

January 2025



## Time Travellers Club

Dear Club Members,

It's two hundred years since the death of Eli Whitney, the inventor of the cotton gin in 1793. It was hard to not let such a key fibre invention pass by as a historical date!

A cotton gin is a machine that can remove the seeds from cotton. Prior to the mechanisation this had to be done by hand, and was incredibly labour intensive, each person could only pick through a pound of cotton a day. Mechanisation allowed 55 pounds a day to be processed. It was this invention that allowed cotton to become a profitable crop, ultimately led to the industrial revolution (which was actually a textile revolution) and strengthened the economic foundation of slavery in America. A pretty hefty rap sheet for one humble machine.

Whitney was born in Massachusetts in 1765. He attended Yale, after working as a farm labourer and private tutor to save money. His father was a prosperous farmer, but his step mother objected to his attending college, so he had to pay his own way. He graduated in 1792, but was unable to continue to study law due to a shortage of funds, instead accepting a post as a tutor in South Carolina, and from there he visited Georgia.

When he initially sailed for South Carolina, among his shipmates was Catherine Littlefield Greene widow of and the Revolutionary hero Gen. Nathanael Greene of Rhode Island (one of George Washingtons most talented and dependable officers). Mrs. Greene invited Whitney to visit her Georgia plantation, Mulberry Grove.

Whilst staying at Mulberry Cove Whitney created numerous household machines, altho led to Catherine introducing him to several local businessmen who were exploring the idea of a machine to de-seed cotton. In a couple of weeks he's developed a prototype, a wooden drum embedded with hooks that pull the cotton fibers through a mesh. The cotton seeds do not fit through the mesh and fall outside. Whitney occasionally told a story that he was inspired by observing a cat attempting to pull a chicken through a fence, and able to only pull through some of the feathers!

Whitney believe that his invention would help to lessen the demand for enslaved labour. In the 1790's rice, tobacco, and indigo, were the common southern crops, and none were particularly profitable. Cotton wasn't profitable due to the deseeding issue, but the invention of the gin now meant that plantation owners could grow cotton and process it more cheaply, so needed manual labour to work the fields. As soon as cotton became cheaper demand sky rocketed. Cotton exports went from less than 500,000 pounds (230,000 kg) in 1793 to 93 million pounds (42,000,000 kg) by 1810. It became the U.S.'s chief export, representing over half the value of U.S. exports from 1820 to 1860. By 1860 there were 4 million slaves in the South.

Whitney didn't make his fortune from the cotton gin, and went on to die of prostate cancer aged just 59. The Eli Whitney Students Program, Yale University's admissions program for non-traditional students, is named in honor of him.

Your fibre this month is maybe not the colour you are expecting. White cotton was ideal for mass production as it could be dyed any colour. However cotton naturally comes in a variety of shades, and I'll explore a bit more about that over in the bonus content in The Fellowship of Yarn.

Happy Spinning

Katie

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label

50% Organic Merino  
50% Bamboo Viscose

Further Reading-

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eli\\_Whitney](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eli_Whitney)

<https://www.eliwhitney.org/museum/about-eli-whitney/inventor>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qyvxFCMShNQ>