



South Carolina's Story The making of a state

By Ron Chepesiuk
and Louise Pettus

of the Winthrop College faculty

Cotton From Sea Island Equaled Silk

BY RON CHEPESIUK AND LOUISE PETTUS

Sea island cotton has long been recognized as the aristocrat of the Cotton Kingdom. When short staple cotton sold for 9 cents per pound, sea island cotton nearly equaled the price of silk. The top price recorded was \$2 per pound.

William Elliott grew the first bale in South Carolina at Hilton Island in 1790. The first bale in America, grown from seed imported from the Bahamas, was produced at San Simon's Island, Ga., in 1788.

Elliott planted his sea island cotton on the exact spot where Jean Ribault had planted a French colony more than 200 years previously.

Soon planters up and down a narrow strip of coastal islands between Georgetown and northern Florida were abandoning indigo in favor of the new cotton.

Kinsey Burden, a planter in St. Paul's parish, discovered that by saving the seeds from his best plants he could produce superior crops. Soon, like wine-makers, leading planters were selling their sea island cotton under private brand names.

Most of the sea island cotton was shipped to France where it was spun into thread so fine that it was compared to a spider's web. The fine thread was surprisingly tough. For a long time the U.S. government used the thread in the manufacture of mail bags. The first pneumatic automobile tires were lined with the thread.

Sea island cotton was truly tropical, requiring high humidity, abundant sunshine and a light, loamy soil. Very tedious to prepare, the cultivation required a large labor force. Planters estimated that a crop could not possibly be raised with less than 20 slaves. Whitmarsh B. Seabrook, one of the largest planters on Edisto Island, wrote in 1844 that 54 laborers were necessary in his plantation.

Most of the labor was done with a hoe and a few ox carts. An agricultural survey in 1822 on Edisto Island, one of the largest islands, listed not a single plow.

The cotton gin for the long staple seed was different from the Whitney gin, which separated lint from the tufted green seeds of short staple cotton. Sea island cotton seeds were slick and black. Sea island ginning was accomplished by using a simple set of hard oak rollers mounted in a box and powered by a foot pedal. Twenty or 30 gin stands, each with its attendant slave, might be placed in a single room.

Because so much labor was required, only large plantations could possibly produce sea island cotton. Those who were successful became immensely wealthy. William Brisbane of St. Paul's raised sea island cotton for two years and made enough profit to retire. He sold his plantation to William Seabrook for an "exorbitant price." Seabrook paid for the plantation in two years. David Ramsey called sea island cotton culture an "annual lottery" where the winners can purchase the land in one year and pay for the slaves who cultivated it in two years.

In 1843 the planters formed St. Helena's Agricultural Society in order to improve the quality and to standardize the prices. The members were urged to keep careful records, exchange seeds, make soil analyses and write articles about their experiences.

Soil deficiency diseases, such as rust and blight, were present but could be corrected with compost and lime. Plant lice, cutworms and caterpillars were much more difficult to control.

Mild winters followed by wet springs produced caterpillars that would strip fields in 48 hours. The planters' turkey flocks, their only counter force, were simply not numerous enough to save the plants. In 1846 and 1847 caterpillars wiped out the entire crop.

At least six times during the 19th century hurricanes destroyed the crop. The destruction of the Civil War and the loss of slave labor diminished sea island cotton production considerably.

The final blow was the invasion of the boll weevil from Mexico. In 1917 the first infestation showed up. All cotton, long- and short-stapled, was affected. Sea island cotton culture never recovered. Today resort hotels and golf courses cover the old fields.