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## The Rise and Fall of “King Cotton”

Arley McCormick



**Marco Polo**  
(National  
Geographic)

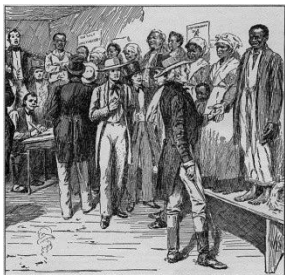
In 1269 Marco Polo began his adventurous travel to the Orient and returned 24 years later with the riches of China and India on his caravan. He was not the first European to venture to the mysterious land where there was an abundance of cotton and silk but he was the only one that wrote about it. His writing inspired maritime exploration leading to the America's in 1492 and a sea route to Asia that fed an economic revolution of global magnitude.

The foundation of a global economy is competitive advantage. If one country can produce the raw material, manufacture, or transport the products more cheaply than another country can acquire the same products internally or from another source, a competitive advantage exists to feed a growing market. When a market is born the merchants and governments join forces to preserve that advantage even if it means war.

The United Kingdom was successful in leading the first global economy based upon cotton. Through the British government supported East India Company, a near monopoly was created connecting the raw material in the Orient, through transport to England, then manufacturing into cloth, and satisfying and unquenchable demand for finished goods. The cotton business was lucrative and countries fought to preserve or participate on a global scale.

The United Kingdom led but there were many players attempting to wrench away their competitive advantage. The French, Dutch, and Portuguese were influencing cotton growth in Africa, Italy, the colonies in the Caribbean Islands and Brazil; and, labor proved to be the decisive ingredient for successful production.

Africans were initially sold as indentured servants in the North American colonies but by the late 1600's that practice changed to unqualified slavery. African slaves were relatively few in number in the colonies and their toil was oriented toward domestic production and consumption. The principle crops in the colonies produced by slaves during the 1700's were sugar cane, indigo, and tobacco. Only indigo and tobacco was considered a cash crop. Cotton was a domestic product grown and used locally.



**Slave market**  
(thelawkeepers.org)

It all changed for the Africans after 1780. An obscure entrepreneur in a village in England had studied cotton for many years and finally organized the first manufacturing center for textiles in the Western World. It was the unanticipated beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Suddenly, the combination of labor, capitol, material, transportation, and time could harness the production of textiles so quickly that the best grade of cloth was

available to the entire population of Europe, not just the rich. The result was a massive explosion in demand driving the cost of raw cotton higher and higher. There just wasn't enough of those little cotton pods available to satisfy the demand.



**Cotton Pod**

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the American colonies were primarily on the coast and the vast lands between the Atlantic and the Mississippi were sparsely populated by Europeans and Native Americans. The soil, climate, and the availability of vast amounts of African labor seemed inexhaustible. The merchants and planters in the Atlantic states, watching the price of cotton soar steadily, worked with the federal government to expand westward and acquire land in the early southwest (Alabama and Mississippi) and

it came within their grasp as well as land west of the Mississippi (Louisiana Purchase in 1803).

Madison County was recognized as possessing an abundance of fertile land waiting for cotton. Many early settlers were of the Yeoman Farmer class but the son's and son's inlaw of the planters on the east coast created the antebellum cotton economy and social environment. Settlers, squatters, adventurers, and those trying to escape the past also composed the social fabric of the growing population.

Treaties with Native Americans provided encouragement to the new residents and optimistic settlers but also proved unsatisfactory and they were eventually subdued, removed from their homeland, and sent west. The imported African slaves rapidly cleared land to establish sprawling plantations throughout the black belt of Alabama, facilitating the growth of the Plantation Industrial Complex.

Littleberry Adams, with 17 slaves, was one of the two largest slaveholders in Madison County in 1809 and by 1810 he was placing cotton on keelboats making their way down the Tennessee to the Ohio and on to New Orleans. The industry matured quickly and the cotton economic engine dominated domestic politics and international markets. By 1849 Alabama provided 20% of the cotton produced in the south.

Cotton influenced the methods of financing, changes in transportation, advances in technology, and launched agricultural research. The world, in less than thirty years was at the mercy of the owners of Southern Plantations.

Originally, the Plantation Industrial Complex was remote from population centers and by necessity became a self contained enterprise that produced almost everything needed to grow cotton. And, almost every inhabitant in the vicinity of a plantation benefited from its financial success. Slave labor was organized into field hands, servants, and artisans (those trained to repair the equipment used in the process including blacksmiths,

wheelwrights, and animal husbandry for maintaining herds of cattle, horses, mules, and pork) and there was a hierarchy of responsibility to supervise the labor. The slave was central to the systems success and motivated by being provided food, clothing, housing and the whip.

Local laws were adopted to protect the property of the plantation. Slaves could not be whipped without cause, mothers could not be sold away from their siblings, the marriage was to be honored by the master and families remain whole. The law was on the books but not always followed to the letter.

Plantation finances depended upon loans secured mostly through Northern banks and the collateral was the number of productive slaves on the plantation, and the anticipated quality and quantity of the crops. The banking and insurance industry flourished and angry confrontations in the congress of the nation's capital and in the media were constant as the "Age of Reason" caused learned men to challenge the morality of slavery as others defended the economic advantage.

There were other cotton growers around the world but they could not compete with the South's plantation industry and reverted to satisfying their domestic demand rather than attempt to compete in the world market. But, they did not lie dormant forever. After the Civil War, there was no free labor example anywhere in the world that produced the efficiency equal to the Southern Plantation Complex and cotton never reached the productive levels experienced prior to 1860 again.

When the Founding Fathers drafted the Constitution, the Industrial Revolution was an unknown infant and the cotton gin was not invented. But, the sectional rivalry had already manifested itself through the economic policy emanating from Northern representatives and the advantages plantation owners sustained over many southern highland farmers' protests. No one could have anticipated how the  $3/5^{\text{th}}$ s rule regarding counting a slave for a

state's representation in the nation's congress was going to play out over the next 60 years.

The United States Constitution compromised on the slavery issue to unite a country. The first Alabama Constitution of 1819 clearly perpetuated slavery because it supported a competitive economic advantage and the advantage was sustained in the Constitution of the Confederacy. The international competitive advantage gained by southern planters over 60 years, longer than most of the men representing their state in the Confederate Congress had been alive, was a birth right, all they knew and their only experience. Secure in their knowledge of the power of "white gold" and grasping for the key that would secure international recognition for the Confederacy, they ransomed "King Cotton" by reducing and refusing to export cotton to Europe. The political decision became one that helped seal the fate of the fledgling democracy. **HHS**

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*Arley McCormick is originally from North Missouri. He has a Master's Degree from George Washington University, Washington D.C. in Public Administration and he is a former soldier and consultant. His articles have appeared in the U.S. Army Military Review published at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and the Old Tennessee Valley Magazine and Mercantile Advertiser and he contributed to the Tennessee Valley Civil War Round Table's first book "13 Wore Gray and the Rest Blue". He is currently serving on the Board of Directors of the Tennessee Valley Civil War Round Table, the Board of Directors of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, and he is a member of the Huntsville-Madison County Alabama Bicentennial Committee. He and his wife, Lynda, a native of New Hope, Alabama, live in the Huntsville, Alabama area.*