



Primary Source 17

Cotton-field workers, film still from *The River*, 1936–37.

Primary Source 17

After the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, cotton became the major southern crop. It remained a staple of the southern economy until the 1910s when the drop in cotton production resulted in the need for fewer workers, helping to stimulate the Great Migration. This photograph shows fieldworkers hard at work. They could pick about twenty pounds of cotton an hour. By 1917, fieldworkers earned between 75 cents and \$1.25 per day, the cost of four quarts of milk or two pounds of bacon.

Many African American fieldworkers were sharecroppers who rented their land as tenant farmers and paid in the form of crops. Few actually owned the land on which they worked. Often the share of crops paid to the landowner was a quarter or more of the total, leaving the sharecropper and his family with very little profit for their own expenses. This system created an unending cycle of debt and poverty. In Panel No. 17 of *The Migration Series*, Lawrence illustrates this unfair situation faced by many African Americans in the South.

Panel No. 17



Teaching Tips

Language Arts/Mathematics/Social Studies/Technology: Conduct internet research to determine the cost of basic household items during the 1910s. What could a family purchase for \$1.25? Was this daily salary enough money to live on? Write a research paper explaining your findings and conclusions.

LA 2, 4, 5, 7, II MA 1, 9 SS 2, 3, 7 TE 10, 11

Mathematics: Create a line graph indicating how much cotton pickers earned per hour if they picked for 8 hours. Use the amounts of \$0.75, \$1.00, and \$1.25 per day as the points on your graph. For extra credit: a good worker picked 20 pounds per hour for 8 hours, how much would he or she have been paid per pound of cotton for each of those 3 amounts?

MA 2, 6

Science/Social Studies: Research the invention of the cotton gin. How did it impact the agricultural industry, particularly in the American South? What were some of the positive and negative outcomes of the invention? Consider Panel No. 17 of *The Migration Series* as evidence.

SC 5, 6, 7 SS 2, 3, 8

Language Arts/Social Studies: Read the description of the Great Migration (“The Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance”—Tab 3), along with the description of the photograph (Primary Source 17). Write a letter from the African American tenant farmer to the white planter in Panel No. 17 of *The Migration Series* explaining why the tenant farmer wants to leave the cotton fields of the South and go north in search of a better life.

LA 2, 4, 5, 7, II SS 2, 3, 5

Visual Arts: Compare and contrast the posture of the four figures in the photograph (Primary Source 17) with Panel No. 17 of *The Migration Series*. What do the poses and gestures of the figures tell you about laboring in the cotton fields?

VA 3, 4, 6

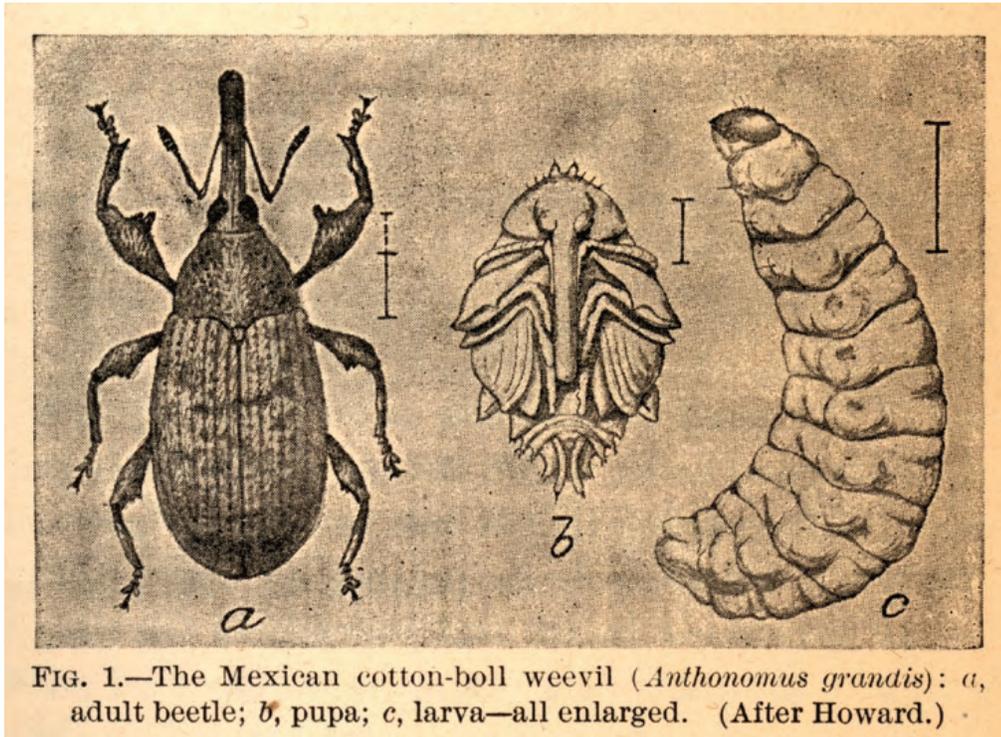


FIG. 1.—The Mexican cotton-boll weevil (*Anthonomus grandis*): *a*, adult beetle; *b*, pupa; *c*, larva—all enlarged. (After Howard.)

Primary Source 18

Frederick W. Mally, "The Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil," *Farmers Bulletin* No. 130, 1901.

Primary Source 19

Excerpt from "The Negro at Work during the World War and during Reconstruction," 1921, by the United States Department of Labor, Division of Negro Economics.



The boll weevil entered the southwestern corner of Georgia in 1915 and damaged the top, or late fall, cotton crop slightly. In 1916, heavy damage was inflicted in 10 counties in the southwestern section, and before the fall of 1916 the weevil had spread over all or a considerable part of 10 other counties, inflicting damage on some farms and leaving others undamaged. In these counties terrific rains during July added to the damage of the weevil and made it increasingly difficult to take the proper precautions against its inroads. As a result many of the farmers were almost ruined and many decided to change from cotton to food products.... The employers of about 30 per cent [sic] of the Negro farm hands and tenants in five of the counties heavily damaged by the weevil and about 30 per cent of the hands and tenants in two of the counties suffering moderate damage, together with scattering employers in other boll-weevil counties, were questioned as to their labor supply in 1916 and 1917. Their replies indicated that the line of heavy movement corresponded closely to the line of heavy damage by the weevil (pp. 78–79).

Primary Sources 18 and 19

A variety of economic hardships, including failing crops, contributed to the Great Migration. The boll weevil, a type of beetle measuring about a quarter of an inch in length, ravaged southern cotton crops in the early twentieth century. The destructive pest entered the United States from Mexico in 1892. This excerpt from a report by the Department of Labor's Division of Negro Economics explains that by 1916 the boll weevil had inflicted heavy damage on a large number of cotton farms in Georgia. This prompted farmers to begin cultivating food products instead, which required fewer workers and motivated many African Americans to leave the area.

Lawrence depicted the boll weevil and its destruction of southern crops in Panel No. 9 of *The Migration Series*. However, when he created the painting, he had never seen a boll weevil in person and referred to scientific illustrations, similar to the one pictured here.

Panel No. 9



Teaching Tips

Language Arts/Visual Arts: Compare Lawrence's representation of the boll weevil in Panel No. 9 of *The Migration Series* to the scientific illustration of the boll weevil (Worksheet 3—Tab 4). What does each image reveal about this beetle?

LA 4, 5 VA 3, 4, 6

Science/Visual Arts: Conduct internet research to find images of cotton plants. Using these images along with the scientific illustration of the boll weevil and Panel No. 9 of *The Migration Series*, make a three-dimensional artwork of the boll weevil ravaging the cotton plant. Use cotton balls, construction paper, and pipe cleaners.

SC 3 VA 1, 2, 4, 6

Language Arts/Science/Visual Arts:

After reading the excerpt from the Department of Labor Report on the boll weevil, imagine that you are an artist hired by a charitable institution to design a poster. The poster's purpose is to solicit aid for farmers and their employees in southwestern Georgia whose livelihoods are suffering due to the impact of the boll weevil. Use the scientific illustration of the boll weevil, information in the report, and Lawrence's Panel No. 9 of *The Migration Series* as your sources in creating this poster.

LA 2, 3, 5, 7 SC 3 VA 1, 2, 3, 4, 6