

King Cotton: 1800 to 1860



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In 1840, the western Piedmont was relatively well off economically. With the introduction of upland, short-staple cotton and the invention of the cotton gin by Cyrus McCormick, an economic boom in the South Carolina economy had begun at the turn of the century (1800).

Wealthy Low Country planters and savvy Upper Country landowners began clearing and planting upland cotton in the lower Piedmont. An Upper Country plantation society and economy spread northwestward towards the western Piedmont. By 1840, the area was well into this plantation economy. This cotton plantation economy would flourish until the beginning of the Civil War.

A person viewing the western Piedmont in 1840 would see a countryside made over by humans. Large open areas planted in cotton and some in corn would stretch on each side of most roads. Because the agricultural practices of the time drained the soil of its nutrients, there would be some open areas lying fallow with a growth of native grasses, herbaceous plants, and sapling trees. Livestock grazing would be mostly limited to fallow areas and woodlands. Rivers and streams would flow muddy red after each rainfall.

Most large mammals such as Bison, Elk, Mountain Lion, Black Bear, and Red Wolf had been expatriated from the western Piedmont by 1800, probably due mostly to hunting. By 1840, the Carolina

Parakeet disappeared from all of South Carolina. Land use change and hunting pressure probably greatly reduced the Whitetail Deer, Beaver, and Wild Turkey populations in the western Piedmont by 1840.

Dr. John Henry Logan writing in his "History of the Upper Country of South Carolina" published in 1859 described the land as follows:

"At this day the upper-country of South Carolina presents a very different aspect from that of the same territory in the middle of the eighteenth century. It was then new and beautiful, and as remarkable for the luxuriant richness of its landscape as it is still for the striking features of its rolling hills and towering mountains; but under the iron tread of what is called a progressive civilization, its ancient glories of forest, and flora, and fertile soil have been well-nigh wasted and ruined. ...

"The ordinary observer may discover that much of the forest of the present day is of comparatively recent growth; the greater number of the trees have sprung up in the memory of living men; few are so old as a hundred and sixty years, and only here and there, at immense intervals, towers a patriarchal pine or oak, whose germination dates back to the beginning of the sixteenth century. ...

"The pea- vine and grasses occupied the place of the bushes and young forest growth that render the woods of the present time so gloomy and intricate."