population and became an integral part of an increasingly global economy. It did not, as previous generations of histories have told, sit back on its cultural and social traditions and insulate itself from an ex-

Eyre Crowe,
*Slaves Waiting for
Sale, Richmond,
Virginia*, 1861.
University of Vir-
ginia, The Atlantic
Slave Trade and
Slave Life in the
Americas.

panding system of communication, trade, and production that connected Europe and Asia to the Americas. Quite the opposite; the South actively engaged new technologies and trade routes while also seeking to assimilate and upgrade its most “traditional” and culturally ingrained practices—such as slavery and agricultural production—within a modernizing world.

Beginning in the 1830s, merchants from the Northeast, Europe, Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean flocked to southern cities, setting up trading firms, warehouses, ports, and markets. As a result, these cities—Richmond, Charleston, St. Louis, Mobile, Savannah, and New Orleans, to name a few—doubled and even tripled in size and global importance. Populations became more cosmopolitan, more educated, and wealthier. Systems of class—lower-, middle-, and upper-class communities—developed where they had never clearly existed. Ports that had once focused entirely on the importation of slaves and shipped only regionally became home to daily and weekly shipping lines to New York City, Liverpool, Manchester, Le Havre, and Lisbon. The world was slowly but surely coming closer together, and the South was right in the middle.

II. The Importance of Cotton

In November 1785, the Liverpool firm of Peel, Yates & Co. imported the first seven bales of American cotton ever to arrive in Europe. Prior to this unscheduled, and frankly unwanted, delivery, European merchants saw cotton as a product of the colonial Caribbean islands of Barbados, Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), Martinique, Cuba, and Jamaica. The American South, though relatively wide and expansive, was the go-to source for rice and, most importantly, tobacco.

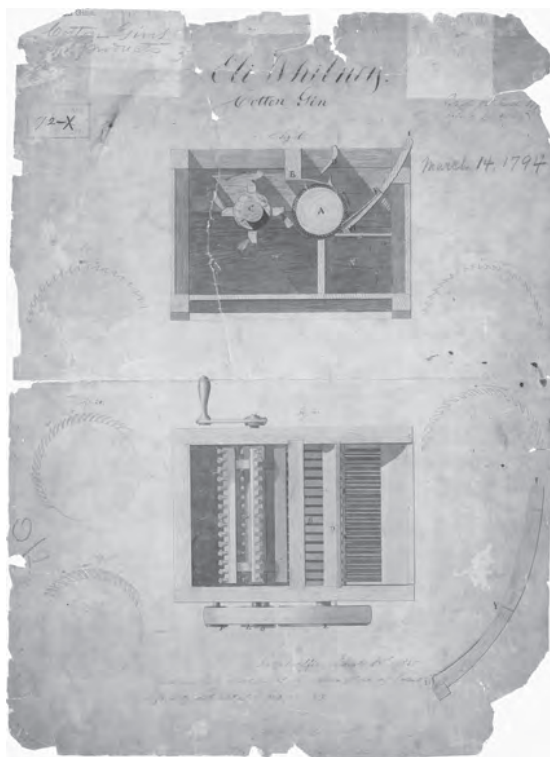
Few knew that the seven bales sitting in Liverpool that winter of 1785 would change the world. But they did. By the early 1800s, the American South had developed a niche in the European market for “luxurious” long-staple cotton grown exclusively on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.¹ But this was only the beginning of a massive flood to come and the foundation of the South’s astronomical rise to global prominence. Before long, botanists, merchants, and planters alike set out to develop strains of cotton seed that would grow farther west on the southern mainland, especially in the new lands opened up by the Louisiana Purchase of 1803—an area that stretched from New Orleans in the South to what is today Minnesota, parts of the Dakotas, and Montana.

The discovery of *Gossypium barbadense*—often called Petit Gulf cotton—near Rodney, Mississippi, in 1820 changed the American and

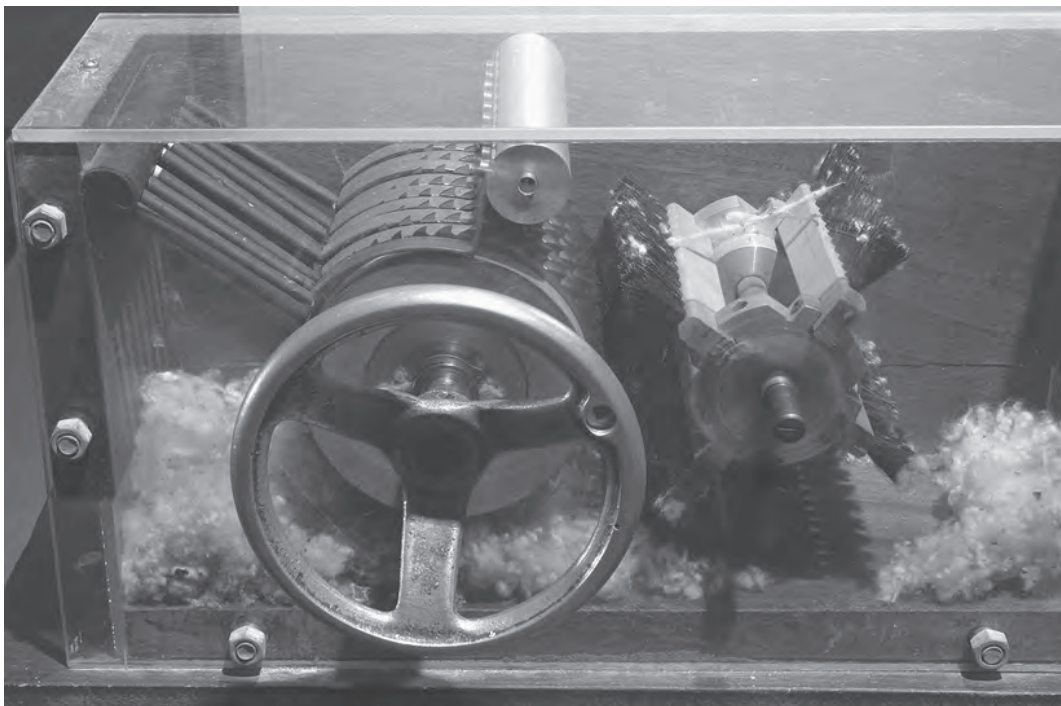


global cotton markets forever.² Petit Gulf, it was said, slid through the cotton gin—a machine developed by Eli Whitney in 1794 for deseeding cotton—more easily than any other strain. It also grew tightly, producing more usable cotton than anyone had imagined to that point. Perhaps most importantly, though, it came up at a time when Native peoples were removed from the Southwest—southern Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and northern Louisiana. After Indian removal, land became readily available for white men with a few dollars and big dreams. Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, the federal government implemented several forced migrations of Native Americans, establishing a system of reservations west of the Mississippi River on which all eastern peoples were required to relocate and settle. This system, enacted through the Indian Removal Act of 1830, allowed the federal government to survey, divide, and auction off millions of acres of land for however much bidders were willing to pay. Suddenly, farmers with dreams of owning a large plantation could purchase dozens, even hundreds, of acres in the fertile Mississippi River Delta for cents on the dollar. Pieces of land that would cost thousands of dollars elsewhere sold in the 1830s for several hundred, at prices as low as 40¢ per acre.³

Thousands rushed into the Cotton Belt. Joseph Holt Ingraham, a writer and traveler from Maine, called it a “mania.”⁴ William Henry



Eli Whitney's mechanical cotton gin revolutionized cotton production and expanded and strengthened slavery throughout the South. Eli Whitney's patent for the cotton gin, March 14, 1794; Records of the Patent and Trademark Office; Record Group 241. Wikimedia.



A nineteenth-century cotton gin on display at the Eli Whitney Museum. Wikimedia.

Sparks, a lawyer living in Natchez, Mississippi, remembered it as “a new El Dorado” in which “fortunes were made in a day, without enterprise or work.” The change was astonishing. “Where yesterday the wilderness darkened over the land with her wild forests,” he recalled, “to-day the cotton plantations whitened the earth.”⁵ Money flowed from banks, many newly formed, on promises of “other-worldly” profits and overnight returns. Banks in New York City, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and even London offered lines of credit to anyone looking to buy land in the Southwest. Some even sent their own agents to purchase cheap land at auction for the express purpose of selling it, sometimes the very next day, at double and triple the original value, a process known as speculation.

The explosion of available land in the fertile Cotton Belt brought new life to the South. By the end of the 1830s, Petit Gulf cotton had been perfected, distributed, and planted throughout the region. Advances in steam power and water travel revolutionized southern farmers’ and planters’ ability to deseed and bundle their products and move them to ports popping up along the Atlantic seaboard. Indeed, by the end of the 1830s, cotton had become the primary crop not only of the southwestern states but of the entire nation.

The numbers were staggering. In 1793, just a few years after the first, albeit unintentional, shipment of American cotton to Europe, the South

produced around five million pounds of cotton, again almost exclusively the product of South Carolina's Sea Islands. Seven years later, in 1800, South Carolina remained the primary cotton producer in the South, sending 6.5 million pounds of the luxurious long-staple blend to markets in Charleston, Liverpool, London, and New York.⁶ But as the tighter, more abundant, and vibrant Petit Gulf strain moved west with the dreamers, schemers, and speculators, the American South quickly became the world's leading cotton producer. By 1835, the five main cotton-growing states—South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana—produced more than five hundred million pounds of Petit Gulf for a global market stretching from New Orleans to New York and to London, Liverpool, Paris and beyond. That five hundred million pounds of cotton made up nearly 55 percent of the entire United States export market, a trend that continued nearly every year until the outbreak of the Civil War. Indeed, the two billion pounds of cotton produced in 1860 alone amounted to more than 60 percent of the United States' total exports for that year.⁷

The astronomical rise of American cotton production came at the cost of the South's first staple crop—tobacco. Perfected in Virginia but grown and sold in nearly every southern territory and state, tobacco served as the South's main economic commodity for more than a century. But tobacco was a rough crop. It treated the land poorly, draining the soil of nutrients. Tobacco fields did not last forever. In fact, fields rarely survived more than four or five cycles of growth, which left them dried and barren, incapable of growing much more than patches of grass. Of course, tobacco is, and was, an addictive substance, but because of its violent pattern of growth, farmers had to move around, purchasing new lands, developing new methods of production, and even creating new fields through deforestation and westward expansion. Tobacco, then, was expensive to produce—and not only because of the ubiquitous use of slave labor. It required massive, temporary fields, large numbers of slaves and laborers, and constant movement.

Cotton was different, and it arrived at a time best suited for its success. Petit Gulf cotton, in particular, grew relatively quickly on cheap, widely available land. With the invention of the cotton gin in 1794, and the emergence of steam power three decades later, cotton became the common person's commodity, the product with which the United States could expand westward, producing and reproducing Thomas Jefferson's vision of an idyllic republic of small farmers—a nation in control of its land, reaping the benefits of honest, free, and self-reliant work, a nation of families and farmers, expansion and settlement. But this all came at a





This map, published by the U.S. Coast Guard, shows the percentage of slaves in the population in each county of the slave-holding states in 1860. The highest percentages lie along the Mississippi River, in the “Black Belt” of Alabama, and in coastal South Carolina, all of which were centers of agricultural production (cotton and rice) in the United States. E. Hergesheimer (cartographer) and Th. Leonhardt (engraver), *Map Showing the Distribution of the Slave Population of the Southern States of the United States Compiled from the Census of 1860*, c. 1861. Wikimedia.

violent cost. With the democratization of land ownership through Indian removal, federal auctions, readily available credit, and the seemingly universal dream of cotton’s immediate profit, one of the South’s lasting traditions became normalized and engrained. And by the 1860s, that very tradition, seen as the backbone of southern society and culture, would split the nation in two. The heyday of American slavery had arrived.

III. Cotton and Slavery

The rise of cotton and the resulting upsurge in the United States’ global position wed the South to slavery. Without slavery there could be no Cotton Kingdom, no massive production of raw materials stretching across

thousands of acres worth millions of dollars. Indeed, cotton grew alongside slavery. The two moved hand-in-hand. The existence of slavery and its importance to the southern economy became the defining factor in what would be known as the Slave South. Although slavery arrived in the Americas long before cotton became a profitable commodity, the use and purchase of slaves, the moralistic and economic justifications for the continuation of slavery, and even the urgency to protect the practice from extinction before the Civil War all received new life from the rise of cotton and the economic, social, and cultural growth spurt that accompanied its success.

Slavery had existed in the South since at least 1619, when a group of Dutch traders arrived at Jamestown with twenty Africans. Although these Africans remained under the ambiguous legal status of “unfree” rather than being actual slaves, their arrival set in motion a practice that would stretch across the entire continent over the next two centuries. Slavery was everywhere by the time the American Revolution created the United States, although northern states began a process of gradually abolishing the practice soon thereafter. In the more rural, agrarian South, slavery became a way of life, especially as farmers expanded their lands, planted more crops, and entered the international trade market. By 1790, two years after the ratification of the Constitution, 654,121 slaves lived in the South—then just Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and the Southwest Territory (now Tennessee). Just twenty



Though taken after the end of slavery, these stereographs show various stages of cotton production. The fluffy white staple fiber is first extracted from the boll (a prickly, sharp protective capsule), after which the seed is separated in the ginning and taken to a storehouse. Unknown, *Picking cotton in a great plantation in North Carolina, U.S.A.*, c. 1865–1903. New York Public Library Digital Collections.

years later, in 1810, that number had increased to more than 1.1 million individuals in bondage.⁸

The massive change in the South's enslaved population between 1790 and 1810 makes historical sense. During that time, the South advanced from a region of four states and one rather small territory to a region of six states (Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee) and three rather large territories (Mississippi, Louisiana, and Orleans). The free population of the South also nearly doubled over that period—from around 1.3 million in 1790 to more than 2.3 million in 1810. The enslaved population of the South did not increase at any rapid rate over the next two decades, until the cotton boom took hold in the mid-1830s. Indeed, following the constitutional ban on the international slave trade in 1808, the number of slaves in the South increased by just 750,000 in twenty years.

But then cotton came, and grew, and changed everything. Over the course of the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, slavery became so endemic to the Cotton Belt that travelers, writers, and statisticians began referring to the area as the Black Belt, not only to describe the color of the rich land but also to describe the skin color of those forced to work its fields, line its docks, and move its products.

Perhaps the most important aspect of southern slavery during this so-called Cotton Revolution was the value placed on both the work and the body of the slaves themselves. Once the fever of the initial land rush subsided, land values became more static and credit less free-flowing. For Mississippi land that in 1835 cost no more than \$600, a farmer or investor would have to shell out more than \$3,000 in 1850. By 1860, that same land, depending on its record of production and location, could cost as much as \$100,000.⁹ In many cases, cotton growers, especially planters with large lots and enslaved workforces, put up slaves as collateral for funds dedicated to buying more land. If that land, for one reason or another, be it weevils, a late freeze, or a simple lack of nutrients, did not produce a viable crop within a year, the planter would lose not only the new land but also the slaves he or she put up as a guarantee of payment.

So much went into the production of cotton, the expansion of land, and the maintenance of enslaved workforces that by the 1850s, nearly every ounce of credit offered by southern, and even northern, banks dealt directly with some aspect of the cotton market. Millions of dollars changed hands. Slaves, the literal and figurative backbone of the southern





The slave markets of the South varied in size and style, but the St. Louis Exchange in New Orleans was so frequently described that it became a kind of representation for all southern slave markets. Indeed, the St. Louis Hotel rotunda was cemented in the literary imagination of nineteenth-century Americans after Harriet Beecher Stowe chose it as the site for the sale of Uncle Tom in her 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. After the ruin of the St. Clare plantation, Tom and his fellow slaves were suddenly property that had to be liquidated. Brought to New Orleans to be sold to the highest bidder, Tom found himself “beneath a splendid dome” where “men of all nations” scurried about. J. M. Starling (engraver), *Sale of estates, pictures and slaves in the rotunda, New Orleans*, 1842. Wikimedia.

cotton economy, served as the highest and most important expense for any successful cotton grower. Prices for slaves varied drastically, depending on skin color, sex, age, and location, both of purchase and birth. In Virginia in the 1820s, for example, a single female slave of childbearing age sold for an average of \$300; an unskilled man above age eighteen sold for around \$450; and boys and girls below age thirteen sold for between \$100 and \$150.¹⁰

By the 1840s and into the 1850s, prices had nearly doubled—a result of both standard inflation and the increasing importance of enslaved laborers in the cotton market. In 1845, “plow boys” under age eighteen sold for more than \$600 in some areas, measured at “five or six dollars per pound.”¹¹ “Prime field hands,” as they were called by merchants and

traders, averaged \$1,600 at market by 1850, a figure that fell in line with the rising prices of the cotton they picked. For example, when cotton sat at 7¢ per pound in 1838, the average “field hand” cost around \$700. As the price of cotton increased to 9¢, 10¢, then 11¢ per pound over the next ten years, the average cost of an enslaved male laborer likewise rose to \$775, \$900, and then more than \$1,600.¹²

The key is that cotton and slaves helped define each other, at least in the cotton South. By the 1850s, slavery and cotton had become so intertwined that the very idea of change—be it crop diversity, antislavery ideologies, economic diversification, or the increasingly staggering cost of purchasing and maintaining slaves—became anathema to the southern economic and cultural identity. Cotton had become the foundation of the southern economy. Indeed, it was the only major product, besides perhaps sugarcane in Louisiana, that the South could effectively market internationally. As a result, southern planters, politicians, merchants, and traders became more and more dedicated—some would say “obsessed”—to the means of its production: slaves and slavery. In 1834, Joseph Ingraham wrote that “to sell cotton in order to buy negroes—to make more cotton to buy more negroes, ‘ad infinitum,’ is the aim and direct tendency of all the operations of the thorough going cotton planter; his whole soul is wrapped up in the pursuit.”¹³ Twenty-three years later, such pursuit had taken a seemingly religious character, as James Stirling, an Englishman traveling through the South, observed, “[slaves] and cotton—cotton and [slaves]; these are the law and the prophets to the men of the South.”¹⁴

The Cotton Revolution was a time of capitalism, panic, stress, and competition. Planters expanded their lands, purchased slaves, extended lines of credit, and went into massive amounts of debt because they were constantly working against the next guy, the newcomer, the social mover, the speculator, the trader. A single bad crop could cost even the most wealthy planter his or her entire life, along with those of his or her slaves and their families. Although the cotton market was large and profitable, it was also fickle, risky, and cost intensive. The more wealth one gained, the more land one needed to procure, which led to more slaves, more credit, and more mouths to feed. The decades before the Civil War in the South, then, were not times of slow, simple tradition. They were times of high competition, high risk, and high reward, no matter where one stood in the social hierarchy. But the risk was not always economic.

The most tragic, indeed horrifying, aspect of slavery was its inhumanity. All slaves had memories, emotions, experiences, and thoughts. They saw their experiences in full color, felt the pain of the lash, the heat of the





In southern cities like Norfolk, Virginia, markets sold not only vegetables, fruits, meats, and sundries, but also slaves. Enslaved men and women, like the two walking in the direct center, lived and labored next to free people, black and white. S. Weeks, *Market Square, Norfolk*, from Henry Howe's *Historical Collections of Virginia*, 1845. Wikimedia.

sun, and the heartbreak of loss, whether through death, betrayal, or sale. Communities developed on a shared sense of suffering, common work, and even family ties. Slaves communicated in the slave markets of the urban South and worked together to help their families, ease their loads, or simply frustrate their owners. Simple actions of resistance, such as breaking a hoe, running a wagon off the road, causing a delay in production due to injury, running away, or even pregnancy provided a language shared by nearly all slaves in the agricultural workforce, a sense of unity that remained unsaid but was acted out daily.

Beyond the basic and confounding horror of it all, the problem of slavery in the cotton South was twofold. First and most immediate was the fear and risk of rebellion. With nearly four million individual slaves residing in the South in 1860, and nearly 2.5 million living in the Cotton Belt alone, the system of communication, resistance, and potential violence among slaves did not escape the minds of slaveholders across the region and the nation as a whole. As early as 1785, Thomas Jefferson wrote in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that slaves should be freed, but then they should be colonized to another country, where they could become an “independant people.” White people’s prejudices, and black people’s “recollections . . . of the injuries they have sustained” under slavery, would keep the two races from successfully living together in America. If freed slaves were not

colonized, eventually there would be “convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.”¹⁵

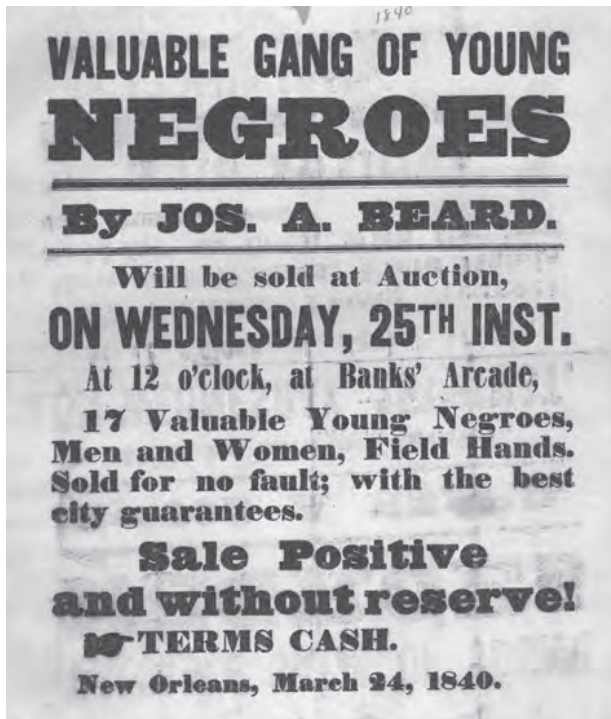
Southern writers, planters, farmers, merchants, and politicians expressed the same fears more than a half century later. “The South cannot recede,” declared an anonymous writer in an 1852 issue of the New Orleans-based *De Bow’s Review*. “She must fight *for* her slaves or *against* them. Even cowardice would not save her.”¹⁶ To many slaveholders in the South, slavery was the saving grace of not only their own economic stability but also the maintenance of peace and security in everyday life. Much of pro-slavery ideology rested on the notion that slavery provided a sense of order, duty, and legitimacy to the lives of individual slaves, feelings that Africans and African Americans, it was said, could not otherwise experience. Without slavery, many thought, “blacks” (the word most often used for “slaves” in regular conversation) would become violent, aimless, and uncontrollable.

Some commentators recognized the problem in the 1850s as the internal slave trade, the legal trade of slaves between states, along rivers, and along the Atlantic coastline. The internal trade picked up in the decade before the Civil War. The problem was rather simple. The more slaves one owned, the more money it cost to maintain them and to extract product from their work. As planters and cotton growers expanded their lands and purchased more slaves, their expectations increased.

And productivity, in large part, did increase. But it came on the backs of slaves with heavier workloads, longer hours, and more intense punishments. “The great limitation to *production is labor*,” wrote one commentator in the *American Cotton Planter* in 1853. And many planters recognized this limitation and worked night and day, sometimes literally, to find the furthest extent of that limit.¹⁷ According to some contemporary accounts, by the mid-1850s, the expected production of an individual slave in Mississippi’s Cotton Belt had increased from between four and five bales (weighing about 500 pounds each) per day to between eight and ten bales per day, on average.¹⁸ Other, perhaps more reliable sources, such as the account book of Buena Vista Plantation in Tensas Parish, Louisiana, list average daily production at between 300 and 500 pounds “per hand,” with weekly averages ranging from 1,700 to 2,100 pounds “per hand.” Cotton production “per hand” increased by 600 percent in Mississippi between 1820 and 1860.¹⁹ Each slave, then, was working longer, harder hours to keep up with his or her master’s expected yield.

Here was capitalism with its most colonial, violent, and exploitative face. Humanity became a commodity used and worked to produce profit





The slave trade sold bondspeople—men, women, and children—like mere pieces of property, as seen in the advertisements produced during the era. 1840 poster advertising slaves for sale in New Orleans. Wikimedia.

for a select group of investors, regardless of its shortfalls, dangers, and immoralities. But slavery, profit, and cotton did not exist only in the rural South. The Cotton Revolution sparked the growth of an urban South, cities that served as southern hubs of a global market, conduits through which the work of slaves and the profits of planters met and funded a wider world.

IV. The South and the City

Much of the story of slavery and cotton lies in the rural areas where cotton actually grew. Slaves worked in the fields, and planters and farmers held reign over their plantations and farms. But the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s saw an extraordinary spike in urban growth across the South. For nearly a half century after the Revolution, the South existed as a series of plantations, county seats, and small towns, some connected by roads, others connected only by rivers, streams, and lakes. Cities certainly existed, but they served more as local ports than as regional, or national, commercial hubs. For example, New Orleans, then the capital of Louisiana, which entered the union in 1812, was home to just over 27,000 people in 1820; and even with such a seemingly small population, it was

the second-largest city in the South—Baltimore had more than 62,000 people in 1820.²⁰ Given the standard nineteenth-century measurement of an urban space (2,500+ people), the South had just ten in that year, one of which—Mobile, Alabama—contained only 2,672 individuals, nearly half of whom were enslaved.²¹

As late as the 1820s, southern life was predicated on a rural lifestyle—farming, laboring, acquiring land and slaves, and producing whatever that land and those slaves could produce. The market, often located in the nearest town or city, rarely stretched beyond state lines. Even in places like New Orleans, Charleston, and Norfolk, Virginia, which had active ports as early as the 1790s, shipments rarely, with some notable exceptions, left American waters or traveled farther than the closest port down the coast. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, American involvement in international trade was largely confined to ports in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and sometimes Baltimore—which loosely falls under the demographic category of the South. Imports dwarfed exports. In 1807, U.S. imports outnumbered exports by nearly \$100 million, and even as the Napoleonic Wars broke out in Europe, causing a drastic decrease in European production and trade, the United States still took in almost \$50 million more than it sent out.²²

Cotton changed much of this, at least with respect to the South. Before cotton, the South had few major ports, almost none of which actively maintained international trade routes or even domestic supply routes. Internal travel and supply was difficult, especially on the waters of the Mississippi River, the main artery of the North American continent, and the eventual gold mine of the South. With the Mississippi's strong current, deadly undertow, and constant sharp turns, sandbars, and subsystems, navigation was difficult and dangerous. The river promised a revolution in trade, transportation, and commerce only *if* the technology existed to handle its impossible bends and fight against its southbound current. By the 1820s and into the 1830s, small ships could successfully navigate their way to New Orleans from as far north as Memphis and even St. Louis, if they so dared. But the problem was getting back. Most often, traders and sailors scuttled their boats on landing in New Orleans, selling the wood for a quick profit or a journey home on a wagon or caravan.

The rise of cotton benefited from a change in transportation technology that aided and guided the growth of southern cotton into one of the world's leading commodities. In January 1812, a 371-ton ship called the *New Orleans* arrived at its namesake city from the distant internal port

