

Eli Whitney's cotton gin

1793 | Grade 4 · Explain with evidence

Words to know

invent — create a new tool, process, or idea

labor — work done by people

consequence — a result of an action

Look closely



Modern topic illustration created for Massachusetts History Explorers. It is not a historical artifact.

Read the story

Eli Whitney, born in Westborough, developed a cotton gin. It separated seeds from cotton fibers. The machine sped up one task. Cotton growing expanded, and so did the demand for enslaved labor.

An invention can have harmful social consequences even when it saves work at one stage. Cotton linked southern plantations, northern factories, finance, and world markets. Technology's effects depend on the system using it.

Think, talk, and show evidence

1. State the main idea. Support it with two details from the reading.
2. Explain a change or challenge described in the text. Which words support your answer?
3. Use one vocabulary word in a new sentence about this event.
4. What can the image and caption help explain? What can they not tell you?

Follow-up reading: USS Constitution is launched

1797

The sailing warship USS Constitution was launched in Boston. Many workers helped build it. It later became famous as Old Ironsides. The ship connects Boston to naval history and the War of 1812.

The ship was built before the War of 1812, a different conflict from the Revolution. Study skilled labor, materials, and sailors' experiences alongside stories of battles and famous commanders.

Compare the two readings. Explain one similarity or difference using a detail from each. Their order does not prove that one caused the other.

Teacher guide & source trail

Original classroom adaptation. Suggested reading levels are instructional choices, not standardized readability certifications. Use professional judgment and learner feedback.

ELA practice: RI.4.1: refer to details; RI.4.2: main idea and summary; RI.4.3: explain events; RI.4.7: interpret visual information; W.4.2 and SL.4.1: explain and discuss.

These tasks support selected skills in the [Massachusetts 2017 ELA framework](#); they do not establish mastery of an entire standard.

Answer guidance

Factual anchor: Eli Whitney, born in Westborough, developed a cotton gin. It separated seeds from cotton fibers. The machine sped up one task. Cotton growing expanded, and so did the demand for enslaved labor. An invention can have harmful social consequences even when it saves work at one stage. Cotton linked southern plantations, northern factories, finance, and world markets. Technology's effects depend on the system using it.

Accept accurate main ideas and explanations supported by the text. Vocabulary meanings are in the opening word bank. For picture questions, use the caption and credit below; distinguish what is visible from what is inferred. For comparison, accept a specific connection supported by both readings. Do not require personal accounts of trauma.

Continue the inquiry

[Research source for this event ↗](#)

[Research source for follow-up ↗](#)

[Event page, accessible HTML reading, and vocabulary game ↗](#)

Image: Original site illustration.

[Image source and rights record ↗](#)

The PDF contains selectable English text and embedded fonts. For adjustable text and browser reading tools, use the event's [HTML page](#). External sources may need adult guidance.