

Richardson, Edmund ^[1]

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28 June 1818–11 Jan. 1886

Edmund Richardson, the world's largest cotton planter, was born in [Caswell County](#) ^[2], the son of James and Nancy Payne Ware Richardson. Educated in local schools, he worked on the family farm and clerked in a dry goods store in Danville, Va. In 1833, when others from the county were moving to the Deep South, he settled in Brandon, Miss., and again became a clerk. In 1840, he used a moderate cash settlement and the labor of the enslaved people from his father's estate, plus his own savings, to create a joint mercantile firm in the state capital, Jackson, and to establish branches in nearby communities. The firm flourished, and in 1852 he became a junior partner in a factorage company in New Orleans. He invested excess profits from his store in land and the further enslavement of other people, and by 1861 he owned five plantations and enslaved several hundred people. During the [Civil War](#) ^[3], because of the economic upheaval in the South, the factorage business was suspended and at the war's end Richardson was deeply in debt. By buying and selling cotton, however, his skill in business soon enabled him to recover. Establishing a new firm, he annually moved 100,000 bales of cotton.

His extensive operations earned for him the sobriquet "Cotton King," and he was a commissioner from the cotton-producing states at the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876 to observe the one-hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence—an occasion widely ignored by Southerners who had recently lost their own struggle for independence. He also was vice-president of the Atlanta Cotton Exposition in 1881, and President Chester A. Arthur appointed him commissioner of the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition in New Orleans in 1884. Of the latter he was president of the board of management and made the opening address. His formal report on the exposition, submitted to the president shortly before his death, stressed the significance of this undertaking for the industrial advancement of the South as well as of the nation.

In the belief that cotton mills should be operated near the source of their raw material, Richardson leased in 1868 the Mississippi state penitentiary, installed machinery, and leased convict labor, a practice common throughout the nation at that time. To employ all of the laborers available, he bought and leased additional plantations and in time raised cotton on 25,000 acres in some fifty locations in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas. On each of his plantations he kept a store and sold supplies to his employees. In productive seasons they produced 12,000 bales, worth in excess of \$500,000. He soon acquired controlling interest in other cotton mills and extended his interests to include cottonseed oil and railroads. Richardson's fortune was variously estimated at between 10 and 12 million dollars.

On a buying trip for his stores in 1847, Richardson met Margaret Elizabeth Patton, of Huntsville, Ala., the sister of former governor Robert Patton, and they were married the following year. They became the parents of seven children. During his last years Richardson moved from New Orleans to Jackson, where he died.

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Stephen B. Weeks Scrapbook, vol. 4 (North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

Additional Resources:

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