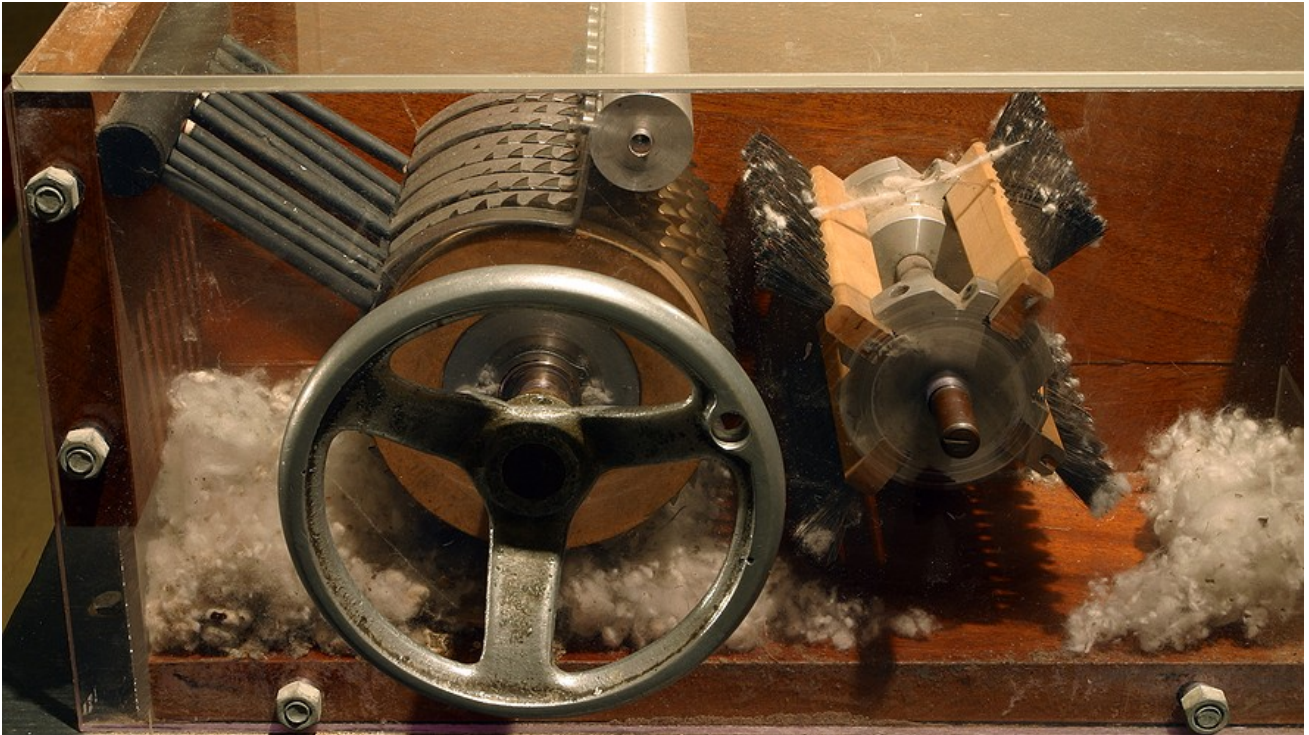


Forgotten spot holds history of South, start of slavery and cotton gin

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. — No museum graces the most important site in Southern history. No visitors center welcomes tourists to Mulberry Grove, an overgrown and forgotten plantation along the Savannah River. There is a historic marker a mile away, but few passers-by stop to investigate.

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

By greatly speeding up the harvesting of cotton, Whitney's machine made cotton cultivation far more extensive and profitable, which in turn led to an increased demand for slave labor. The cotton gin "breathed life into this institution of slavery" said Todd Groce, the president of the Georgia Historical Society. It "triggered the massive migration of slaves, and set the North and the South on a course to the Civil War."

Some Want Plantation Memorial

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.

Memorializing the South's tortured past is never easy, though. The cotton gin, after all, singlehandedly led to the importation of hundreds of thousands of slaves and spread America's "darkest stain" across the region.

Nonetheless, many historians say the plantation should somehow be memorialized, with a full recognition of its dark side.

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

Georgia's First Slaves Worked Here

It was nothing but swamp and bluff in 1733, the year the colony of Georgia was founded. Slavery was illegal in the colony, but that did not stop Patrick Mackay, a South Carolina plantation owner. Mackay brought in Georgia's first slaves from South Carolina, setting them to work in the rice fields of what would become Mulberry Grove.

Following the Revolutionary War, Major General Nathanael Greene became the owner of Mulberry Grove, and after his death in 1786 it passed to his wife, Catherine.

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, or short staple, cotton from its green seeds. To solve that problem in 1793 he built a cotton engine (or gin). His device consisted of wire teeth set in a wooden box; when rotated the teeth easily separated cotton fiber from seed.

Cotton Gin Changed The Economy

Copies of Whitney's invention quickly spread across the South, and the impact on the nation was profound.

"It was the beginning of American prosperity" and of the country's industrial development, said Bill Brown, the director of Connecticut's Eli Whitney Museum and Workshop. Of course, Brown added, the invention had a terrible downside as well, as it led to the rapid growth of slavery.

Catherine Greene sold Mulberry Grove in 1800, after which a succession of owners grew rice and other crops — but not cotton. In 1985, the Georgia Ports Authority acquired the property, which it still owns.

“The layers of history are unbelievable,” said historian Hugh Golson, whose own ancestors once owned Mulberry Grove. “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.”

No Historical Buildings Survive

There have been several attempts to preserve and develop the site, but so far nothing has worked out. Nonetheless, many people still feel something must be done to honor 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.”

So far, the site’s inaccessibility and the absence of surviving historical buildings have made it difficult to win wide support for a memorial. Another problem is that Whitney’s reputation as an inventor has been revised. Modern scholars say that cotton gins had already existed for decades by the 1790s. Whitney’s wire-toothed contraption was just a variation, they say, even if his version was copied and used extensively across the South.

Mulberry Grove Called "Ground Zero"

Yet there is little disagreement over the impact Whitney’s gin and others had on the South’s economy. In 1790, Georgia and South Carolina produced roughly 1.5 million pounds of cotton. In 1861, the year the Civil War began, the South produced 2.3 billion pounds, accounting for nearly 60 percent of the nation’s exports.

About 700,000 slaves toiled in Virginia tobacco fields or South Carolina rice plantations in 1790. Four times as many slaves worked the cotton plantations and other farms that stretched to Texas by the time the Civil War started.

Mulberry Grove is "ground zero" for the pre-Civil War South, with its "different meanings for white and black people," said historian Stan Deaton. “Some will say, ‘It evokes bad memories and we should not linger on it,’” in part because it brings up troubling issues of guilt and blame.

The South’s history, though, cannot be disentangled from its present, as recent racially motivated violence makes painfully clear.

“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 answer choices describes two MAIN ideas in the article?
1. *Mulberry Grove has a past that has been integral to the history of slavery in the United States.*
 2. *Mulberry Grove should be celebrated for the role it has played in history.*
 3. *Mulberry Grove should be vilified for the role it has played in the history of slavery in the United States.*
 4. *Mulberry Grove must be remembered for both its positive and negative contributions to history.*
- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 1 and 4
- (C) 2 and 3
- (D) 3 and 4
- 2 Which of the following sentences from the article would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of it?
- (A) Nonetheless, many historians say the plantation should somehow be memorialized, with a full recognition of its dark side.
- (B) "This is sacred ground," said historian Vaughnette Goode-Walker, whose Savannah walking tour details the city's embrace of slavery.
- (C) It was nothing but swamp and bluff in 1733, the year the colony of Georgia was founded.
- (D) Following the Revolutionary War, Major General Nathanael Greene became the owner of Mulberry Grove, and after his death in 1786 it passed to his wife, Catherine.
- 3 Bill Brown would be most likely to AGREE with which of the following statements?
- (A) The cotton gin had little noticeable effect on American society.
- (B) The invention of the cotton gin was a solely positive event for America.
- (C) The cotton gin had both negative and positive effects on American society.
- (D) The cotton gin proved to be a purely negative addition to American society.

- 4 The author develops the importance of Mulberry Grove in each of the following ways EXCEPT:
- (A) by quoting historians about the plantation's importance
 - (B) by describing major historical events that took place there
 - (C) by describing how inaccessible the plantation has become
 - (D) by describing the efforts of various groups to restore its vitality