

THE COTTON INDUSTRY OF SOUTHERN
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COTTON GROWING AN EARLY INDUSTRY IN ILLINOIS

While the exact date of the first cotton grown in Illinois is perhaps unknown, yet it could not have been many years after the first permanent English settlements. As proof of this, Governor John Reynolds, in speaking of the early cotton industry in Illinois says: "The first gin was established in 1813."¹ This statement of Reynolds is in complete accord with that of J. M. Peck, who wrote his *Gazetteer of Illinois* in 1837. In this book Peck says: "Cotton, for many years, has been successfully cultivated in this state (Illinois) for domestic use, and this branch of business admits of enlargement; and invites the attention of eastern manufacturers with small capital."² Peck further states: "A few factories for spinning cotton yarn have been put into operation in several counties on a small scale of from one hundred to two hundred spindles each."³

H. L. Ellsworth in his book, "Illinois In 1837," makes this significant statement concerning early cotton manufactures in Illinois: "Coarse clothing from cotton is manufactured in the southern portion of the state, where the article is raised in small quantities. Woolen cloth, and jeans, a mixture of wool and cotton, is made for ordinary wear, as is cloth from flax."⁴ From these early writers it is clear that cotton was not merely grown in Illinois at a very early date, but cotton yarn and cotton cloth were made for commercial purposes in addition to that made and consumed in the homes of the early settlers.

It is also quite probable that available statistics do not show the entire amount of cotton raised, for the reports show the amount of lint by bales. Baled cotton was for

¹ Reynolds, John: *Pioneer History of Illinois*. Page 398.

² Peck, J. M.: *Gazetteer of Illinois*. Page 22.

³ Peck, J. M.: *Gazetteer of Illinois*. Page 32.

⁴ Ellsworth, H. L.: *Illinois in 1837*. Page 59.

“export” and did not represent that used in the home, for such cotton was evidently not baled.

AMOUNT OF BALED LINT PRODUCED FROM 1839 TO 1880

In 1839	amount of lint	produced in Illinois	was	402	bales.
“ 1859	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	1186	“
“ 1860	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	1482	“
“ 1865	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	7609	“
“ 1870	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	465	“
“ 1875	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	13	“
“ 1876	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	about 1	“
“ 1877	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	118	“
“ 1878	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	6	“
“ 1879	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	18	“
“ 1880	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	“ “ “ “	95	“

While available statistics do not show the production for each year, yet they do show that cotton was probably continuously grown from the period of the early English settlements of Illinois to at least 1880. It is quite probable that cotton continued to be grown on a small scale till about 1910 or even later. The writer distinctly remembers seeing a field of cotton between Mound and Mound City about 1910.

COTTON INDUSTRY DURING CIVIL WAR

In 1865 cotton culture in Illinois reached its high water mark for the 19th century. This was due almost wholly to the changed economic conditions caused by the war itself. President Lincoln's proclamation closing the southern ports to all foreign trade, together with lack of labor on many southern plantations near the close of the

COTTON PRODUCTION IN 13 ILLINOIS COUNTIES IN 1865.

Counties	No. of acres planted	Yield per acre	No. of bales of lint	Price per lb. in seed	Amount realized
Jackson	3,280	800 lbs.	1,876	10¢	\$378,065
Union	2,700	800 “	1,458	10¢	\$199,757
Williamson	1,678	800 “	1,000	10¢	\$141,750
Johnson	1,000	900 “	800	9½¢	\$136,800
Massac	728	800 “	370	9½¢	\$ 55,361
Perry	661	800 “	639	9¢	\$ 56,563
Franklin	625	800 “	356	9½¢	\$ 47,500
Jefferson	435	800 “	240	9¢	\$ 27,920
Pope	350	800 “	190	9¢	\$ 22,680
Alexander	310	800 “	250	9¢	\$ 18,700
Gallatin	300	800 “	200	9¢	\$ 21,600
Pulaski	123	1100 “	200	10½¢	\$ 13,500
Hardin	45	800 “	30	8¢	\$ 4,200
Totals	12,835		7,609		\$1,125,396

war, caused a very serious shortage of raw cotton both in America and western Europe. Thus the price of cotton was high and many southern Illinois farmers found cotton the most profitable crop they could raise.

These statistics show some rather remarkable things. In the first place, the largest producing counties in 1865 were not the extreme southern counties of Alexander, Pulaski, Massac, and Pope, but Jackson, Union, Williamson and Johnson counties, somewhat farther north. Jackson county alone produced more than twice as much as the five southernmost counties combined. In the second place most of the cotton was not produced in the more fertile bottom lands of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, but on the warmer south and east slopes of the hill lands of Jackson, Union, Williamson, and Johnson counties. Even the hill county of Massac produced more than twice as much cotton as the two counties of Pulaski and Alexander with their much larger proportion of river bottom land. The explanation of this is that the river bottom lands in 1865 were still largely in timber, poorly drained, and not well protected from floods, while the hill lands still retained much of their virgin fertility of soil, were warmer, and much better drained. Cotton needs warm and well drained lands quite as much as lands of high fertility.

Owing to the fact that the Illinois Central railroad was the only road having a direct outlet to the north and thence east to New York City, nearly all the cotton was marketed in towns along the Illinois Central railroad. Of all these towns Carbondale was the most accessible to the chief cotton producing counties and as a consequence became the chief cotton market in Illinois. In 1865 there were 11 cotton gins in and near Carbondale. Carbondale was the shipping point for most of the cotton of Jackson, Williamson, Saline, Gallatin, northern Hardin, Pope, and Johnson counties.

The importance of Carbondale as a cotton market can be gained also from this statement of Newsome, who says: "At one time there were about a dozen cotton gins

⁵ Pearcy, A. J.: Transactions of Ill. State Agr. Society. Vol. 6, 1865-6, Page 66.

in town (Carbondale), so in the autumn, the place had very much the appearance of a southern town, for the cotton was everywhere, and the bales were piled upon the depot platform ready for shipment. The price was high, money was plenty, and business lively⁶." It is quite probable that more than one-half of the 1,125,396 dollars worth of cotton shipped from Illinois in 1865 was shipped from Carbondale. For a few years after the Civil War cotton continued to be one of the leading money crops in several southern Illinois counties; but as the South gradually recovered from the war, cotton growing increased, prices grew less and Illinois being unable to compete with the southern cotton grower, the industry gradually declined and finally ceased entirely about 1910 or soon thereafter.

REVIVAL OF COTTON GROWING IN 1923 AND 1924

Perhaps at no time in the history of Illinois has more been said and done to revive cotton growing in this state than has been the case in the last two years. Bankers, farm advisers, lawyers, merchants, farmers and others have been persistently advocating the possibilities of cotton production, particularly in the counties of Pulaski, Alexander, Union, Massac, and Johnson. Bankers and lawyers have visited the southern cotton growing states to study how best to start the industry. Experienced cotton men from the South, and the national government have been brought to these counties where large and enthusiastic meetings with prospective growers have been held. At these meetings such questions as these have been discussed: the time to plant cotton, the type of soils, the best kinds of cotton for southern Illinois, manner of preparing seed bed and of cultivating cotton, the amount one man can plant, cultivate and pick, and finally how and when best to pick and how to sell the crop.

CHIEF CAUSES THAT HAVE PRODUCED THIS REVIVAL

Chief of the causes that have contributed to this renewed interest in cotton growing is the destruction due

⁶ Newsome, E. "Historical Sketches of Jackson Co. Ill.," Page 124.

to the ravages of the boll weevil in the southern cotton growing states. Second, there is a general belief among experienced cotton growers that the boll weevil will not be a serious menace to cotton growing in southern Illinois, due to the colder winters of this section of the country.

The third reason for this revival in cotton growing is the development, by careful seed selection, of earlier maturing varieties of cotton that can mature a paying crop in these more northern regions with their shorter growing seasons. Such early varieties as trice, acula, delfos and express can mature an early crop of high grade cotton in latitudes of southern Illinois.

The fourth reason is that cotton has been successfully grown in southern Illinois for a great number of years. Added to this is the influence of the largely increased growing of cotton just across the state border, in southeastern Missouri. This rather large scale production in southeastern Missouri has been so pronounced that it has attracted the attention of business men and farm advisers in adjoining sections of southern Illinois.

There are other, but perhaps more temporary, causes for this recent activity in cotton planting. These last may even be the greater stimuli to many farmers who will plant cotton this season. The greatest of these stimuli is the present high price of cotton. Very closely connected with this is the fact that farmers generally have made but little out of wheat, corn, alfalfa, and live stock in the last few years and are as a consequence ready to listen to any suggestion of some farm product that promises better money returns than the present day staple crops. Experience alone must in the future determine whether these stimulating causes have sufficient merit to justify present expectations. They certainly seem to have. While there is still some uncertainty as to the cotton acreage for 1924, yet conservative estimates place the amount somewhere between 15,000 and 18,000 acres. It may go to 20,000. These estimates are based on amounts of cotton seed already purchased through farm advisers in the various cotton producing counties.

The accompanying table shows approximately the chief cotton planting counties for 1924 and the amount to be planted in each.

Pulaski and Alexander, together, estimated from 10,000 to 12,000 acres.

Union County estimated acreage about 2,500 to 3,000 acres.

Massac	"	"	"	750	"	1,000	"
Johnson	"	"	"	1,000	"	2,000	"
Jackson	"	"	"	250	"	300	"

For Williamson, Pope, Saline, and perhaps other counties, no definite figures are available, but each will plant a small amount. Pulaski probably will have the largest acreage, which will be closely followed by Alexander county.

In contrast to the cotton growing counties of the Civil War period, it will be noticed that the extreme southern counties, with their larger share of bottom lands, will lead; and the more hilly lands to the north will take a decidedly lower rank. The explanation of this contrast with 1865 is that the river bottom lands are much more fertile, they are now much better drained than formerly, and the construction of levees in recent years gives greater protection from floods.

In the larger producing counties of Pulaski, Alexander and Union the labor in the cotton fields will be done chiefly by negroes from the South. These are experienced cotton raisers who have left the South because of the ravages of the boll weevil and are as a rule very poor. The land owners lease the land, furnish food, implements, seed, teams, and get one half of the crop. In the other counties the labor will be largely performed by native white labor on their own farms.

This seasons trial of cotton growing will be watched eagerly, particularly by southern Illinois farmers, and upon its success the future of cotton growing in this section will largely depend.

The chief hope of southern Illinois becoming again a part of the cotton growing region rests largely upon the oft repeated statements of experienced cotton growers from the South who declare to prospective Illinois growers, "You are on the same footing as we of the Gulf States because we must plant early maturing varieties to get the crop far enough advanced before the boll wee-

vil becomes sufficiently numerous to effect the crop seriously." In other words, the growing season for these early maturing varieties is about the same in southern Illinois as in the Gulf States.