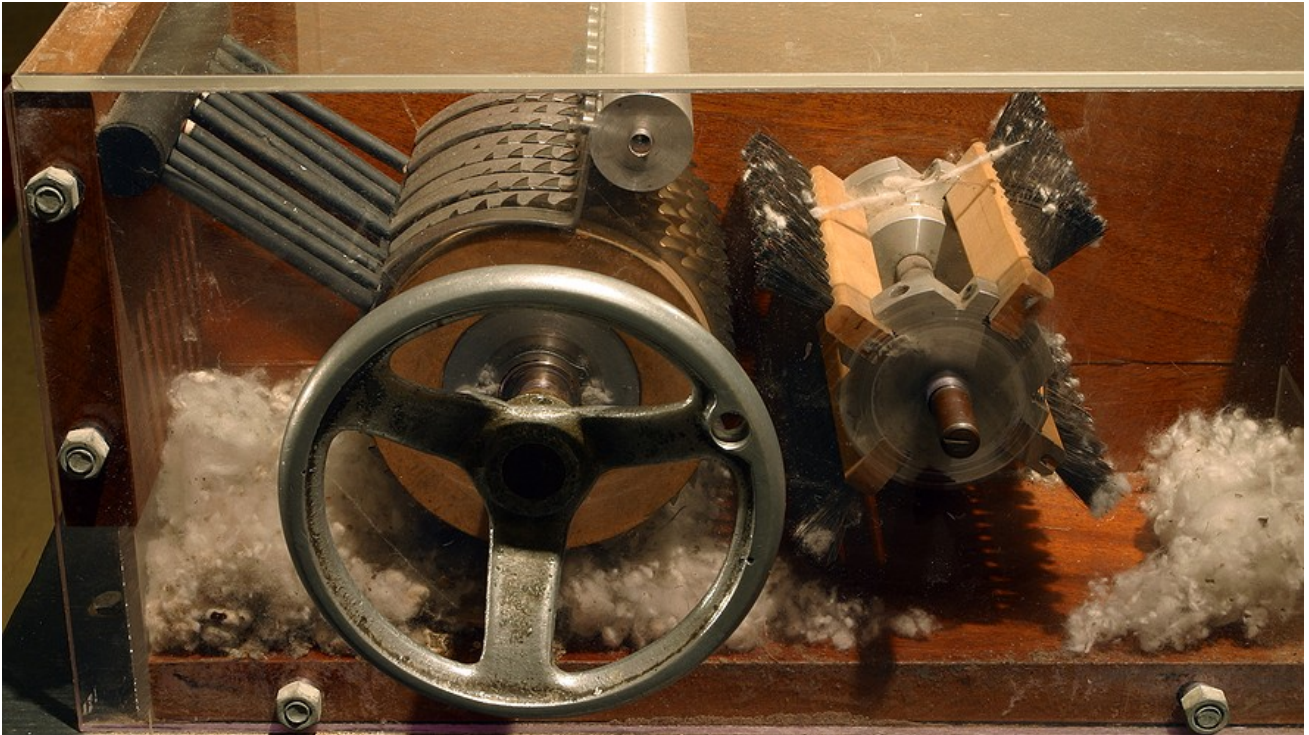


Southern history, cotton gin, slavery have roots in forgotten plantation

By Atlanta Journal-Constitution, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.29.16

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A model of a 19th-century cotton gin is on display at the Eli Whitney Museum in Hamden, Connecticut. Photo: Wikipedia

SAVANNAH, Ga. — Mulberry Grove is the most important site in Southern history. Yet, it has no visitors center or museum. Today the old plantation along the Savannah River is overgrown and forgotten. There is a historic marker a mile away, but few passers-by stop to investigate.

Nonetheless, events of enormous importance took place at Mulberry Grove. It was here that slavery was first introduced to Georgia. It was here that Eli Whitney built a cotton gin that changed the course of U.S. history.

Whitney's machine led to a great increase in cotton cultivation throughout the South. In turn, that led to rapid economic growth.

It also led to an increased demand for slave labor. Countless Africans were brought to the New World, where they were bought and sold and forced to work in the cotton fields.

"Darkest Stain" Of History Here

Over time, the growth of slavery caused increasing conflict between the slave-owning and non-slave-owning states. Whitney's machine "set the North and the South on a course to the Civil War," historian Todd Groce says.

Groce and others want to see the old plantation recognized and memorialized. They say it should perhaps be turned into a living history center where the world could learn of the supremely important events that happened there.

Of course, what happened at Mulberry Grove cannot simply be celebrated. Its dark side must be recognized, too. After all, the cotton gin directly led to the importation of hundreds of thousands of African slaves and spread America's "darkest stain" across the South.

Many Want To Mark Historic Site

Nonetheless, many historians say the plantation should somehow be memorialized.

"This is sacred ground," said historian Vaughnette Goode-Walker, whose Savannah walking tour details the history of slavery in the city. "It should be remembered. People need to know what happened here."

The site was nothing but swamp in 1733, the year the colony of Georgia was founded. Slavery was against the law in the colony, but that did not stop Patrick Mackay, a South Carolina plantation owner. Mackay brought in Georgia's first slaves to work in the rice fields of what would become Mulberry Grove.

After the Revolutionary War, Major General Nathanael Greene became the owner of Mulberry Grove. After his death in 1786, the plantation passed to his wife, Catherine.

Farm Boy Built Machine To Sift Cotton

In 1792 Catherine invited Eli Whitney to stay at Mulberry Grove. A farm boy with a fondness for fixing things, Whitney was intrigued by the difficulty growers had separating upland cotton from its green seeds. To solve that problem in 1793 he built a cotton engine — or "gin," for short. His device consisted of wire teeth set in a wooden box. When rotated, the teeth easily separated cotton fiber from seed.

Most modern historians say Whitney did not actually invent the cotton gin, which had already been around in various forms for years. They say he simply came up with a slightly different machine that was perfect for upland cotton. Still, copies of Whitney's new machine quickly spread across the South, causing enormous change.

As cotton cultivation became easier, cotton became much more profitable. Soon, cotton became the new country's biggest export. It helped create a great deal of wealth, and set the country on the path to becoming the world's most powerful and richest nation.

Growth Of Slavery Was Dramatic

It also led to the explosive growth of slavery and the slave trade. In 1790, the country had about 700,000 slaves. By 1861, the year the Civil War began, the South had nearly 3 million.

“The layers of history are unbelievable,” said historian Hugh Golson. “What Whitney created supercharged cotton production and slavery. We can’t ignore the man. At the same time, we have to document the damage done.”

There have been several attempts to preserve and develop Mulberry Grove, but so far nothing has worked out. Nonetheless, many still feel something must be done to mark the plantation's central part in Georgia and U.S. history.

“It’s one thing to read about history. It’s another to go to a site and feel what it was like,” said history professor Solomon Smith. “There’s so much history here that it would be a loss if nothing’s done.”

Of course, that history has “different meanings for white and black people,” said historian Stan Deaton. Some would prefer not to think about it, because it brings up troubling issues of guilt and blame.

“People don’t know that Mulberry Grove is here or why it’s here,” Goode-Walker said. “People don’t really want to deal with history anymore. But they should. We need to tell the whole story.”

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following are two MAIN ideas from the article?
1. *Mulberry Grove has not been recognized for its importance in U.S. history.*
 2. *Eli Whitney was the inventor of the cotton gin.*
 3. *Mulberry Grove is a large plantation in Georgia that has become overgrown.*
 4. *Mulberry Grove must be recognized for both its positive and negative aspects.*
- (A) 1 and 3
- (B) 1 and 4
- (C) 2 and 3
- (D) 2 and 4
- 2 Which detail would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) the invention of the cotton gin at Mulberry Grove
- (B) the attempts that have been made to improve Mulberry Grove
- (C) the names of the historians who are currently studying Mulberry Grove
- (D) the increase in slaves resulting from the invention of the cotton gin
- 3 What is MOST likely the reason why the author included statistics about the growth of slavery in the United States?
- (A) to demonstrate that Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in order to increase slavery in the United States
- (B) to argue that slavery would never have become so popular in the United States without Mulberry Grove
- (C) to argue that Mulberry Grove should be forgotten due to its dark role in increasing slavery in the United States
- (D) to demonstrate that the invention of the cotton gin had an enormous impact on slavery in the United States

- 4 In the section "Farm Boy Built Machine To Sift Cotton," Eli Whitney is introduced in what way?
- (A) through a humorous anecdote
 - (B) through a description of his inventions
 - (C) through a detailed explanation of the cotton gin
 - (D) through a description of his background and interests