

## Some New Evidence on the Subject

# Was First Cotton Gin Invented in Winnsboro?

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Around Winnsboro stories persist that an ancient cotton gin was invented and built about the time of Eli Whitney's famous invention in 1793. Some claim, in fact, that a Fairfield County inventor may have built the first gin.

How true these claims are, I cannot say. But a sequence of events within the last few days—including the finding of what is be-

lieved to be an old Hodgen Holmes gin — adds new evidence of the existence of an early master gin maker near Winnsboro.

I helped Lewis E. and Charles W. Leavell, Sumter, load this old gin into the back of a pickup truck this week on what may be the first leg of a journey to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. According to T. D. Efland and D. K. Gentry at Clemson, this gin was probably made in the late 1700's.

This quest started several months ago when, quite by chance, J. M. Eleazer, Clemson, walked into the office of S. A. Williams, Clemson extension cotton ginning specialist, Clemson. Williams was reading a letter from Mrs. Grace Rogers Cooper, curator of textiles at the Smithsonian, who was inquiring about early gins, preferably pre-1840, for exhibition in the institution's textile hall.

Eleazer, formerly a county agent in Sumter county, stated that such a gin did exist, and now owned by Mrs. Ned Leavell of Sumter, whose husband, now deceased, was once a cotton buyer and later a real estate dealer. We visited Mrs. Leavell.

"We heard the gin was made on the old Kinkaid plantation in Fairfield County. My husband, born in 1892, played with it at the depot in Winnsboro where his grandfather, W. B. Creight, was agent."

Creight later gave the old gin to his grandson about 1895 and it followed the fam-

ily to Sumter sometime after 1897. It's quite obvious that the gin is not the earliest made. Efland called it an "integrated cotton mill" because it was designed to carry out several functions now performed in mills including spinning. It appears to be a "second generation" gin and not the first built by Holmes.

But Mrs. Leavell's statement that the gin was thought to have come from the Captain James Kinkaid plantation is pertinent. This is the plantation where Hodgen Holmes, a master mechanic and manager at the plantation, was believed to have built a gin, perhaps before that of Eli Whitney's.

Before the U. S. Patent laws were passed by Congress in 1790, Holmes was supposed to have obtained a "writ"—a "Caveat of Invention" from the War Office March 14, 1789, to run for five years, protecting his rights to a cotton gin he had invented.

Perhaps the most authoritative history of cotton gins is that written by Charles A. Bennett, formerly principal agricultural engineer, cotton ginning section, USDA. Bennett quotes extensively from the research of Professor D. A. Tompkins, trained engineer and writer who

lived in Charlotte, North Carolina, and is an instructor in textiles at Clemson College.

"It is convincingly claimed," Bennett writes, "that ideas for saw-toothed cotton ginning began in 1787 at Kinkaid Plantation in Craven (now Fairfield) county by Henry Ogden Holmes, now generally known as H. Ogden or Hodgen Holmes, who obtained a "Caveat" thereon in 1789.

"... Holmes obtained his "Caveat" of invention from the War Office under date of March 14, 1789, covering a saw-toothed type cotton gin.

"The 'Caveat' for 5 years thus expired on March 14,

1794—the date the patent was granted to Eli Whitney for his spike and needle-toothed gin, although Whitney's application has been filed in 1793."

This evidence makes it clear that Whitney obtained the first "patent" for a gin

but at the same time casts doubt that he actually invented the first one. Is it more than coincidence that Whitney obtained his patent on the exact date Holmes' "Caveat" expired?

The Book of Knowledge encyclopedia credits Whitney with the invention of the first gin. The encyclopedia Britannica likewise credits Whitney with the invention but does say that Hodgen Holmes secured a patent (later annulled in 1796, one year after Whitney's.

It is doubtful that either of the encyclopedias had the benefit of Bennett's research published in 1962.