

Student Essay

"Why A Plantation?"



William Aiken Walker, *The Sunny South*, 1881.

Photograph courtesy of Robert M. Hicklin Jr., Inc. Spartanburg, SC.

Plantations were southern farms that were usually dedicated to the production of one crop and that usually relied on the labor of at least twenty slaves. The planters who owned these estates often viewed them as extended households in which the master was responsible for the well-being of all who lived there. This perspective is called paternalism because the planter acted like the parent and treated the workers like children. However, it is unlikely that most slaves shared this perspective. They knew that plantations were not households and they were not children. Regardless of the rhetoric of paternalism, plantations were large scale commercial enterprises that were run for a profit. Planters thus differed from other southern farmers (who may have even owned a few slaves) because they participated in a market economy. This means that they produced a crop for sale rather than for their own use. They thus engaged in a certain amount of economic risk taking because, if no one bought their crops, they couldn't eat their products in order to survive.





Before the American Revolution, tobacco, rice, and indigo were the major crops produced for market. Cotton was not produced for market because it was so hard to process. Cotton is picked in little balls off a cotton plant.



Sticky seeds inside each cotton ball have to be removed. When this is done by hand, it takes a very long time. People around the world, as well as those on the Georgia islands and in the Bahamas, had long used a mechanical device to clean cotton. These roller gins may have given people the idea that a machine could speed up the process of removing the sticky seeds from the cotton. The saw gin, patented in 1793, made the processing of cotton even easier, faster and cheaper. Soon cotton became the most important market crop in the South.



Cotton Gin, 1793.

Courtesy of the National Museum of American History, Washington, DC.

The invention of the saw gin was only one of the technological innovations which propelled the growth of cotton as a cash crop. The other important technological innovations came with the invention of machinery for the manufacture of cloth in England (and eventually the United States) that created a growing demand for cotton. However, while these technological developments were crucial in the growth of cotton as a cash crop, cotton production was an agricultural commodity, and made money only when plantation owners could put more workers in the field, rather than buy more machines. From an investor's point of view, slaves were a capital investment, comparable to the machinery a northern factory owner might purchase.

Because cotton was an agricultural product rather than an industrial product, the work involved in its production changed with the seasons: from plowing and planting in the spring to harvesting in the fall. Thus technology did not alter the seasonal nature of slave work rhythms. On the other hand, cotton was not an agricultural product that required skilled labor for its production. Slaves did not work on their own, completing specialized, skilled tasks (as they did with the production of rice, for example). Cotton could be - and often was - cultivated by gangs of slaves working side by side. They were supervised by an overseer and subject to strict rules of discipline. In this respect, the growing of cotton on plantations in the South resembled the spinning and weaving of cotton in factories of the North.



From *The Progress of Cotton*, 1835-40.

Courtesy of Slater Mill Historic Site, Pawtucket, RI.

However, what distinguished southern plantations from northern factories more than anything else was the use of slave labor. Slaves had been used to garner huge profits for tobacco planters since the 17th century and were critical to the rice cultivation which developed in the 18th century. The growth of cotton as a cash crop in the 19th century meant the growth of slavery throughout the South. As the number of slaves grew in the South,

planters defended their labor system by claiming that African Americans were an inferior race incapable of working independently or of taking care of themselves.

Many Europeans had come to the New World with racist ideas about Africans - stereotyping them as sexually promiscuous and savage. These attitudes expanded and flourished with the growth of slavery in the South. Whites commonly described African Americans as naturally docile and lazy, deceitful and foolish, childlike and incompetent. This view of African Americans as inferior - more like apes than humans - was reinforced by the legal definition of slaves which made them property.

Planters argued that slaves were well cared for on plantations: fed, clothed, housed, and protected, in return for their work. Planters went on to argue that they thus took more responsibility for the well being of their workforce than northern manufacturers did for theirs, and that slaves were therefore better off than northern workers. While the criticism of northern factories is well taken, the physical brutality that many slaves experienced at the hands of masters, mistresses, and overseers, belies any claims to paternal protection. Moreover, slaves made it clear in numerous ways that they were dissatisfied with the plantation system. In a few cases they staged rebellions involving slaves from several plantations. More frequently they engaged in individual acts of resistance such as running away or working more slowly than masters and overseers demanded. And while planters may have claimed that their plantations were extensions of one large family, slaves went to great lengths to establish their own families independent of planter control.

Thus plantations were created to make a profit for the owners before technology made cotton a cash crop and before slavery was the only labor system. But plantations were adapted to produce cotton in the 19th century and by then they only employed slaves. Planters became wealthy by exploiting the labor of men and women who could not choose another way of life, and by promoting the idea that whites were superior to blacks.

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