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## Cotton made America, but the country paid a high price for its cash crop

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By JEROME WEEKS / The Dallas Morning News

### HISTORY

In his memoir, *Honky Tonk Hero*, which is coming out in March, songwriter Billy Joe Shaver recalls growing up poor near Corsicana. Soon after he was born, his mother went back to picking cotton – with him on her back. For his meals, his grandmother strained bean soup through a rag.

It's a much harsher picture of sharecropping than is found in Mr. Shaver's nostalgic song, "Jesus Was Our Savior and Cotton Was Our King." But both memoir and song highlight a fact that, even if one has lived in Dallas for years, it's perfectly easy not to know: This city was built, not on oil or cattle, but on cotton, on slavery and black-land soil, on wretched sharecroppers and the huge "stripper harvesters" that replaced them. All of these made cotton Texas' biggest cash crop for more than a century and the state the leading cotton producer in the country.

America itself was built on cotton – and was nearly destroyed by it. The same with the British Empire, which controlled India's cotton until Mahatma Gandhi encouraged Indians to defy colonial rule and spin their own clothing.

In his compelling new history, *Big Cotton: How a Humble Fiber Created Fortunes, Wrecked Civilizations and Put America on the Map*, Stephen Yafa relates all of this in the fabric's rise from prehistoric India to today's textile conglomerates that clothe the world, modify cotton DNA and suck up federal subsidies.

Typically, in a "concept history" – all those popular books about salt, tea or tobacco – the historian recounts the origins of a giant industry that grew around a once-obscure product. Unsurprisingly, giant industries eventually bend entire governments to their will. These tectonic shifts, however, seem invisible to us now because they're just part of the landscape.

Take cotton: Once, the dyed fabric was a widely coveted secret of Indian artisans. Their monopoly lasted for centuries, until the British took it at gunpoint. Yet even today, we can hardly talk about fashion without using a fossilized reference to that long-ago age. Calico, chintz, dungaree, khaki, madras, pajamas, sash, seersucker and shawl – all are derived from Indian/Hindu terms.

Concept histories are the children of *Connections*, James Burke's landmark TV series about history's contingencies and influences. As such, they're best when they upend our complacency and make us realize how much human sweat and ingenuity went into, say, those "globalized" jeans you wear.

With cotton, Mr. Yafa brings a personal connection, having grown up in Lowell, Mass., where his tale begins. Francis Cabot Lowell stole the secrets of the British cotton mills (their spinning frames and looms) and brought them to New England.

Britain's "dark, Satanic mills" had spearheaded the Industrial Revolution, while exploiting workers so horribly that the mills inspired *The Communist Manifesto*. In America, the mills that Lowell built began our factory system – and led to the brutal showdown between New England's "Lords of the Loom" and the South's "Lords of the Lash."

The phrase "cotton is king" was coined by South Carolina Sen. James Henry Hammond. In 1858, Hammond declared that a war over slavery was impossible because the South could simply stop planting cotton and cripple the world economy: "No power on Earth dares make war on cotton. Cotton is King."

But as Mr. Shaver's song mourns, "Jesus is our Savior now, but cotton ain't our king" – at least not the way it once was. It wove together an entire, racially divided culture of Greek Revival mansions, boll weevil disasters and the blues. Cotton gave the South its millionaire gentry and gutted whole towns before it disappeared into distant, corporate offices. Here, we marked this historic passing in true Dallas fashion: In 1994, despite the efforts of preservationists, the downtown Cotton Exchange was imploded.

Up to the 20th century, more than two-thirds through *Big Cotton*, Mr. Yafa's tale is compellingly told, partly because it *is* a story, a vivid narrative tracing colonization and commercial genius. It's when Mr. Yafa comes to current issues, though, that his story becomes diffuse, losing the drama of the Civil War.

Pesticides, the China market, America preaching free market values while undercutting African growers: It's hard to encompass it all. Cotton still is king today, but as a faceless, string-pulling industry. So no one's writing any hip-hop songs about it.

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Big Cotton

How a Humble Fiber Created Fortunes, Wrecked Civilizations and Put America on the Map

Stephen Yafa (Viking, \$25.95)

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