

Cotton

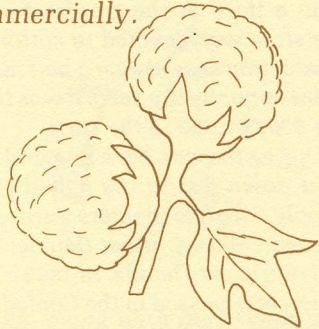
The history of Georgia and cotton are closely interwoven. Cotton was first planted in the state near Savannah in 1734, just one year after the state was settled. Although grown in other colonies, Georgia was the first to produce it commercially.

Georgia was noted for its production of the famous extra-long staple Sea Island cotton. According to one account, Columbus first found this variety in the West Indies. In 1786, these bags of West Indian seed somehow turned up on Sapelo Island off the coast of Georgia. Someone in need of a gunny sack is said to have dumped the seed; the seed sprouted and became the first crop of Sea Island cotton in America.

The culture of this variety spread for 300 miles among the coastal islands, Georgia and the South Carolina coast, and brought up to two dollars a pound. While Sea Island cotton provided an extremely valuable commodity, it had its limitations: it could only be grown on the coast. It was the upland, short staple cotton that produced the great revolution in Georgia agriculturally.

During the pre-Revolutionary period, cotton was usually planted in small patches; the fibers were spun and woven mostly for home use. However, two important events which occurred after the American Revolution made cotton production feasible and appealing.

Separating cotton from the seed by hand was a tedious and costly task and discouraged many farmers from planting the crop. On a plantation near Savannah in the latter 1700's, Eli Whitney remedied this problem with his invention of the cotton gin.



This simple, hand operated device, patented in 1793, separated up to 50 pounds of lint from the seed per day. This was a drastic improvement considering it previously required an individual an entire day to separate one pound.

Englishman Samuel Slater also gave cotton a boost; he built the first successful textile mill in the United States in 1790. The first important Georgia mill was built in 1811, nine miles southeast of Washington in Wilkes County. Cotton thus became the foundation for one of the state's first and still largest industries, the textile business.

The invention of the cotton gin and mill combined with demand for more cotton by American and English mills led to expansion of cotton acreage. By the 1820's cotton production was beginning to change the agricultural pattern of piedmont Georgia, until now, dominated by small farmers. Production increased from 1000 bales in 1790 to 90,000 bales in 1820. By 1826, Georgia was the leading cotton state producing 150,000 bales.

Introduction . . .

Georgia's history is so intertwined with agriculture that the two are practically inseparable. The climate, soil types, terrain, long growing season and plentiful rainfall caused the state to be chiefly agricultural from the start.

While many early settlers sought religious freedom, they also hoped to find a suitable environment to grow commodities that Europeans needed. Initially the crops early settlers wanted to grow included grapes, tobacco, silk, potatoes, melons, rice, indigo, peaches, plums, and quince. Some of these were successful; others were replaced by a variety of more lucrative crops.

This booklet showcases, different crops that played a part in the history of Georgia. The story begins . . .