

# Eli Whitney

1765–1825



**WHY HE MADE HISTORY** Eli Whitney was the creator of the cotton gin, an invention that revolutionized the textile industry and defined the economy and culture of the South. Whitney also brought the concept of mass production to the American factory, thereby impacting the North as well.



*As you read the biography below, think about how Eli Whitney's inventiveness changed American society.*



Library of Congress

Eli Whitney made his way to the South from New Haven, Connecticut, in 1793. He was supposed to start a job as a teacher, but learned along the way that his wages would be half of what he had been promised. Whitney was determined not to take the job. A woman named Katherine Greene invited Whitney to study law at her plantation in Georgia. While living on the plantation, Whitney learned about the problems facing the southern planters.

The South needed a money crop. Cotton was in high demand, but it was hard to produce. It took up to 10 hours for a worker to separate the seeds from a pound of cotton lint. Whitney carefully studied how the workers separated the seeds from the cotton. In 10 days Whitney invented a machine that could separate the cotton many times faster than human hands.

Word about Whitney's device spread quickly. Farmers began planting large amounts of cotton in their fields. Whitney applied for a **patent** on the cotton gin, but the simple genius of his machine made it easy for the planters to copy. Despite many legal battles to receive payment, Whitney earned

## VOCABULARY

**patent** exclusive right granted to an inventor to make, use, or sell an invention

very little money from his invention. The planters, however, made millions of dollars from the cotton, thanks to Whitney's device.

Whitney returned to New Haven and began a new life after his disappointment in the South. It was in the North where Whitney created another revolution of sorts. He convinced the U.S. government to give him an order for 10,000 muskets. The muskets were to be finished in two years. Whitney had no factory and no workers, and he had never made a gun before. Yet his reputation as an inventor convinced the government to grant him the order.

Whitney had the idea of creating a new system of manufacturing. He knew there were very few skilled machinists in the country. He thought that if he could create a system of interchangeable parts, any unskilled worker would be able to put those parts together to make a final product. He built the machines and a factory, and hired many workers. While it took more than two years to finish the first order, Whitney forever changed American manufacturing.

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

- 1. Compare** How were the problems in the North similar to those of the South?

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- 2. Expressing and Supporting a Point of View** What do you think was Eli Whitney's greatest accomplishment? Provide reasons or examples to support your point of view.

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### ACTIVITY

- 3.** Imagine that you are an inventor. Create your own machine. Draw a design on paper. Write a description about each part of the machine and tell what purpose the machine would serve.