

# THE FABRIC OF AMERICA

## Activity Sheet 1

*Note to students: Here are seven “essay starters” you can use to write a super history essay related to cotton. Below you’ll find some Web site addresses where you can find out more about various aspects of the topic. Web site addresses change all the time, so don’t depend only on these addresses; these are just starting points. Have fun exploring!*

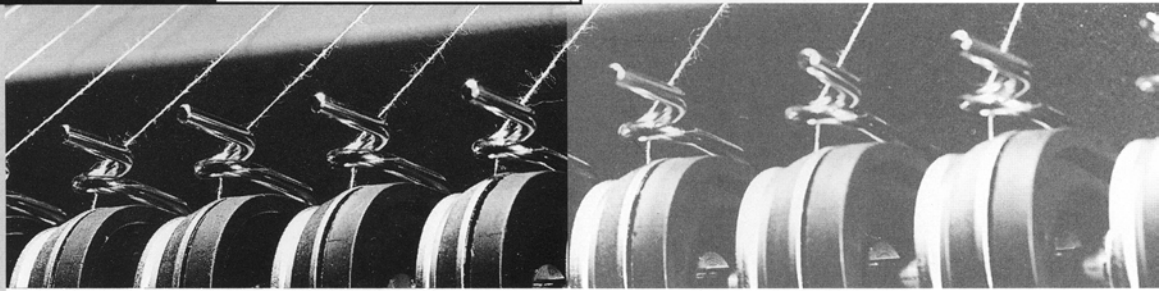
<http://web.mit.edu/invent/>

<http://www.spartacus.school-net.co.uk/Textiles.htm>

<http://www.nara.gov/education/cc/whitney.html>

<http://ceres.ca.gov/ceres/calweb/geology/goldrush.html>

[http://www.eurohist.com/the\\_industrial\\_revolution.htm](http://www.eurohist.com/the_industrial_revolution.htm)



### Fabric in Antiquity

The best evidence is that cotton was first cultivated—grown deliberately as a crop, rather than wild—in India as much as 5,000 years ago, based on clues archaeologists have found about agriculture of that time. There is other evidence, however, that suggests cotton (whether cultivated or merely taken from the wild) was used to make fabric in the Americas as early as 7,000 years ago, and in Egypt as far back as 12,000 years ago. For instance, many Egyptian mummies are wrapped in cotton cloth.

### Colonial America

Jamestown, Virginia, founded in 1607, was the first permanent English settlement in North America. One of the important crops the first English settlers planted was cotton, to make clothes.

During the following 150 years, cotton became an important crop in the Southern colonies, such as Virginia and the Carolinas. England passed laws that required cotton growers to ship all their cotton to England, where it was manufactured into clothes. England then sold the clothing in Europe and to North Americans at high prices.

In defiance of the English laws, some cotton was kept within the colonies and used to make clothes called homespun. Homespun was rough and not very fashionable. Clothes imported from England were expensive, and only fairly wealthy colonists could afford to buy them. But during the American Revolution, patriots wore homespun to show their loyalty to the American cause. Even George Washington wore homespun during the Revolution.

### The Textile Industry of Great Britain

To protect its monopoly on manufacturing cotton clothing, England made it illegal for people who knew how British spinning machines worked to move to other countries, especially the United States. These machines spun cotton fiber into yarn much faster than could be done by hand. In 1789, Samuel Slater decided that he wanted to move to America. He had worked for six years in a textile mill in Derbyshire, England, and had learned how a spinning machine invented by Richard Arkwright worked.

Slater disguised himself as a farmer and sailed for America. The following year, he built a spinning machine from memory. One of Slater’s first mills, which was built in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, in 1793, is now a museum.

### Eli Whitney and Other Inventors of the Late 18th Century

In 1790, Eli Whitney, a recent graduate of Yale College, moved from New England to Georgia to become a teacher. In Georgia, Whitney saw how hard it was to separate cotton fiber from cottonseeds by hand. It took about 10 hours to get one pound of cotton. To help, Whitney invented a machine, called the cotton gin, that could do the work much faster. The cotton gin could produce 50 pounds of cotton fiber in one day. With the new manufacturing machines, cotton became so important to the American economy that it was called “King Cotton.”

### The California Gold Rush

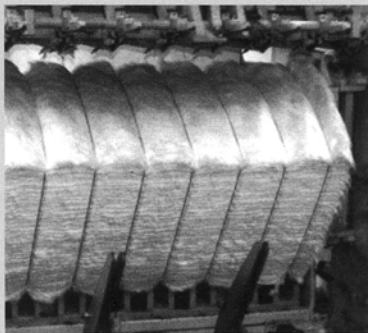
In 1848, gold was discovered in California. While thousands of people flocked to the area hoping to strike it rich, Levi Strauss opened a general store. He knew that people would need supplies. After opening his store, Strauss invented a new kind of cotton pants—denim jeans. To make the sturdy pants, which miners could wear while looking for gold, he used rivets to hold pieces of cotton together.

### The Industrial Revolution

Cotton was used in some of the most important inventions of the 19th century. For instance, Samuel Morse invented the telegraph and a language called Morse Code to send messages over long distances. The messages were sent over electrical wires similar to today’s telephone wires. Cotton was used to insulate the metal wires. When the famous inventor Thomas Edison was trying to develop the first practical electric light bulb, he needed a special material for the filament, which is the part of the light bulb that heats up and glows. He tried platinum, silicon, and boron. Then he tried a strip of charred cotton—it was perfect for the light bulb because, unlike other materials, it glowed rather than melted when subjected to the electric charge.

### Everyday Inventions, Today and Tomorrow

As the twentieth century took off, so did cotton. In 1905, Wilbur and Orville Wright covered the wings of their first airplane with cotton. When World War I broke out, fine cotton fibers were used to make a smokeless gunpowder. Twentieth-century inventors found more and more uses for cotton. It is now used to make everything from photographic film to margarine. We can only wonder what new uses twenty-first century inventors will find for cotton, this miracle of nature!



## *The Fabric of America - Activity Sheet 1*

Indicate 'T' for true or an 'F' for false.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Cotton was first cultivated in Africa.
  2. \_\_\_\_\_ Many Egyptian mummies were wrapped in cotton, conclusive evidence of cotton's cultivation in Egypt.
  3. \_\_\_\_\_ In 1607, the first English settlers at Jamestown, Virginia, planted cotton.
  4. \_\_\_\_\_ During the American Revolution, patriots wore cotton clothing called homespun to show their loyalty to the cause of American liberty.
  5. \_\_\_\_\_ English inventor Richard Arkwright invented a spinning machine that turned cotton fiber into yarn.
  6. \_\_\_\_\_ In 1790, Samuel Slater, an English textile worker, disguised himself as a farmer and moved to America, where he built a spinning machine from memory.
  7. \_\_\_\_\_ Eli Whitney graduated from Harvard in 1790.
  8. \_\_\_\_\_ One of Whitney's first mills, in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, is now a museum.
  9. \_\_\_\_\_ Eli Whitney built the first cotton gin, a machine that could separate 50 pounds of cotton fiber from seed in one day.
  10. \_\_\_\_\_ A famous cotton farmer named George Lincoln was called "King Cotton."
  11. \_\_\_\_\_ The California Gold Rush started with a discovery of gold in 1848.
  12. \_\_\_\_\_ Levi Strauss invented rivets.
  13. \_\_\_\_\_ In the nineteenth century, Samuel Morse invented the telegraph. Morse Code messages were sent across telegraph wires insulated with cotton.
  14. \_\_\_\_\_ Thomas Edison used charred cotton as a filament in the world's first practical electric light bulb.
  15. \_\_\_\_\_ In 1905, the Wright Brothers used polyester to cover the wings of their first plane.
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