

The Economics of Slavery

Slavery took hold during the colonial period. Slaves worked on the tobacco farms of the Chesapeake and the rice and indigo plantations of Carolina. The Industrial Revolution in England and the North caused cotton to become the most important crop. Rising demand from textile mills in England and the North spurred cotton production in the South.

Cotton was well-suited to plantation farming. Higher profits came from higher yields. But because work was by hand, higher yields required having larger work forces.

Because large plantations were so efficient for growing cotton, the South had many more large farms than the North did. In the South, almost 5 percent of all the farms had 500 acres of land or more. But in the North, only .1 percent of the farms were that large. In the North, most farms were family-owned, and families did not have the workers available to work large farms.

The organization of the work force depended on the size of the plantation. Most slaveowners had fewer than 20 slaves. The owners often worked in their own fields and directed the work of the slaves.

On larger plantations, owners hired overseers to run the work in the fields. Overseers were often young men who hoped to save enough money to buy their own land. Slaves were organized into work groups called gangs. Each gang was assigned a task to do or area to work each day.

Field work began early in the day and generally lasted until sundown. Slaves worked every day except Sunday. Men performed the hard labor of plowing. Women and children did the weeding and joined with the men in harvesting the crop. Slaves worked late into the night at harvest time.

The free labor by slaves and the demand for cotton made cotton-growing extremely profitable. As a result, the output of cotton and the number of slaves in the South grew rapidly from 1820 to 1860, as the accompanying graph shows.

Slave Population, 1820–1860	
Year	Slaves (in thousands)
1820	1,644
1830	2,162
1840	2,642
1850	3,352
1860	4,097

Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States*

From 1820 to 1860, the output of cotton increased almost 12 times. In the same period, the number of slaves more than doubled. That means that the average slave was producing almost five times as much cotton in 1860 as in 1820. This was partly because of inventions like the cotton gin, which speeded up the process of harvesting cotton. But it was also because slaveowners constantly pushed their enslaved laborers to work harder.

Growing cotton brought profits to slaveowners. It also caused problems. Cotton used up the nutrients in the soil. When the soil was no longer productive, plantations were abandoned. For this reason, there was a gradual westward movement of cotton growing. In the 1810s through the 1830s, people moved away from the coastal states. They built plantations in Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. By the 1840s and 1850s, these lands, too, were becoming unproductive. In this period, cotton growing moved to Arkansas and Texas.