

The Labor of Cotton Production

Cotton is a plant which planters grew in large quantities in the 19th century southern United States to make cloth. It's leaves and stems are stiff and sharp, making picking difficult and often painful. The seeds are difficult to extract, stuck fast within the tangling fiber. Despite these challenges, enslaved people were forced to do the back-breaking work of picking cotton and extracting these seeds daily. The institution of slavery deprived enslaved people of any legal rights, and granted the slave owner complete power over the black men, women, and children, legally recognized as property.



Top: Cotton boll picked from plant



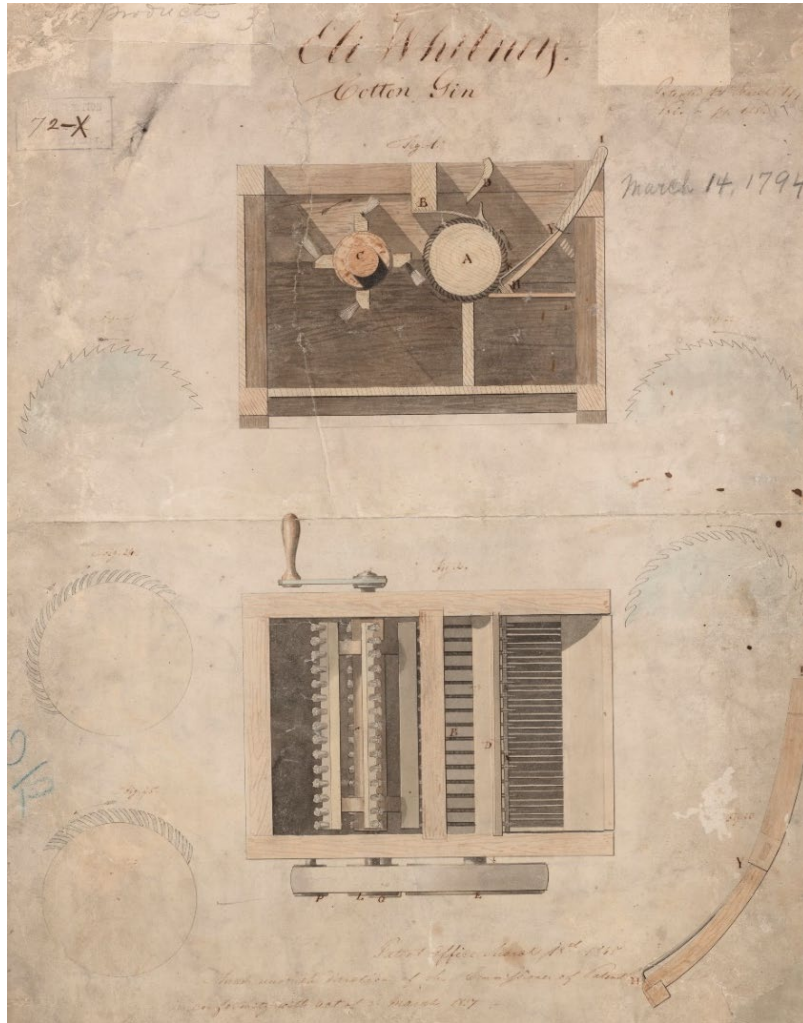
Middle: Raw cotton removed from boll



Bottom: Cotton seeds removed from cotton
“fluff”

The Labor of Cotton Production

This is Eli Whitney's cotton gin patent drawing, dated March 14, 1794. Though he did not invent the cotton gin, which had existed in some form for centuries, Whitney did popularize the use of a cotton gin that could clean short-staple cotton by removing the seeds from the fluff. This enabled farmers to grow and process large amounts of cotton, making for big profits and increasing the number of people enslaved on plantations to cultivate the crop.



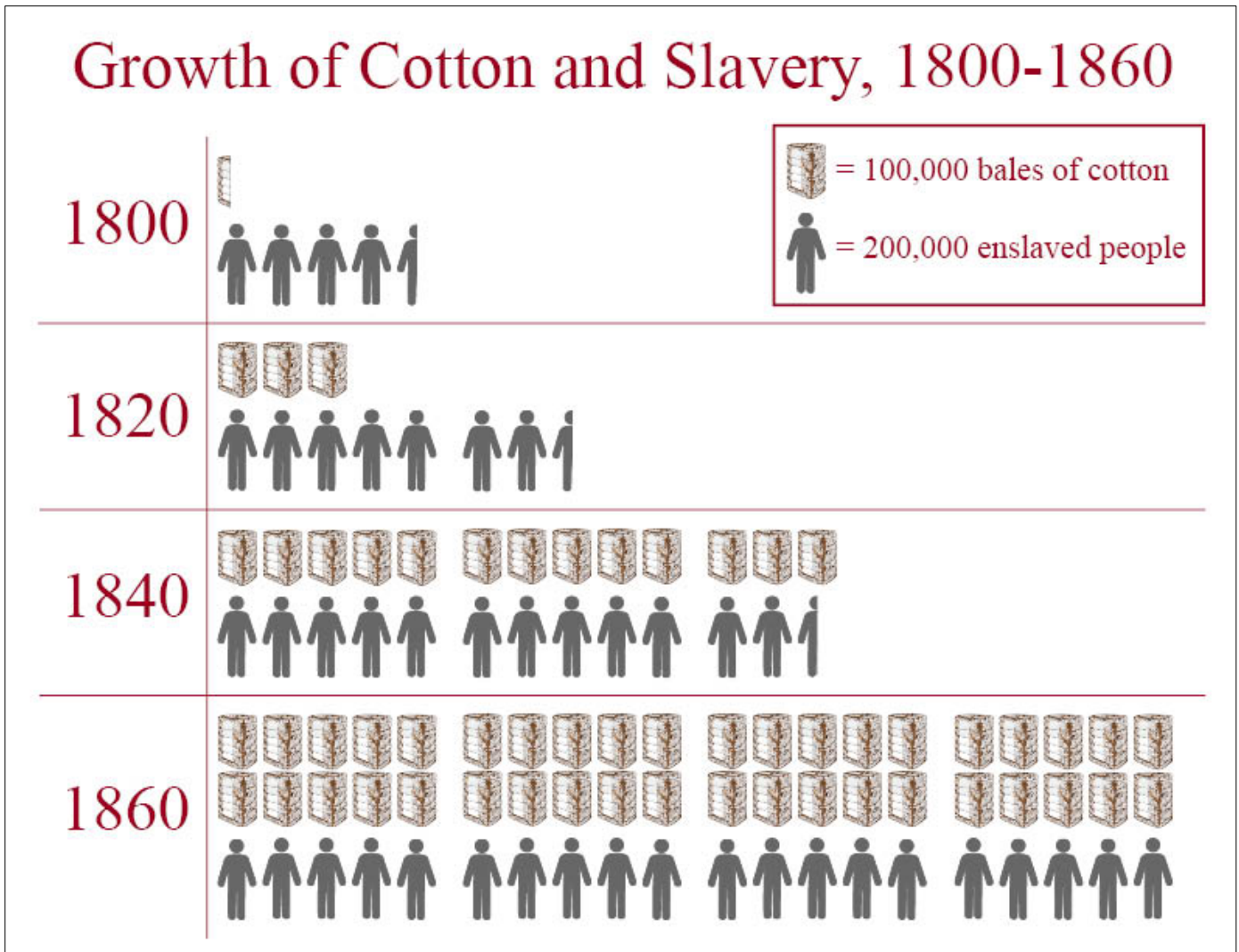
“Green seed cotton was more difficult to separate from its seed.... Whitney’s gin ‘so facilitates the preparation of this species, for use, that the cultivation of it has suddenly become an object of infinitely greater importance.... ‘The whole interior of the Southern states were [languishing] ... for want of some objects to engage their attention, and employ their industry, when the invention of this machine at once opened views to them which set the whole country in active motion.’ Supplying ‘our sister states’ with ‘raw materials for their manufactories....”

Image: “Eli Whitney’s Patent for the Cotton Gin,” The National Archives and Records Administration, Group 233, Identifier 306631.

*Text: Angela Lakwete, *Inventing the Cotton Gin: Machine and Myth in Antebellum America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 70-71.*

The Labor of Cotton Production

As cotton grew increasingly profitable, cotton-growers looked to expand their operations, which required more laborers to work the land. As a result, the number of people enslaved in the United States grew dramatically alongside the production of cotton. Slaveholding cotton-growers used the systemic nature of this involuntary, unpaid workforce to maximize their profit.



The Labor of Cotton Production

Enslaved people across the southern United States were forced to work long days in harsh conditions, including those who picked and processed cotton on large plantations. If these enslaved people did not comply with the commands of plantation owners, they could be beaten, whipped, abused, or sold as punishment.

“The day's work over in the field, the baskets ... carried to the gin-house, where the cotton is weighed. No matter how fatigued and weary he may be—no matter how much he longs for sleep and rest—a slave never approaches the gin-house with his basket of cotton but with fear. If it falls short in weight—if he has not performed the full task appointed him, he knows that he must suffer. And if he has exceeded it by ten or twenty pounds, in all probability his master will measure the next day's task accordingly. So, whether he has too little or too much, his approach to the gin-house is always with, fear and trembling. Most frequently they have too little, and therefore it is they are not anxious to leave the field. After weighing, follow the whippings...”



*Text: Solomon Northrup, Twelve Years a Slave (Auburn: Derby & Miller, 1853), 167-168.
Image: Lakin, J. H., photographer. Picking cotton near Montgomery, Alabama. Alabama Montgomery, [1860]. Library of Congress.*

Working the Land for Themselves

Enslavers sometimes permitted enslaved people to keep gardens and animals on small plots of land around their cabins, but for many bonds people this was not a luxury but a necessity. Given meager rations by their enslavers, they needed to supplement their diets with additional calories and nutrients in order to survive.



“We entered one of the huts of the [enslaved people], for one cannot call them by the name of houses. They are more miserable than the most miserable of the cottages of our peasants.... A very small garden planted with vegetables was close by, with 5 or 6 hens, each one leading ten to fifteen chickens. It is the only comfort that is permitted them [the enslaved population at Mount Vernon], for they may not keep either ducks, geese or pigs. They sell the poultry in Alexandria and procure for themselves a few amenities. They allot them each one [peck] of maize per week; this makes one quart a day, and half as much for the children, with 20 herrings each month... Most of these [enslavers] give to their [enslaved people] only bread, water and blows.”

*Image: Slave cabin and garden, Historic Smithfield.
Text: Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, "A Trip to Mount Vernon," in
American Heritage, 16, no. 2, (February 1965): 68.*

Working the Land for Themselves

Archaeological evidence from the slave quarters at George Washington's Mount Vernon can tell us about lives of enslaved people – what they ate, how they were treated, and even how people resisted bondage. These objects, along with primary documents written by enslavers, can reveal stories about how some enslaved people exercised their agency to supplement their diet by stealing from household stores.



Left: Large cast lead shot with visible stem

Middle: Two cowpea fragments. Commonly known as black-eye peas, the plant is native to Africa.

Right: 1725 silver Spanish 2-real coin, cut into 1/8

George Washington to his farm manager William Pearce. The enslaved men he mentions, Nathan, Sam, and Joe, are listed in Washington records without last names.

“I wish you could find out the thief who robbed the Meat house at Mount Vernon, and bring him to punishment. At the same time secure the house against future attempts; for our drafts upon it will be pretty large, I expect... Nathan has been suspected, if not detected, in an attempt of this sort formerly; and is as likely as any one to be guilty of it now. Postilion Joe has been caught in similar practices; and Sam, I am sure would not be restrain[ed] by any qualms of conscience, if he saw an opening to do the like.”

All images: George Washington's Mount Vernon.

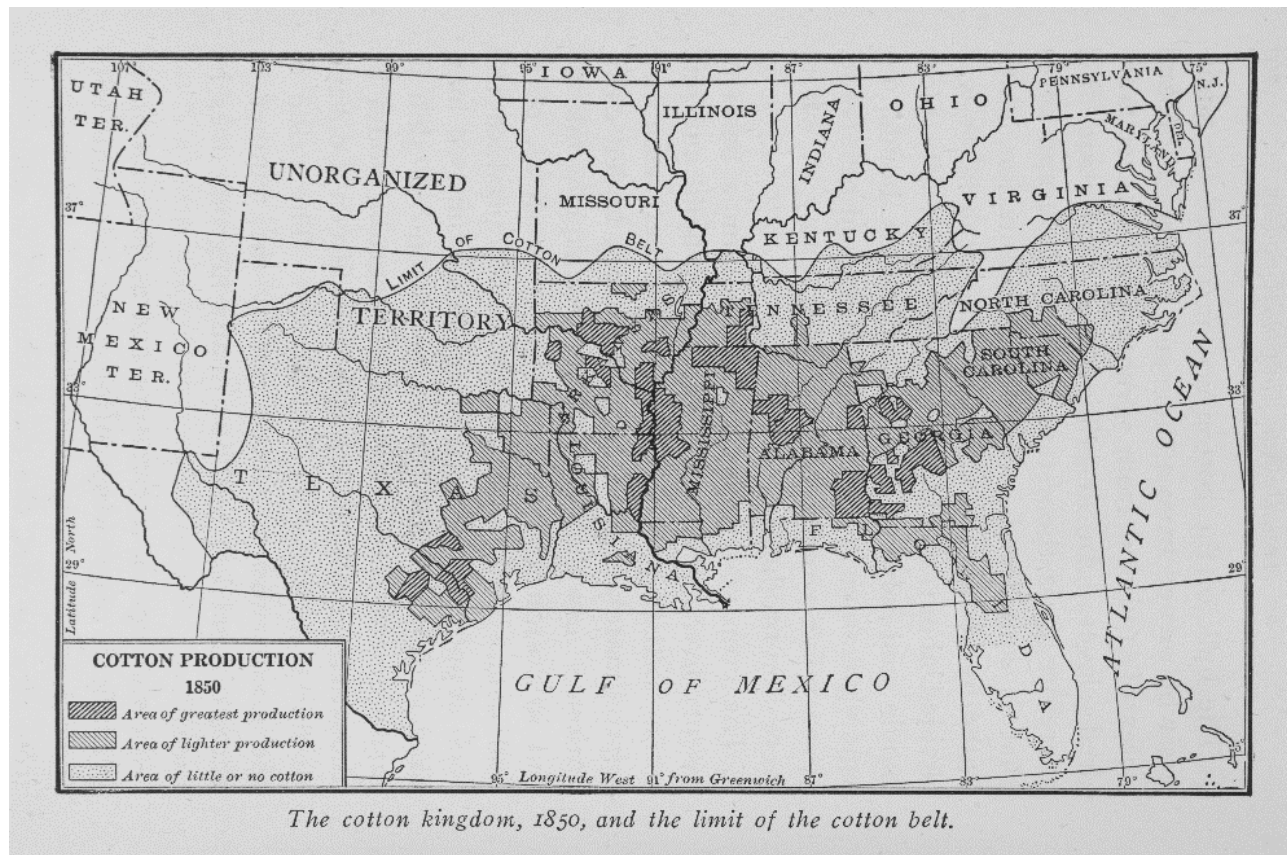
Text: George Washington, "Letter to William Pearce," June 7, 1795. George Washington's Mount Vernon.

Spread of Slavery & Westward Expansion

Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead traveled across the South from 1852-54 and recorded his impressions about the state of cotton agriculture. Cotton production tends to drain the soil of its nutrients, hence why Georgia's soil was "worn out" by the 1850s. This drove planters west, where they found new rich soil for cotton production.

"The [Georgia] soil varied from a coarse, clean, yellow sand, to a dark, brown, sandy loam. There were indications that much of the land had, at some time, been under cultivation – had been worn out, and deserted."

"In its natural state the [Mississippi] virgin soil appears the richest I have ever seen, the growth upon it from the weeds to trees being invariably rank and rich in colour. At first it is expected to bear a bale and a half of cotton to the acre, making eight or ten bales for each able field-hand."

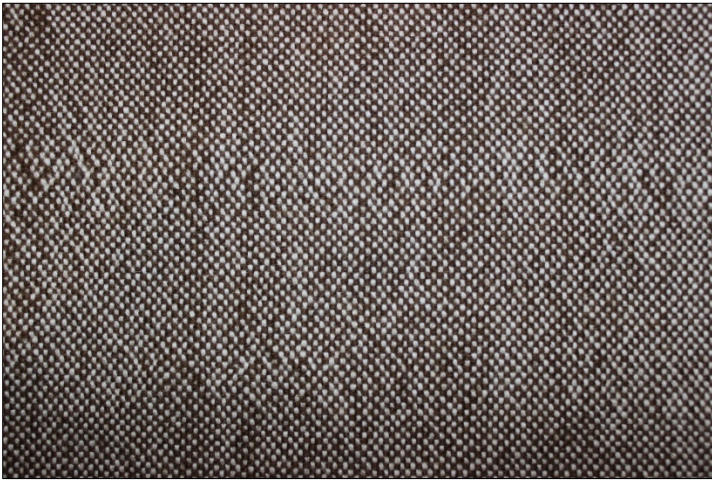


Text: Frederick Law Olmstead, The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. (New York: The Modern Library, 1984). 179, 411.

Image: "The cotton kingdom, 1850, and the limit of the cotton belt," Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library.

Lords of Lash and Loom: Northern Complicity in Slavery

Plantation owners purchased cheap, poor-quality textiles known as “negro cloth” in large quantities for their enslaved people to make their clothes from. In many parts of the country these textiles became known as “Lowell cloth,” as they were manufactured in the factories of Lowell, Massachusetts.




Top: Photo of rough-textured “negro cloth”

Bottom: Runaway slave advertisement from New Orleans, noting that Richard had taken with him a suit of “negro blue cloth.”

\$20 REWARD will be given for the apprehension of the negro boy RICHARD, aged about 32 years, 5 feet 10 inches high, slim, with very bad broken teeth; had on him when he left a black and white cross bar negro pantaloons, a checked shirt and straw hat, but carried away with him a full suit of negro blue cloth clothes.

C. Moore

D12-6t* 24 Levee between Hospital and Barracks sts.



\$20 REWARD will be given for the apprehension of the negro boy RICHARD, aged about 32 years, 5 feet 10 inches high, slim, with very bad broken teeth; had on him when he left a black and white cross bar negro pantaloons, a check shirt and straw hat, but carried away with him a full suit of negro blue cloth clothes.
C. MOORE,
d12-6t* 24 Levee between Hospital and Barrack sts.

*Image: Lowell National Historical Park
Text: “\$20 Reward,” The Daily Picayune (New Orleans, LA),
Dec. 19, 1846. Freedomonthemove.org.*

Lords of Lash and Loom: Northern Complicity in Slavery

Northern textile manufacturers relied heavily on cotton grown by enslaved people in the South to make a profit from manufacturing cloth. Cheaper slave-raised cotton being available meant more affordable textiles could be made, which translated into profits for mill owners. The two industries grew together and fueled one another.

Year	Number of Textile Mills in Lowell	Number of Mill Workers		Yards of Cloth Produced per Week in Lowell	Pounds of Cotton Consumed per Week in Lowell	U.S. Enslaved Population
		Female	Male			
1834	22	5051	1512	753,270	235,700	2,300,000
1844	33	6420	2415	1,459,100	559,000	2,900,000
1848	48	7644	3629	1,704,996	559,000	3,100,000
1858	52	8962	4367	2,394,000	805,770	3,953,696

A letter from John C. Calhoun to Abbott Lawrence, May 13, 1845

Calhoun was a U.S. Senator from South Carolina and ardent supporter of the slave plantation system. Lawrence was one of the founders of the textile factory cities of Lowell and Lawrence, Massachusetts.

My Dear Sir,

... I am much gratified to learn that the manufacturing interest is so prosperous and the prospects so bright. I hope it may be fully realized. I am particularly so to learn that you are so successful in commanding the firelight market.... I would much rather see our cotton go abroad in the shape of yarn and cloth than in the raw state; and when the price instead of being ruled by the foreign shall be ruled by the home market. When that is accomplished all conflict between the planter and the manufacturer would cease, but until then every measure which restricts our foreign exchanges acts as a burthen on the former. I object to high duties, among other reasons because they are, in my opinion, the great impediment to bringing about so desirable a state of things. I am no opponent to manufactures or manufacturers, but quite the reverse, I rejoice in their prosperity.

Table: "Cotton, Cloth, and Conflict: The Meaning of Slavery in a Northern Textile City," Tsongas Industrial History Center.

Text: From J. Franklin Jameson (ed.), "The Correspondence of John C. Calhoun," in Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1899, Vol. II. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900, pp. 654-656.

Lords of Lash and Loom: Northern Complicity in Slavery

On August 21, 1835, a group of prominent Lowellians, including Kirk Boott, who, as agent of the Merrimack Mills and a close connection of big money textile interests in Boston, called for a meeting at Lowell's Town Hall to proclaim anti-abolitionist sentiments. With these actions Boott and others were expressing their support for their cotton-growing, slave-owning business partners in the southern United States.

PUBLIC MEETING.

The undersigned inhabitants of Lowell, are impressed with a belief, that the rash doings of those who advocate the immediate abolition of Slavery result in much mischief to our common country. We believe that sectional jealousies are thereby engendered, which threaten to disturb the harmony of our political system, and which will effectually prevent the attainment of the object proposed, except through evils far worse than slavery itself. We believe, also, that the great mass of this people are disposed to maintain the Constitution unimpaired, and to leave, where our Federal compact left it, the difficult question of slavery to be adjusted by the states for themselves, without other interference or control.

Under these impressions, we invite the inhabitants of Lowell to assemble in the *Town Hall*, on *Saturday Evening, August 22d*, at 8 o'clock, to consult together and to declare their convictions upon this important subject, to the end, that our fellow citizens at the South may be solemnly assured, that the body of our people will not countenance any infraction of their rights, or domestic relations; nor any violation of the peace of the community, or of the constitution and laws of the land.

Kirk Boott,	Benjamin R. Knox,	Albert E. Swasey,
Francis Hobbs,	Joshua Swan,	J. Tabor Pratt,
P. H. Willard,	Samuel A. Coburn,	H. Hartshorn,
H. J. Baxter,	Robert G. Walker,	Sam'l M. Emery,
H. C. Baxter,	John Clark,	Henry Deland,
J. G. Wyatt,	Sylvanus Adams,	H. C. Merriam,
Perez Fuller,	Walter Wright,	J. L. Wentworth,
Alex'r Wright,	John Aikin,	Cha's A Kilham,
Alanson Cranc,	Edwin Stearns,	Tho's P Goodhue,
William Austin,	J. A. Chamberlain,	Wm W Wyman,
Thomas Dodge,	Jno. Avery,	Ira Frye,
S. B. Goddard,	Daniel Cutting,	A Allen,
J. W. Tyler,	Jefferson Bancroft,	J H Elliott,
John B. Goodwin,	Benj. F. Varnum,	Wm A Farwell,
Harrington Hatch,	H. G. F. Corlis,	John Tredick,
Chas L. Tilden,	Walter Willey,	J. W. Mansur,
Jno B. McAlvin,	Wm. Tredick,	Samuel A Appleton,
Jos S. Holt,	C. P. Coffin,	John A. Savels,
Geo. Brownell,	Henry A. Hall,	Jonathan Tyler.

Lowell, Aug. 21, 1835.

Beyond Cotton: The Extent of Slavery's Reach in the North

In addition to harvesting cotton, rice, and other cash crops, enslaved people were forced into other types of labor, including harvesting lumber and working in iron foundries. Ledgers, like those shown below, recorded the cost, quantity, and type of materials used in the construction of Lowell's Boott Mills. The first image references "Hard Pine Floor Boards," harvested in the Carolinas by enslaved laborers and shipped north. The second image reads "Purchase of Pig Iron... for Patuxent." This pig iron was likely used in the construction of Lowell's Boott Mills and the manufacture of power looms. It came from a foundry in Patuxent, MD that relied heavily on enslaved labor.

Floor	Quantity	Dimensions	Cost	Rate
1 st Floor	1	231'-4" x 43'-2"	12483	.20
2 ^d Floor	1	231'-8" x 43'-10"	12693	"
3 rd Floor	1	232'-1" x 44'-6"	12909	"
4 th Floor	1	232'-5" x 45'-2"	13123	"
5 th Floor	1	232'-9" x 46'-	13383	"
1 st Floor O.F.P.	1	12' x 11'	165	"
2 ^d , 3 rd , 4 th , 5 th O.F.P. Floors	4	14' x 13'	912	"
1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd , 4 th , 5 th O.B.O. Floors	5	12' x 10' 9"	805	"
1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd , 4 th , 5 th O.B.O. Floors	5	11'-10" x 9'-2"	675	"
N.F.O. 1 st Story	1	17'-2" x 16'-4"	350	"
2 ^d , 3 rd , 4 th , 5 th N.F.O. Stories	4	17'-6" x 17'-	1488	"
			68986	

Hard Pine Floor Boards

[Floor]	[# of floors]	[Length x Width]	[Sq. Footage]	[?]
1 st Floor	1	231'-4" x 43'-2"	12483	.20
2 nd Floor	1	231'-8" x 43'-2"	12693	"
3 rd Floor	1	232'-1" x 44'-6"	12909	"
4 th Floor	1	232'-5" x 45'-2"	13123	"
5 th Floor	1	232'-9" x 46'-	13383	"
1 st Floor O.F.P.	1	12'- X 11'-	165	"
2 nd , 3 rd , 4 th , 5 th O.F.P. Floors.	4	14'- x 13'-	913	"
1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd , 4 th , 5 th O.B.O. Floors	5	12'-x10'-9"	805	"
1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd , 4 th , 5 th O.B.O. Floors	5	11'-10" x 9'-2"	675	"
N.F.O. 1 st Story	1	17'-2" x 16'-4"	350	"
2 nd , 3 rd , 4 th , 5 th N.F.O. Stories	4	17'-6" x 17'-	1488	"
[Total Square Footage]			68986	

Quantity	Location	Cost
1 Ton	Patuxent	@ \$35

Purchases of Pig Iron [iron that has been smelted, but not molded]

Travel – Curtis Leavens [a 19th c. Boston Shipping Firm]

1. For Patuxent @ \$35

Images courtesy of Kevin Coffee. Collection of Baker Library Special Collections, Harvard Business School.