The Cotton Gin

Warm-up: Examine the two images of the North and the South, and then describe the differences you see. What is different about each of their economies and way of life? What is similar?

Reading: Read along with the slides, and then stop to answer each question below.

1. What was the problem with cleaning cotton?

2. What do you think motivated Eli Whitney?

3. Being a Northerner, what might have Whitney noticed when he moved to the South?

4. How might attitudes, or views on national issues, differ between Northerners and Southerners?

5. If Whitney’s machine efficiently cleaned cotton, why would it increase the demand for slaves?

Activity: In groups of four, your goal is to clean the cotton and make it ready for shipment.

1. Describe the experience of cleaning cotton with your group—what was it like?

2. What were some challenges you encountered while cleaning the cotton?

3. What was the weight of your cleaned cotton once the timer was up?

4. If a machine could help with the cleaning process, what would it do?

5. Would this machine be a positive invention or a negative invention? Explain your reasoning.
Reading: Read “Eli Whitney and the Cotton Gin”. Answer each question in a brief paragraph.

1. What was America’s cotton economy, and why did the cotton gin increase the need for slaves?

2. How might the cotton gin help to contribute to a different way of life in the South than in the North?

3. Imagine yourself an abolitionist living during this time period. If the immoral institution of slavery is expanding, with the South becoming increasingly dependent upon slave labor, what do you propose should be done about it? Explain your plan and your reasoning.

4. Create a simple drawing of the cotton gin that demonstrates how it works: