**A Cotton Tale: The United States’ First Industrial Revolution (1790-1840)**

**Handout 1: Excerpts from Empire of Cotton: A Global History by Sven Beckert1**

The United States was superbly suited for cotton production. The climate and soil of a wide swath of the American South met the conditions under which the cotton plant thrived, with the right amount of rain, the right patterns of rainfall and the right number of days without frost. Perceptive observers noticed the potential. In a bout of optimism, James Madison had predicted as early as 1786 that the United States would turn into a major cotton growing country, while George Washington believed that “in the increase of that new material (cotton)...must be of almost infinite consequence to the prosperity of the United States.”

What distinguished the United States from virtually every other cotton growing area in the world was planters’ command of nearly unlimited supplies of land, labor and capital, and their unparalleled political power. In the Ottoman Empire and India, powerful indigenous rulers controlled the land, and deep entrenched social groups struggled over its use. In the West Indies and Brazil sugar planters competed for land labor and power. The United States, and its plentiful land, faced no such encumbrances. With the support of southern politicians, the federal government aggressively secured new territories by acquiring land from foreign powers and from forced cessions by Native Americans. In 1803 the Louisiana Purchase nearly doubled the territory of the United States, in 1819 the US acquired Florida from Spain and in 1845 it annexed Texas. All these acquisitions contained lands superbly suited to cotton agriculture.

The insatiable demand of cotton planters dominated the politics of the new nation, not just because  
of their reliance on the state to secure and empty new land, but also because of their need for  
coerced labor. Planters in the United States, unlike elsewhere, enjoyed access to large supplies of  
cheap labor—what the American Cotton Planter would call “the cheapest and most available labor  
in the world.” The slave markets in New Orleans and elsewhere boomed as cotton did. And as significant, hundreds of thousands of slaves were available to grow cotton because tobacco production  
in the states of the upper south became less profitable after the American Revolution, encouraging  
slave owners there to sell their human property.  
The reason for America’s quick ascent to market dominance was simple. The United States more  
than any other country had elastic supplies of the three crucial ingredients that went into the production of raw cotton: labor, land and credit. As The Economist put it in 1861, the United States  
had become so successful in the world’s cotton markets because the planters’ “soil is marvelously  
fertile and costs him nothing; his labour has hitherto been abundant, unremitting and on the increase; the arrangements and mercantile organizations for cleaning and forwarding the cotton are all there.”

**Excerpt from Cotton is King**

**On how the North and the West need and support the economics of slavery:**

The increase of mechanics and manufacturers at the North, and the expansion of Slavery at the South, therefore, augment the markets for provisions, and promote the prosperity of the farmer. As foreign nations open their markets to cotton fabrics, increased demands, for the raw material, are made. As new grazing and grain-growing States are developed, and teem with their surplus productions, the mechanic is benefited, and the planted, relieved from food-raising, can employ his slaves more extensively upon cotton. It is thus that our exports are increased; our foreign commerce advanced; the home markets of the mechanic and farmer extended, and the wealth of the nation promoted. It is thus, also, that the Free labor of the country finds remunerating markets for its products—though at the expense of serving as an efficient auxiliary in the extension of Slavery! But more. So speedily are new grain-growing States springing up; so vast is the territory owned by the United States, ready for settlement; and so enormous will soon be the amount of products demanding profitable markets, that the national government has been seeking new outlets for them, upon our own continent, to which, alone, they can be advantageously transported. That such outlets, when our vast possessions, Westward, are brought under cultivation, will be an imperious necessity, is known to every statesman. The farmers of these new States, after the example of those of the older sections of the country, will demand a market for their products. This can be furnished, only, by the extension of Slavery.

**On Great Britain’s dependence on Southern cotton:**

That we have not overstated her [Great Britain’s] dependence upon our Slave labor for cotton, is a fact of world-wide notoriety […] the London Economist quotes as follows: “Let any great social or physical convulsion visit the United States, and England would feel the shock from Land’s End to John O’Groats. The lives of nearly two millions of our countrymen are dependent upon the cotton crops of America; their destiny may be said, without any kind of hyperbole, to hang upon a thread. Should any dire calamity befall the land of cotton, a thousand of our merchant ships would rot idly in dock, ten thousand mills must stop their busy looms; two thousand mouths would starve, for lack of food to feed them.”

**Author/Creator:  Christy, David. *Cotton is King; or, the Culture of Cotton, and its Relation to Agriculture, Manufactures and Commerce: To the free colored people; and to those who hold that slavery is in itself sinful.* 1855**

I used to have to pick cotton and sometime I pick 300 pound and tote it a mile to the cotton house. Some pick 300 to 800 pound cotton and have to tote the bag the whole mile to the gin. If they didn’t do the work get whip til they have blisters on them. I never got whipped, ‘cause I always got my 300 pounds. Us have to go early to do that when the horn goes early before daylight. Us never got enough to eat so us keep stealing stuff. They give us a peck of meal to last a week or two, three pound of bacon in chunk. Us never have flour or sugar, just cornmeal and the meat and potatoes. [We] had a big box under the fireplace where they kept all the big and chickens we stole down in salt.5  
—**Interview with former slave Sarah Ashley of Goodrich, Texas**