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THE SEEDS OF AN IDEA

In the 1700s, cotton was the main crop for the southern United States. The cotton was picked and cleaned by hand, mostly by slaves.

I need a pound of clean cotton by sundown, boy. If I find any seeds in it, you'll be sorry.

After the cotton was cleaned, it was shipped to England. English mills wove the raw U.S. cotton into fabric. Then the fabric was sent back to America.

I love cotton clothing. I wish we didn't have to pay so much for it.

We can grow the cotton here. We just don't have mills to make fabric.

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In 1789, British businessman Samuel Slater came to America. In Rhode Island, he met Moses Brown. They decided to start a business together.

I helped supervise a cotton mill in England. I can show you how the process works.

If you describe what you remember, Samuel, we can build a cotton mill here.

In 1793, Slater's mill opened in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Soon, several other mills were built. These mills allowed U.S. workers to spin thread and make fabric in large quantities.

There isn't enough raw cotton to keep the mill running, Moses.

If cotton could be cleaned more quickly, the South would grow a lot more of it.

Then England would be buying fabric from us.

In 1792, young inventor Eli Whitney went to the South to work as a tutor. But the job didn't work out. His friends Catherine Greene and Phineas Miller invited him to stay at Mulberry Grove in Georgia.

Welcome to Mulberry Grove, Eli. I understand that you studied law in college. Do you plan to become a lawyer?

I don't know. I really love working with my hands. I once built a machine that made nails. Maybe I could do something like that.

I'm sure you can, Eli. A mind like yours will be useful here in the South.

The next day Phineas, who managed the plantation, showed Eli the fields around Mulberry Grove.

We've been trying to find a way to make money from cotton, Eli. But it's difficult to clean.

Our slaves have to pull out the seeds one at a time.

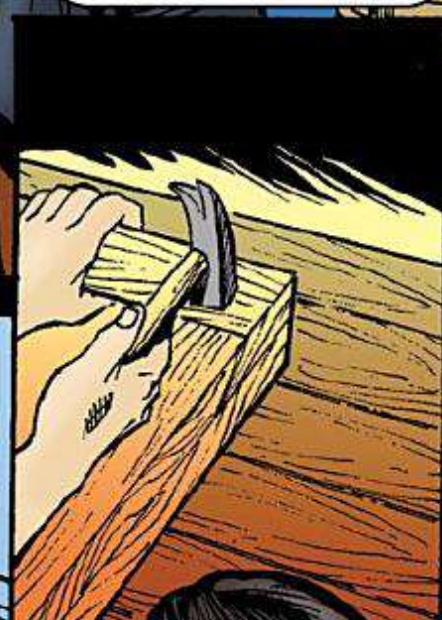
There must be an easier way to clean the cotton.

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Eli spent the next few weeks at Mulberry Grove helping Phineas with his duties. He spent his evenings keeping Catherine and her children company.

This needlework frame keeps cutting into the work I've already done.

May I see? I think I could make a better frame for you.



Eli, this new frame is splendid! It holds the fabric snugly and doesn't cut the threads. You're very talented.

Thank you. It took a few tries, but I'm glad you like it.

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Catherine often invited neighboring farmers to dinner at Mulberry Grove. Eli liked to talk with them and learn about their cotton crops.

Cotton is very popular. We could make a lot of money from it. But green-seed cotton is so hard to clean.

Why does it take so long to separate the seeds from the cotton?

The seeds are very small and sticky. The workers have to pull them from the cotton boll one at a time.

I've heard about a machine that can separate the seeds. Why don't you use it?

The roller gin? It's used for black-seed cotton. Black seeds are smooth. They roll right out of the cotton.

But the roller gin's rollers break the green seeds in our cotton. Nobody wants cotton with seeds mixed in.

