African American History

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Cotton played a pivotal role in the expansion of slavery because it was a crop well suited to slave labor, and a crop which could easily be supervised and did not require expensive equipment. In 1790, it was widely assumed by people that slavery in the US was dying and in 10–20 years slavery would be a minor problem that could easily be solved. Following the industrial revolution, the cotton gin being the most famous part of the industrial revolution flourished the garment industry. Garments, after the industrial revolution, for the upper class was now within easy reach of middle- and lower-class customers, who had much more money in total. Demand for cotton shot up, as did the demand for cotton pickers – slaves (Inikori, 1989). On invention of the cotton gin, cotton got enormously cheaper to produce and started selling in Europe as it is in many ways, a much better fiber material than wool, and this drove an explosion in demand for cotton worldwide. Slaves continued to be used for Tobacco and sugar, rice & coffee in Louisiana & East Texas, but slave-grown cotton was the vast bulk of US exports in US$ sales volume till the civil war.

Slaves were widely used through all kinds of agriculture, however, the special aspect of cotton was its place in the global economy (Hine, Hine, & Harrold, 2013). Cotton was in enormous demand by the textile mills of Britain, and farmers could make a bundle off of supplying them. This, in turn, encouraged the use of cheap slave labor to harvest and process it. Indeed, cotton remained at the center of the southern economy well after the Civil War, giving way to more diversified crops only after the appearance of the boll weevil in the 1920s that made cotton untenable (Inikori, 1989). Slaves were used where it was profitable to use them, and after the invention of the cotton gin, cotton was the main commodity. Before that, rice was commonly a plantation crop, particularly in South Carolina. Slaves were important in the tobacco fields of Virginia and North Carolina. Slaves were not only working on plantations but also worked in ports, loading and unloading cargo. They helped crew ships both at sea and on the river steamboats. Some were trained as carpenters, blacksmiths, and other skilled trades—they could help make a large plantation self-sufficient and could also be rented out. In the steamboat era, slaves were sometimes woodchoppers or the deckhands who loaded the firewood for steamboats (Hine et al., 2013). Some slaves worked as millers and bakers, often to help a large operation be self-sufficient. When industry began to develop, slaves were sometimes hired out as industrial laborers—as in the Tredegar Ironworks in Richmond. A significant number of slaves served as domestic help, doing the kinds of jobs that maids, cooks, and butlers do. They took care of children, did the laundry, washed the windows, tended the fireplaces, lit the lamps and tended the horses.

The Civil War was, without a doubt, about slavery, at least, for the South, and the nation had been warming up for a Civil War long before war had broken out. In fact, fighting had occurred over slavery almost a decade before, with ‘Bloody Kansas’ or ‘The Border War.’ When Kansas was preparing to become a state, there was a vote to decide whether or not it was going to be a slave state. Things got violent and approximately 200 or so people died. One could argue, however, that the seeds of civil war were planted back at the nation’s founding with the 3/5 compromise, which determined that a slave only counted as 3/5 of a person. When the states started seceding, they issued Articles of Secession (Hine et al., 2013). All of them mention slavery as a reason why they were seceding, and the North had a mixed mindset because most of them were fighting to preserve the Union. For much of the time, and for most of those fighting, slavery was not a primary reason, more like something on the back-burner to be dealt with later. Some did not really care about the slaves and some wanted to free the slaves.

**References**

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