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## SEA ISLAND COTTON IN ANTE-BELLUM FLORIDA

by JERRELL H. SHOFNER AND WILLIAM WARREN ROGERS

IN THE LATE 1850's Florida surpassed Georgia and South Carolina in the production of Sea Island cotton. This development was made possible by three factors: climate, soil, and technological progress. While nature supplied the first two requisites, the latter factor was the result of inventive Floridians who designed and patented cotton gins that made the production of Sea Island cotton profitable. A combination of environment and mechanical development thus enabled Florida to supplant the traditional leaders and become the nation's largest producer of long staple cotton.

Florida was not the first area to cultivate Sea Island cotton. When Spain controlled Florida, little effort was made to develop an agricultural economy based on staple crops.<sup>1</sup> After England secured the region in 1763, there seemed little cause for optimism. In 1775 Englishmen were told that farming lands in Florida "must be condemned on comparison with very great tracts in our other colonies," and were therefore, "such as no person would move to, from the worst of our colonies, in order to cultivate them."<sup>2</sup> As late as 1831 the naturalist John James Audubon remarked of Eastern Florida, "The land, if land it can be called, is generally so very sandy that nothing can be raised on it."<sup>3</sup> Despite such overly pessimistic statements Florida soon developed into an important agricultural region.

Sea Island cotton was peculiar to the offshore islands and coastal area of Georgia and South Carolina. It was a long staple, quality cotton with a smooth black seed which did not adhere to

1. Ulrich Bonnell Phillips and James David Glunt (editors), *Florida Plantation Records from the papers of George Noble Jones* (St. Louis, 1927), 10-15.
2. An American, *American Husbandry . . . of the British Colonies*, Harry J. Carman, editor, (New York, 1939), 364-365. Originally published in 1775, this work contains valuable information concerning agriculture in colonial America.
3. Edith P. Stanton, *Early Plantations of the Halifax Concerning the Ruins* (n.p., 1949), quoting a letter of Audubon to the *American Monthly Journal of Geology*.

the fiber. Better known was upland cotton, a short staple cotton with a green seed which clung to the fiber. Both types had been grown in America since colonial days but the difficulty in cleaning the fiber precluded the extensive use of either. Since most of the cotton was used for domestic purposes, the Sea Island variety proved popular because it lent itself readily to cleaning by hand.<sup>4</sup>

As the market for cotton increased toward the end of the eighteenth century, both varieties came into commercial production. Short staple cotton revolutionized the southern economy when Eli Whitney invented a saw gin in 1793 which tore the cotton away from the seed and provided an efficient system of cleaning the fiber. This unleashed the tremendous potentiality of upland cotton. In 1792 domestic consumption of all types of cotton was about five and a half millions of pounds and only 138,328 pounds were exported. By 1860 the southern states produced 2,079,230,800 pounds, of which 1,765,115,735 pounds were exported.<sup>5</sup>

Sea Island cotton owed its surge of popularity to the declining profits of indigo and rice in the coastal areas of South Carolina and Georgia. About 1785 the coastal planters became familiar with an improved variety of Sea Island cotton introduced from the Bahamas.<sup>6</sup> Credit is usually given to Josiah Tatnall and Nicholas Turnbull of Skidway Island near Savannah for first producing this improved variety, but several men were planting it at about the same time.<sup>7</sup>

It was soon discovered that this cotton, when properly prepared for market, commanded a premium price because of its long staple and superior quality. The method of cleaning it differed from that of the Whitney gin in that Sea Island cotton had to be pulled between rollers to force the seed out without damaging the fiber. Until a better method of cleaning could be devised the commercial possibilities of Sea Island cotton were restricted

4. M. B. Hammond, "Correspondence of Eli Whitney Relative to the Invention of the Cotton Gin," *American Historical Review*, III (October, 1897), 91; William H. Clark, *Farms and Farmers: The Story of American Agriculture* (Boston, 1945), 123; Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston, 1929), 95.

5. United States, Census Office, *Eighth Census: 1860. Agriculture* (Washington, 1864), xxvi.

6. J. A. Turner, *The Cotton Planter's Manual* (New York, 1857), 278. "The Beginning of Cotton Cultivation in Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, I (March, 1917), 41-42; E. Merton Coulter, *Thomas Spalding of Sapelo* (Baton Rouge, 1940), 65-67.

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by the amount of labor required for cleaning and the consequent cost of production.

Production of long staple cotton was further limited to the low areas near the coast and the offshore islands where it could receive the effects of the coastal climate. The area where it could be produced was limited to a strip about twenty or thirty miles wide adjacent to the coast from the Santee River in South Carolina to the Florida Everglades. When Sea Island cotton spread into Florida, its geographical limits were greatly extended. Because the peninsula was affected by the Gulf breezes from the west and the Atlantic Ocean from the east, it was found that Sea Island cotton thrived as much as sixty miles inland.<sup>8</sup> A fine quality cotton of the long staple variety was grown in Alachua County almost in the center of the state.<sup>9</sup>

After Florida became a territory, settlers moved into the area in increasing numbers and cotton became the leading staple crop in the 1820's. Because of its agricultural adaptability, Middle Florida, the area between the Apalachicola and Suwannee Rivers, outstripped East and West Florida in population and wealth.<sup>10</sup> In 1827 a caustic writer found central Florida acceptable but dismissed East Florida, because it "has no back country and is rapidly going to decay," and West Florida where "the lands . . . are, likewise, very barren."<sup>11</sup> A former resident of Virginia, who had moved to Tallahassee, wrote home in 1828 praising the farming possibilities of his new home. We pointed out that both upland and Sea Island cotton could be grown and looked forward to the time "when we get in a fair way of making and good Gins to pick it."<sup>12</sup>

Further evidence of the culture of long staple cotton in Middle Florida was given in 1853 at a planters' convention in Columbia, South Carolina. At the convention a paper written by John C. McGehee of Madison was read. The planter-politician's essay

8. Letter from John Finlayson, n.d., 1854, Records of the Agricultural Department of the Patent Office, National Archives, Record Group 16. Hereinafter National Archives material is cited as NA, RG followed by the appropriate number.

9. *Western Journal of Agriculture* [St. Louis, Missouri], VI (1851), 179.

10. Sidney Walter Matin, *Florida during the Territorial Days* (Athens, Georgia, 1944), 108-109.

11. *Niles Weekly Register*, XXXIII (September 22, 1827), 53.

12. See letter from "A Friend" quoted in *Savannah Georgian*, February 5, 1828.

was entitled, "Black Seed Cotton."<sup>13</sup> The overseer of El Destino plantation near Tallahassee recorded in 1854 that he had two buildings housing cotton seed, apparently of the upland variety, and "5 Sacks of Black seed Cotton in my room."<sup>14</sup>

On the east coast, Sea Island cotton was widely grown. On Fort George Island at the mouth of the St. Johns River, Zephaniah Kingsley made large profits in the 1830's and 1840's from Sea Island cotton.<sup>15</sup> The crop was also grown by the planters who moved into the Halifax River country in the 1820's. A contemporary described them as "almost wholly English settlers from the Bahamas, who quitting those sterile rocks, came hither to avail themselves of a better soil; all of them have prospered and several have become very rich by raising sea-island cotton."<sup>16</sup>

In 1824 the Agricultural Society of East Florida reported that Sea Island cotton was the region's leading product. The average yield was 150 pounds per acre, and would have been more had it not been for the usual casualties. These casualties were caused by the "caterpillar, red bug, and occasional extremes in drought or gales."<sup>17</sup> With the general outlook so favorable, the boast was soon made that the production of indigo, rice, and cotton in the older states was "thrown in the shade when compared with the abundant crops of these staples in Florida."<sup>18</sup>

In order for the crop to expand and prosper an adequate cleaning process was needed. The thesis that the ante-bellum South was a static society based on cotton plantations and slave labor and therefore made little or no contribution to the nineteenth century industrial revolution has been successfully challenged.<sup>19</sup> The case of Sea Island cotton and Florida offers a specific example of how mechanical inventions were made to answer the requirements of an agrarian economy.

13. Because McGehee was unable to attend, his paper was read by Noah B. Cloud. See Weymouth T. Jordan, *Rebels In The Making: Planters' Conventions and Southern Propaganda* (Tuscaloosa, 1958), 87.

14. Phillips and Glunt, *Florida Plantation Records*, 554.

15. Philip S. May "Zephaniah Kingsley, Nonconformist (1765-1843)," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXIV (April, 1945), 151.

16. Alfred Jackson Hanna and Kathryn Abbey Hanna, *Florida's Golden Sands* (New York, 1950), 64, quoting Charles Vignoles, *Observations upon the Floridas*.

17. *Washington National Intelligencer*, September 17, 1824.

18. James L. Watkins, *King Cotton: A Historical and Statistical Review, 1790-1908* (New York, 1908), 126.

19. See Thomas C. Johnson, *Scientific Interests in the Old South* (New York, 1936), *passim*.

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Cleaning Sea Island cotton required the principle of the roller gin, or "churka" gin, which was developed in India. Modifications were made in America. Various claimants, from such scattered locales as the Louisiana Territory, West Florida, South Carolina, Georgia, and the Bahamas, offered evidence in the last decades of the eighteenth century of having invented roller gins.<sup>20</sup> No really satisfactory method was developed and until mid-century most Sea Island cotton was cleaned by the inefficient foot or treadle gin.<sup>21</sup>

In South Carolina it was estimated that one hundred pounds of Sea Island cotton required about fifty days work; the work being measured in "tasks."<sup>22</sup> A field hand could tend about three and a half acres of cotton. This limit was due as much to the wide use of the hoe as it was to the laborious ginning methods. In Florida, where manuring was not so necessary, and where prejudice against use of the plow gave way early, one hand could tend about seven acres.<sup>23</sup>

Florida's chief advantage, however, was the adoption of the "McCarthy Gin." Fones McCarthy, sometimes referred to as James McCarty, was born in Georgia around 1790.<sup>24</sup> He first patented his gin in 1840 when he was a resident of Demopolis, Alabama.<sup>25</sup> He soon moved to Orange Springs, Putnam County, Florida, and his gin came into general use in Florida in the early 1840's. Obtaining a seven year extension on his patent upon expiration of the original in 1854,<sup>26</sup> McCarthy remained at Orange Springs and patented an improvement on his gin as late as 1867.<sup>27</sup> Apparently his major source of income came from the sale of his gins.

McCarthy's gin, like most inventions, was an improvement on ideas which were extant at the time. Although rather crude

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20. Hammond, "Correspondence of Eli Whitney," 91; Bernard Romans, *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida* (New York, 1775), 141; Lewis C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (Washington, 1933), II, 674.
  21. *American Agriculturist* [New York], IX (July, 1850), 206; *De Bow's Review*, XVI (June, 1854), 596; Solon Robinson, *Facts for Farmers* (New York, 1867), 936.
  22. *American Agriculturist*, IX (July, 1850), 206.
  23. *De Bow's Review*, XVI (June, 1854), 598; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 736-737.
  24. See Original Census Schedule One, Seventh Census.
  25. Letters Patent Number 1675, July 3, 1840, NA, RG 241.
  26. *Scientific American* [New York], IX (April, 1854), 259.
  27. Letters Patent Number 67327, July 30, 1867, NA, RG 241; *Scientific American*, XVII (August 17, 1867), 103.

by comparison with the saw gins that evolved from Whitney's invention, the machine cleaned the long staple cotton without injuring the fiber. It incorporated the well known roller principle. The cotton was introduced into a hopper and drawn from it by a drawing roller. As the cotton passed from the hopper to the roller it was met by a saw or stripper, which was driven upward against a fixed plate. This action separated the staple from the seed, allowing the seeds to fall through a grate at the bottom. The drawing roller had a strip of leather wound spirally around to draw the cotton through in a sheet at the same time channeling off any hard substance that might be left. The cotton wound on to a receiving roller from whence it was removed by a comb which moved forward and back as the gin operated.<sup>28</sup>

The gin was usually powered by one horse, although steam was introduced to it in 1854.<sup>29</sup> Using one horse for power and one worker to feed it, this gin cleaned five times as much cotton as did the old treadle gins and did it more efficiently. Costing about \$100, the gin's output was estimated at 150 to 200 pounds per day.<sup>30</sup> McCarthy's 1867 improvement altered the gin so that the cotton was fed vertically from above instead of horizontally. This prevented the seeds from being thrown into unginned cotton and thereby speeded up the operating process.<sup>31</sup>

The McCarthy gin remained a favorite with Sea Island cotton planters for many years. Yet it was not introduced into South Carolina until 1853.<sup>32</sup> At that time William Seabrook, the first planter outside Florida to use the gin, was so impressed with its results that he sent samples of ginned cotton to the New York Industrial Exposition and the spinning mills at Manchester, England. It was favorably received and both places reported that the gin left the cotton in exactly the condition required for spinning. There were some complaints about the cleanliness of the cotton thus prepared, however. Extreme care was necessary in preparing the fine quality cotton in order for it to command the highest market prices.<sup>33</sup>

28. Letters Patent Number 1675, July 3, 1840, NA, RG 241.

29. *De Bow's Review*, XVI (June, 1854), 597.

30. R. F. W. Allston, *Essay on Sea Coast Crops* (Charleston, 1854), 15-16; Watkins, *King Cotton*, 128.

31. Letters Patent Number 67327, July 30, 1867, NA, RG 241; *Scientific American*, XVII (New Series, August 17, 1867), 103.

32. Watkins, *King Cotton*, 83.

33. *De Bows Review*, XVI (June, 1854), 597.

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One writer expressed surprise that an invention of so much value to planters was ignored by South Carolinians for a number of years.<sup>34</sup> This was due in part to the lack of promotion for inventions, a circumstance made more difficult by the limited advertising media available. Floridians, however, knew of McCarthy's work, and, not unexpectedly, some began developing gins. Patents on Sea Island cotton gins were issued to Henry Clark of Newport, Wakulla County, in 1855; and to James E. Ferguson of Micanopy, Alachua County, in 1861.<sup>35</sup> These gins differed only slightly from the earlier efforts of McCarthy.

Given the proper climate, soil, and technological devices, Sea Island cotton became an important part of Florida's agricultural economy. In 1860 there were 65,153 bales of cotton ginned in Florida. This represented a significant increase over the 45,131 bales ginned in 1850.<sup>36</sup> Undoubtedly most of this cotton was of the upland variety, although the census schedules made no distinction as to type of cotton.

Florida planters continued the culture of long staple cotton because they received high prices for it and in the 1850's averaged better than 30 cents a pound.<sup>37</sup> Prices are difficult to ascertain because it was a peculiarity of the Sea Island cotton market that transactions were often secretly made and never published.<sup>38</sup>

Scattered reports do give some indication of the value of the product. St. Marks exported 45,407 bales of upland cotton in 1854. This was valued at \$1,816,280. Also shipped that same year were 1,518 bales of Sea Island cotton valued at \$77,418. Undoubtedly, many of these bales were produced in South Georgia.<sup>39</sup> In 1856 Key West shipped 3,912 bales of upland cotton valued at \$136,920, and 573 bales of Sea Island cotton valued at \$45,840.<sup>40</sup>

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34. Allston, *Essay*, 16.

35. Letters Patent Number 12376, February 13, 1855, NA, RG 241; Letters Patent Number 31062, January 1, 1861, NA, RG 241.

36. United States, Census Office, *Eighth Census: 1860. Agriculture*, 19.

37. Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 739.

38. Coulter, *Spalding of Savelo*, 72-73.

39. NA, RG 16. This was a tabulation compiled December 31, 1854, by Hugh T. Archer, Port Collector at St. Marks.

40. Report of the Commissioner of Patents. 1856. House *Executive Document* Number 65, 34th Congress, 3rd Session, 507. According to Gray, *History of Agriculture*, II, 733-734, by 1858 Florida planters were producing more Sea Island cotton and realizing greater profits from it than planters in any other state.



Florida, along with Georgia and South Carolina, was the only area that produced Sea Island cotton in commercial quantities, and it never made up more than a fraction of the total cotton crop of the South. Yet it was significant, and as one historian has remarked, it was Sea Island cotton that first introduced the white, fleecy staple to the world.<sup>41</sup>

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41. Coulter, *Spalding of Sapelo*, 74.