

# Memphis as Cotton Capital

## *Essential Question: Why did Memphis become the Cotton Capital of the South?*

The story of Memphis began with the Jackson Purchase in 1819. The Chickasaw sold all their lands in Tennessee and Kentucky for \$300,000. John Overton had long planned a settlement along the Mississippi's fourth bluff. Along with partners James Winchester and Andrew Jackson, he began plans to develop a settlement in the area. Winchester's sons laid out the town's streets in a grid pattern based on that of Philadelphia. Winchester referred to the Mississippi as America's Nile and suggested that the new town be named for one of ancient Egypt's most famous cities. Despite its lofty name, many people continued to refer to the settlement as Chickasaw Bluffs.

Memphis' growth was slow in the early years due to a number of factors. First, just as development was beginning in the region, a depression struck. Secondly, settlers either had to buy land from those who held the original land claims from North Carolina or simply squat on the land and risk losing it in the future. Another problem for Memphis was the belief that it was unhealthy. The impression of ill health was seemingly verified by periodic outbreaks of dengue fever, malaria, smallpox and yellow fever. Lastly, a sandbar near the port made docking difficult.

Memphis' fortunes began to change in 1832 when the Chickasaw treaties cleared northern Mississippi of Indians and opened new lands to cotton growers. Cotton grown on the lands near Memphis was of the highest quality and consistently fetched higher prices than cotton grown in other parts of the state. Other crops grew equally well in the fertile soil of the region including tobacco, corn and wheat. In 1842, authorities in Memphis finally gained the upper hand over the Mississippi riverboat men who had long ignored wharf taxes. With an orderly system for controlling trade in place, the town experienced a boom in trade and population.

The Civil War years were difficult for Memphis like most other Southern towns. The war meant that cotton production and trade declined. Following the war, the cotton industry rebounded and in 1874 the Memphis Cotton Exchange was founded. The Exchange set the rules and prices for buying and selling cotton in the mid-South region. Today, computerized trading has replaced the shouting voices of the cotton exchange. Cotton production has also changed, but continues to play a major role in the economy and culture of the Memphis area.

Source: Finger, John. *Tennessee Frontiers: Three Regions in Transition*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. Print.

*Cotton Museum at the Memphis Cotton Exchange.* Cotton Museum at the Memphis Cotton Exchange, 2014. Web. <http://memphiscottonmuseum.org/>

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Use information from the reading to complete the graphic organizer below.



List 3 challenges that Memphis overcame to become the Cotton Capital

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List 2 advantages that allowed Memphis to become the Cotton Capital

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List 1 question you still have about Memphis as the Cotton Capital

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