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Level: Grade Four

Cotton Culture: Living and Working on a Cotton Plantation

Introduction

Our nation's history and economy would have been strikingly different had cotton not come to a position of domination in our economic life. Cotton plantation production fueled U.S. economic growth in the years between 1793 and the Civil War. Between 1800 and 1860 the growth and harvesting of cotton shot up from less than one hundred thousand bales to four million bales. Cotton was our most important foreign export from 1803 to 1937. Income from cotton helped establish New York as an economic powerhouse, motivated westward expansion, set the stage for the Civil War and made the enslaved labor of millions of Africans and African Americans indispensable to attaining and maintaining profit by growing this single crop.

Just as exports were centered on this one product, so was agriculture in the Southern United States. While cotton plantations also grew other crops, these crops were mainly grown to maintain the large workforce that was necessary for profitably growing cotton. Often compared to a self-contained village or a rural factory, cotton plantations were a stage set for intense labor as well as a place where slaves, overseers and owners created lives for themselves. It was a place of work where cycles of planting, growth and harvesting were carried out within a system of interlocking roles that brought the bales to market. Some parts of the plantation were considered the white owners' domain, other parts were the slaves' space, made theirs not by legal ownership but by the investment of their work.

The purpose of this lesson is to study the plantation as a physical and production unit. Students will gain awareness of the cotton plantation as a characteristic geographical unit and the stages of production that created this cash crop. They will consider the type of work that took place in the various physical structures that helped define a cotton plantation.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this lesson students will be able to:

1. Describe the growing cycle of the cotton plant.
2. Name the typical tasks that were enacted on a cotton plantation in the 1800's.
3. Examine photos from cotton plantations and describe the labor or function shown.
4. Relate the photos and drawings to a site plan of an idealized "typical" plantation.
5. Complete a graphic organizer that outlines the functions of various buildings on the plantation.

Skills

1. Students will become familiar with the search function of a web page.
2. Students will learn to use historical photographs as primary source material.

Teacher Activities

If students are not already familiar with the life cycles of plants, this concept may need to be reviewed. Students should also know and locate the geographical/cultural region that is referred to as The South or the Southern States. The teacher can decide to assist students searching the Library of Congress or simply locate appropriate photos and print them for the student groups. When a student search reveals items labeled HABS they may need help with the extra step of sorting through a collection of photographs. The teacher or the student groups may choose to do one or more activities from each grouping. This lesson covers only a tiny part of the impact of slavery on the region and our nation.

Student Activities

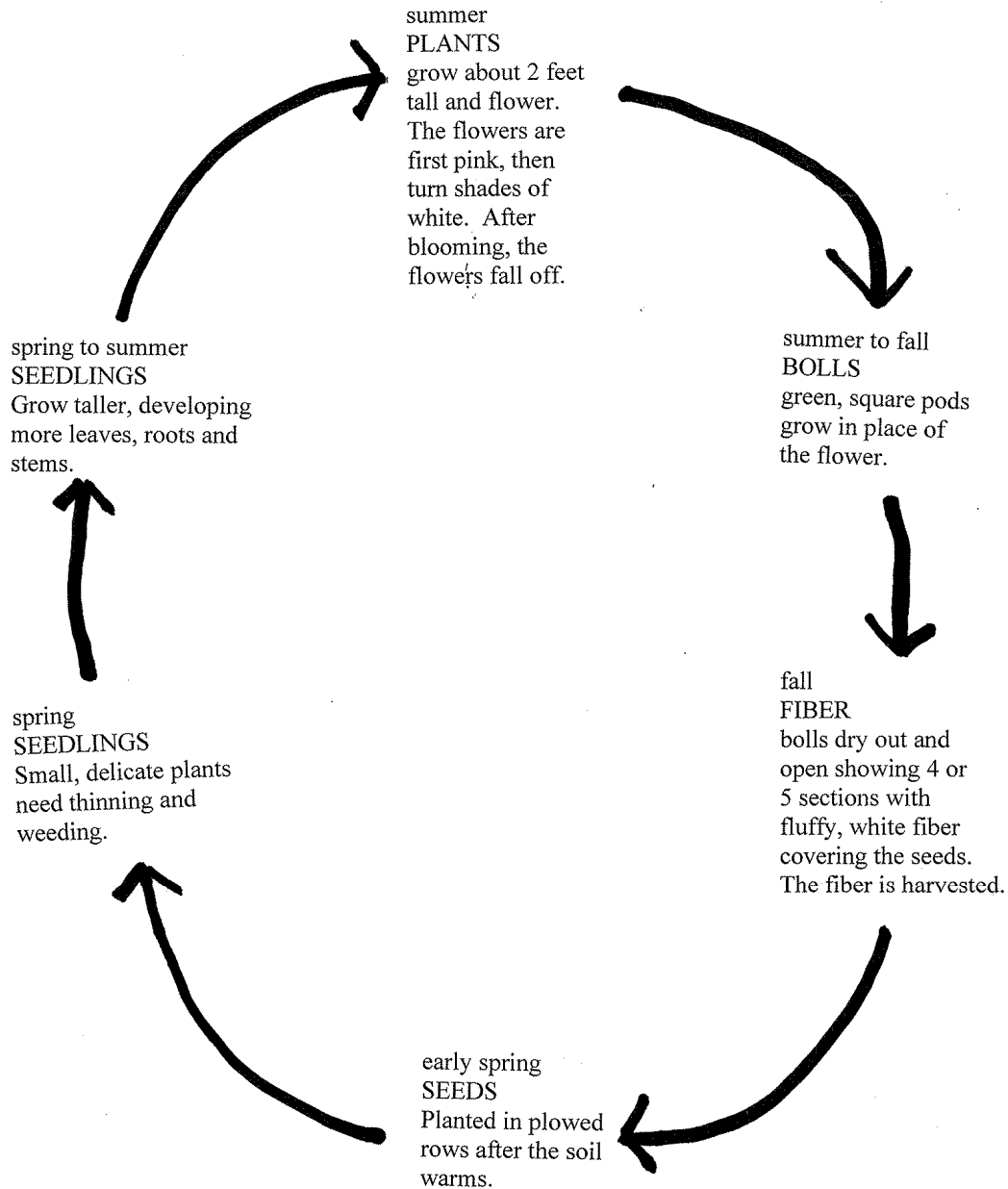
Plant Cycle and Seasons

The plant cycle diagram is distributed and discussed. The students will become familiar with the cyclical and seasonal nature of the plantation work. Student groups may choose one of the activities:

Activity #1. There were three periods of highly concentrated labor involved in the cycle of growing cotton. Working individually or in groups, students will use the cycle diagram to speculate about when the three “bottlenecks” occur in the growing process. The three labor intensive periods are identified below. Students can then use Library of Congress photographs to show what that work looked like in the 1800’s. This may include notes about the size of the labor force, what skills would be necessary, what tools would be used.

Activity #2. According to Charles S Aiken, 20% of the labor went to plowing, planting and growing the plants, 20% of the labor went into “chopping”—thinning and weeding the field—and 50% or more went into harvesting the crop (10% for miscellaneous labor). Students can create a circle graph showing labor distribution and illustrate each section with a historic photo.

Life Cycle of a Cotton Plant in the U.S. South



What Is a Plantation?

The term "plantation" can refer to any large agricultural holding repeatedly devoted to a few specific crops. In the context of the Southern states in the 1800's, it has a more specific meaning. Depending on the market and the region, plantations grew tobacco, rice, sugar cane, cotton, indigo as well as other crops.

Between 1800 and 1860 with the invention and dispersal of the cotton gin raw cotton fiber became the most important export in the United States. The four million bales harvested and grown in the Southern states were sent to England and mills in the North. In order to increase the production of cotton, plantations were established where large tracts of land owned by one family were given over to growing mainly that one crop. Sixty six percent of the world supply of cotton came from the American South. Cotton contributed more than half of the exports from this country in 1860.

This system needed lots of labor and for workers to be available whenever the growing cycle called for another step in the process of bringing this fiber to market. It was not easy to predict when a field would need to be planted, or “chopped,” or picked. Plants needed to be picked several times as different parts of the plant matured.

In his book *The Cotton Plantation South since the Civil War*, Charles S. Aiken identifies 5 geographic characteristics of plantations: 1. a large landholding (at least 250 acres owned by one family), 2. producing one main crop for far away markets, 3. a large labor force who live on the plantation, 4. division of labor, it is clear who is doing which jobs, 5. fields and buildings that are arranged in a particular pattern to support the way of life on the plantation and the processing of the primary crop.

Activity #3. Students can enter the Library of Congress Online Catalogue (more detailed instructions are included later in the lesson). They will search the collection for photographs that illustrate each of the 5 characteristics of a plantation.

Activity #4. Student groups will choose one photograph for focused study. They cover the surface of the photo with post it notes. Beginning in one corner, they remove one post-it note and take notes on what they see in that square. They continue removing one post-it note at a time until the entire surface of the photo is revealed. Photos and notes can be posed on the wall for class study.

Buildings and Labor

Student groups are given the idealized map of a cotton plantation. It is based on blending several cotton plantation maps for a more general picture. Students may consult the attached page for the building descriptions and functions.

Activity #5. Students are assigned a group of buildings. They locate the buildings on the plan, and note the position and the surrounding buildings. They may discuss why the buildings are found in that location and create notes about the structures' purpose. Students will also locate the building's importance in the cotton growing cycle and/or in the daily life of the owners, overseer or slaves (including who did the work performed at this stage of production, who benefited from the product).

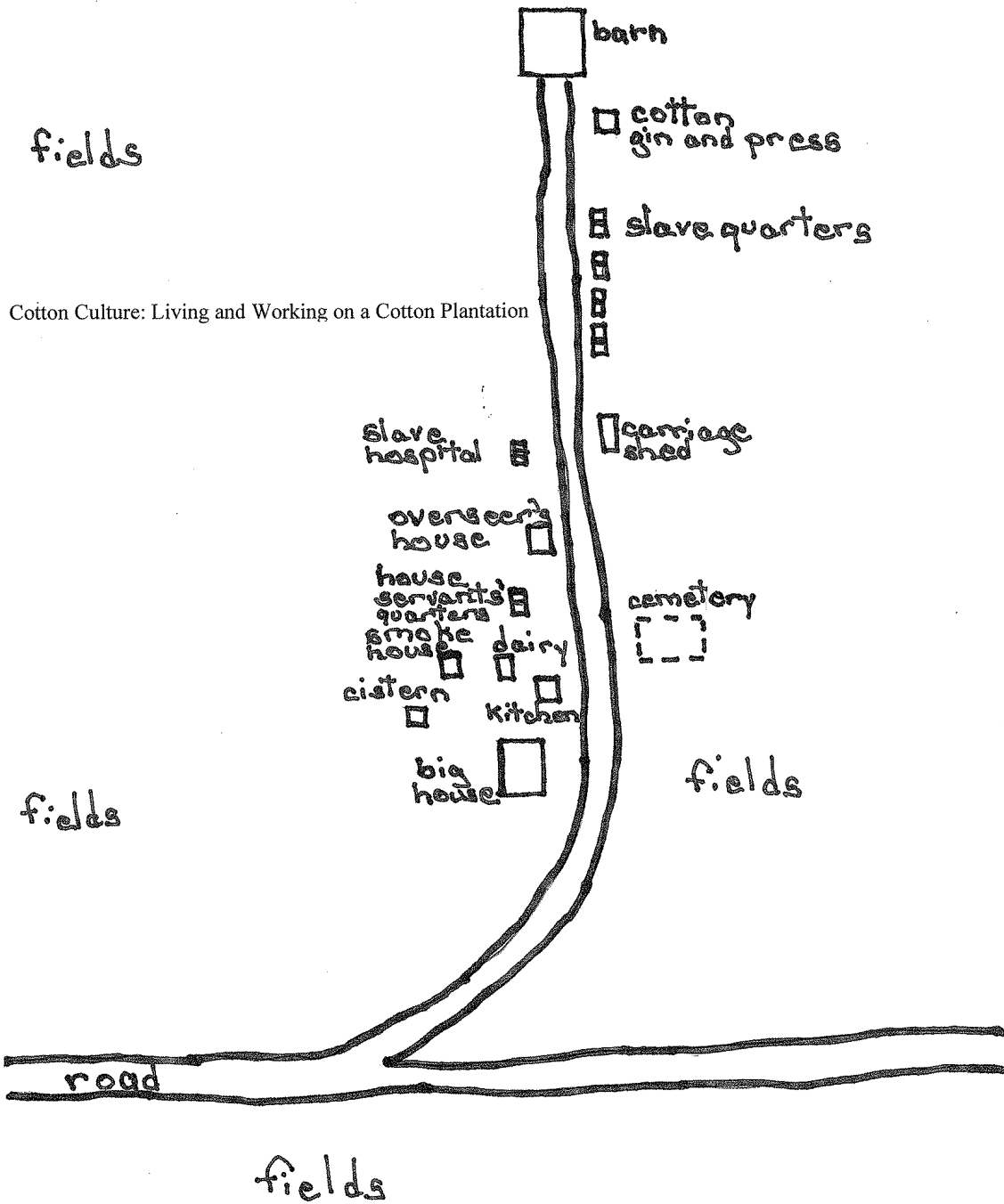
Activity #6. Culminating class activity. Students will search the Library of Congress Online Catalogue for photographs of the buildings (suggested search terms are included in searching directions). A poster sized plantation plan can be created with photos glued in the building's position.

Evaluation

Using the plantation plan and their notes and the photos, students fill out the Plantation Organizer.

Background Information on Plantation Buildings

- **Main House, Big House:** The home of the plantation owners. The most impressive building, often placed on the highest ground or centered to create a dramatic effect as one approached the plantation by road. Creating an impression was one purpose of the Big House. This was also the work place for a small number of house servants who had the job of caring for the owners children and cleaning and maintaining the Big House.
- **Servants' House:** place where house servants lived. This was located closer to the Big House than other Slave Quarters. This was a convenience for the owners who could find the servants whenever needed.
- **Slave Quarters:** A settlement of small (one or two room) cabins often out of sight of the Big House. Where the field slaves lived.
- **Barn:** Used for the plantation livestock: pigs for food, horses for the owner's carriage, mules for field work, milk cows. Storage for carts used to transport loose cotton and bales.
- **Cotton gin and press:** the cotton gin straightened the fibers and removed the seeds, fluffing the raw cotton. The press was a large metal or wooden screw that moved a platform, squeezing the cotton into rectangular bales and securing them with rope or metal bands.
- **Carriage house:** Storage for the owner's transportation.
- **Slave Hospital:** Slaves were valuable investments. This is where sick or injured slaves recovered.
- **Washing place:** large iron or stone basins and an outdoor fireplace. House servants washed, ironed and mended the owners clothing.
- **Smoke house:** for salting, smoking and hanging of meat. This preserved the meat before refrigerators were invented.
- **Dairy:** for separating and cooling milk, cream and butter.
- **Kitchen:** a separate building for preparing meals for the Big House. This kept the heat of the cooking fire out of the house and reduced the danger of the house catching fire.
- **Cisterns:** wells or springs for drawing water.
- **Overseer's House:** The overseer managed the slaves for the owner. They could be white or African American. They were responsible to the owner for the cotton crop and the field slaves. Their house was better and bigger than the slave quarters.
- **Family cemetery, slave cemetery:** resting place.
- **Cotton fields:** large landholding given over to rows and rows of cotton.



Plantation Organizer

- Buildings for the owner's use of benefit
- Buildings to keep the labor force alive and working
- Buildings of Land for growing or processing the crop

Using the Library of Congress Website for this Lesson

1. Access the internet.
2. Go to www.loc.gov
3. Click on **Library Catalogues** and select **Prints and Photographs Online Catalogue**
4. Use one of these search terms in the search window: plowing cotton, chopping cotton, picking cotton, cotton gin, cotton press, barns on cotton plantations, slave hospital on cotton plantations, smoke house on cotton plantations, Main House on cotton plantations, cisterns on cotton plantations, kitchens on cotton plantations, slave quarters on cotton plantations

Bibliography

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Vlach, John Michael. *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

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Library of Congress, www.loc.gov, n.d.