The **cotton gin** is a machine that separates cotton seeds from cotton fiber. The modern mechanical cotton gin was invented by **Eli Whitney** in 1793, and patented in 1794. The cotton gin was an important invention because it dramatically reduced the amount of time it took to separate cotton seeds from cotton fiber. Prior to Whitney's invention, cotton seeds had to be removed by hand or with other primitive tools, making it a tedious and timely process. The cotton gin completely revolutionized the cotton industry in America. It made cotton a profitable crop in the southern United States, ultimately leading to a rise in slavery. Many historians have cited the invention of Eli Whitney's cotton gin as a leading cause of the **Civil War**.

**Purpose of the Cotton Gin**

Throughout history, cotton has been an important crop. From it a variety of textiles can be made, cotton cloth being one of the most popular. When cotton is harvested, tiny cotton seeds are mixed in with the actual cotton fiber. It order for the fiber, or the **lint** as it is often called, to be used, the seeds need to be removed. Until the invention of the cotton gin, removing the seeds by hand or with other primitive tools was extremely time-intensive. It took one person approximately ten hours to remove one pound of lint from the seeds. Eli Whitney's cotton gin invention was designed to efficiently remove the seeds from the fiber.

**Eli Whitney**

The inventor of the mechanical cotton gin, Eli Whitney, was born in Westborough, Massachusetts, in 1765. He attended Yale College, and graduated in 1792. While just a young man, Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793. Although he received a patent for his invention in 1794, imitations of his device were widespread, and he was not able to profit from his revolutionary machine. Legal troubles plagued Whitney. Some even charged that Catherine Littlefield Greene, the wife of Revolutionary War hero, Nathaniel Greene, told Whitney how to make the cotton gin. Loopholes in the patent law prevented him from winning the rights to his patent until 1807. By that time, however, it was too late, and imitation cotton gins were readily available. In addition to inventing the cotton gin, Whitney also helped popularize interchangeable machine parts and was among the first to develop the milling machine. Whitney died in 1825 at the age of 58.

**How the Cotton Gin Operated**

Whitney's cotton gin was a machine consisting of a cylinder that was wound by hand. Attached to the cylinder were rows of small 'teeth' that pulled the fiber through a grid. In this way, the machine, 'combed out' the seeds, leaving only the lint fiber. Whitney's cotton gin went through numerous variations over the years, but the basic operating principle remained the same.
Impact of the Cotton Gin

The impact of the cotton gin was monumental. Whereas before the invention of the cotton gin it took one man ten hours to produce a single pound of lint, Whitney's machine made it possible to produce 50 pounds of lint daily. As a result, the cotton industry in the southern United States boomed. Cotton became the leading cash crop in the South; it proved even more profitable than tobacco. Slogans like Cotton is King, or King Cotton were popular in the Antebellum South, reflecting the importance of the cotton industry. By the time of the Civil War, the American South was supplying 75% of the world's cotton. While it would seem that the invention of cotton gin would decrease the reliance on slave labor, it actually increased it. The Eli Whitney Museum website describes this phenomenon:

'While it was true that the cotton gin reduced the labor of removing seeds, it did not reduce the need for slaves to grow and pick the cotton. In fact, the opposite occurred. Cotton growing became so profitable for the planters that it greatly increased their demand for both land and slave labor. In 1790 there were six slave states; in 1860 there were 15. From 1790 until Congress banned the importation of slaves from Africa in 1808, Southerners imported 80,000 Africans. By 1860 approximately one in three Southerners was a slave.'

Most historians regard the invention of the cotton gin as a leading cause of the Civil War. The invention of the cotton gin lead to a massive increase in slavery, brought wealth to the South, and gave the South a sense of confidence. While historians acknowledge these facts, most are reluctant to put blame on Eli Whitney personally, as he could not have realized the full implications of his machine.