

Document Description:

The story of Eli Whitney and the cotton gin has long served as a benchmark in American history, an economic turning point from which white southerners extended plantation agriculture (via short staple cotton and enslaved African labor) to the southern backcountry. White settlers in the South Carolina backcountry searched for a viable commercial crop as early as the 1730s, experimenting with tobacco, wheat, and cotton. The difficulty in ginning short staple cotton effectively prevented cotton production from rising above domestic use. Roller gins, which had been used for centuries to separate the seeds from long staple cotton, did not work adequately for short staple cotton. Eli Whitney's new design for a cotton gin, a design distinct from the older roller gins, sparked an immediate interest among backcountry planters, as well as numerous controversies over rights to his patent. The following primary sources help to tell the story of Eli Whitney and the cotton gin, with a particular emphasis on the rise of cotton in South Carolina during the nineteenth century.

This letter from Whitney to his father gives a brief summary of his seven-month "southern expedition" to Georgia. It was here at Mulberry Grove Plantation that Whitney learned of "the extreme difficulty in ginning Cotton, that is, separating it from its seeds." He wrote to his father that he "struck out a plan of a Machine...which required the labor of one man to turn it and with which one man will clean ten times as much cotton as he can in any other way before known and also cleanse it much better than in the usual mode." Whitney began a partnership with Phineas Miller, who offered to cover all initial expenses for producing the machine for a share in the profit. Whitney was sure he would "make a Fortune from it."

Whitney was confident that his gin (short for "engine") was an improvement to ginning cotton by hand or the roller gins that had been used for centuries, and he asked his father to keep this news a "profound secret." At the time of this letter, Eli Whitney had returned to New Haven, where he was setting up shop to begin making his cotton gins. Whitney worried that "something...may frustrate my expectations" as he sought to secure a patent for his machine. With his patent application filed on June 20, Whitney retraced every detail of his design that summer. By October 15, he submitted specifications and drawings to the Secretary of State to support his claim.

Citation:

Eli Whitney, Jr. to his Father, 11 September 1793. Eli Whitney Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

Transcription:

Eli Whitney to Eli Whitney, Senr

New Haven, Sept. 11th, 1793.

Dear Parent,

I received your letter of the 16th of August with peculiar satisfaction and delight. It gave me no small pleasure to hear of your health and was very happy to be informed that your health and that of the family has been so good since I saw you. I have fortunately just heard from you by Mr. Robinson who says you were well when he left Westboro sooner than I now fear will be in my power. I presume, sir, you are desirous to hear how I have spent my time since I left College. This I conceive you have a right to know and that it is my duty to inform you and should have done it before this time; but I thought I could do it better by verbal communication than by writing, and expecting to see you soon, I omitted it. As I now have a safe and direct opportunity to send by Mr. Robinson, I will give you a summary account of my southern expedition.

I went from N. York with the family of the late Major General Greene to Georgia. I went immediately with the family to their Plantation about twelve miles from Savannah with an expectation of spending four or five days and then proceed into Carolina to take the school as I have mentioned in former letters. During this time I heard much said of the extreme difficulty in ginning Cotton, that is, separating it from its seeds. There were a number of very respectable Gentlemen at Mrs. Greene's who all agreed that if a machine could be invented which would clean the cotton with expedition, it would be a great thing both to the Country and to the inventor. I involuntarily happened to be thinking on the subject and struck out a plan of a Machine in my mind, which I communicated to Miller, (who is agent to the Executors of Genl. Greene and resides in the family, a man of respectability and property) he was pleased with the Plan and said if I would pursue it and try an experiment to see if it would answer, he would be at the whole expense, I should loose nothing but my time, and if I succeeded we would share the profits. Previous to this I found I was like[ly] to be disappointed in my school, that is, instead of a hundred, I found I could get only fifty Guineas a year. I however held the refusal of the school untill I tried some experiments. In about ten Days I made a little model, for which I was offered, if I would give up all right and title to it, a Hundred Guineas. I concluded to relinquish my school and turn my attention to perfecting the Machine. I made one before I came away which required the labor of one man to turn it and with which one man will clean ten times as much cotton as he can in any other way before known and also cleanse it much better than in the usual mode. This machine may be turned by water or with a horse, with the greatest ease, and one may and a horse will do more than fifty men with the old machine. It makes the labor fifty times less, without throwing any class of People out of business.

I returned to the Northward for the purpose of having a machine made on a large scale and obtaining a patent for the invention. I went to Philadelphia soon after I arrived, made myself acquainted with the steps necessary to obtain a Patent, took several of the steps with Secretary of State Mr. Jefferson agreed to send the Patent to me as soon as it could be made out—so that I apprehended no difficulty in obtaining the Patent—Since I have been here I have employed several workmen in making machines and as soon as my business is such that I can leave it a few days, I shall come to Westboro'. I think it is probable I shall go to Philadelphia again before I come to Westboro', and when I do come I shall be able to stay but few days. I am certain I can obtain a patent in England. As soon as I have got a Patent in America, I shall go with the machine which I am not making, to Georgia, where I shall stay a few weeks to see it at work. From thence I expect to go to England, where I shall probably continue two or three years. How advantageous this business will eventually prove to me, I cannot say. It is generally said by

those who know anything about it, that I shall make a Fortune by it. I have not expectation that I shall make an independent fortune by it, but think I had better pursue it than any other business into which I can enter. Something which cannot be foreseen may frustrate my expectations and defeat my Plan; but I am now so sure of success that ten thousand dollars, if I saw the money counted out to me, would not tempt me to give up my right and relinquish the object. I wish you, sir, not to show this letter not communicate anything of its contents to any body except My Brothers and Sister, enjoining it on them to keep the whole a profound secret.

Mr. Robinson came into town yesterday and goes out tomorrow, this has been such a bustling time that I have not had opportunity to say six words to him. I have told him nothing of my business—perhaps he will hear something about it from some body else in town. But only two or three of my friends know what I am about tho' there are many surmises in town—if Mr. Robinson says anything about it, you can tell him I wrote you concerning it, but wished not to have it mentioned. I have been considerably out of health since I wrote you last; but now feel tolerably well. I should write to my Brothers and Sister but fear I shall not have time—hope they will accept my good wishes for their happiness and excuse me.

With respects to Mama I am,

kind Parent, your most obt. Son

Eli Whitney, Junr.

Mr. Eli Whitney.