

# COTTON



The manufacturing of cotton into cloth is at least 7,000 years old. Scientists have found both cotton bolls and cotton cloth in Mexican caves that date to as early as 5,000 B.C.

Cotton was growing in the Bahamas when Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492. It was planted by the English settlers in Virginia in 1607, the year they first arrived in America.

Georgia began growing cotton immediately after its founding in 1733. Cotton was first spun by machines in England in 1730. Because this process was much faster than hand spinning, the demand for raw cotton increased tremendously. There was a ready market for all the cotton that America could produce.

The problem with processing cotton is that the cotton seeds are firmly imbedded in the cotton boll. Picking the seeds out by hand was time consuming and not cost effective. Most of the cotton grown in America in the 18th century was used by the grower. The job of spinning the cotton into thread was given to the daughters of the house. Thus the word “spinster” was used to describe an unmarried woman.

Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin (short for engine) at Mulberry Plantation just outside Savannah in 1793. This machine could pluck the seeds from the cotton ten times faster than could be done by hand. The amazing results led to a 5,000 percent growth in the cotton industry over the next ten years.

The invention of the cotton gin changed the history of this century. Once it became profitable to grow cotton for sale, the need for slaves to clear the land, work in the fields, and work in the processing houses increased astronomically. The slave trade expanded to meet the need, and the plantation system was born.

The boll weevil, an insect described as a “cross between a termite and a tank” almost destroyed the cotton economy in the early 20th century. It arrived in Georgia in 1913 and within ten years the boll weevil devastated the cotton crops reducing many rural families to poverty. Only the advent of modern pesticides ended the plague of the boll weevil.

Today, all parts of the cotton plant are used; even the seeds that were once thrown away are used to make oils and meal. The process from planting to the manufacturing of cloth is completely mechanized. Today, cotton is grown all over the southern United States, from California to Virginia, as well as in India, China, Brazil and Turkey.

