Cotton Picker, Mechanical Encyclopedia Article

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The growing and harvesting of cotton was central to the social and economic structure of the southern United States during its early history. The cotton-based economy consisted of large plantations primarily built and sustained through the labor of slaves who had been brought from Africa. Because of this continuing supply of human labor, the development of mechanical cotton harvesters was slower than other types of farm equipment. Although some early cotton pickers were invented, they were commercial failures. In 1850 S. S. Rembert and J. Prescott of Memphis, Tennessee, patented a mechanical cotton picker. In 1895 August Campbell patented the spindle, which plucked the cotton from the boll, the basis for today's pickers. After the end of the American Civil War in 1865, many newly freed slaves migrated to cities in the North. However, most remained as poorly paid field laborers, continuing to make machinery unnecessary.

The first mechanical tractor-pulled cotton strippers, which removed the entire cotton boll from the plant, did not appear until 1914. Consisting of nothing more than a section of picket fence dragged across the field, the process was referred to as " sledding cotton." During the 1920s International Harvester purchased Campbell's patents, and, after nearly twenty years of research, produced and marketed the barbed-spindle cotton picker, beginning in 1942. Texans Mack and John Rust patented a smooth spindle picker in 1932. However, the recurrence of cheap labor during the Great Depression of the 1930s again delayed acceptance of cotton pickers by farmers, and the pair did not market their machine until 1949. After 1950 mechanical pickers were rapidly brought into the cotton fields. In 1953, 25 percent of United States cotton was mechanically harvested, and by 1962, that figure had risen to 60 percent. The increased used of mechanical pickers led in part to the second wave of migration of black laborers to northern cities, some of whom went to work in the factories that made the machines. Hand-picked cotton, is rarely available as most picking is currently mechanical. Cotton fibers are now routinely mixed with synthetics adding strength to the cotton and moisture absorption and wrinkle resistance to the synthetic material.While there is a 5 to 10 percent field loss with mechanical picking, the cost-effectiveness of machine harvesting makes it preferred for the mass market.