Inventing the Cotton Gin: Machine and Myth in Antebellum America. *By Angela Lakwete.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. xiii + 232 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, $45. ISBN: 0-801-87394-0.

Reviewed by John Majewski

As somebody who regularly teaches an introductory survey of U.S. history, I have five different textbooks sitting on my office bookshelf. Each book reports the same basic story: in 1793, the northern-born, Yale-educated Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin while visiting a Georgia plantation. Only after Whitney's invention, the standard interpretation goes, could cotton production flourish in the South. I have unthinkingly repeated the standard interpretation myself in countless undergraduate lectures. The thesis of Angela Lakwete's *Inventing the Cotton Gin* is that the textbooks and my lectures are dead wrong. She persuasively argues that Eli Whitney did not invent the cotton gin, and that such simplistic accounts of his inventive greatness rest upon a series of long-standing historical myths designed to trumpet Yankee ingenuity and downplay the industrial genius of the slave South.

Lakwete shows in the first chapter that cotton gins had been used for hundreds of years in China, India, and the Mediterranean. In the United States, various inventors experimented with different designs in the late colonial and revolutionary periods. By 1790, gins in the United States and the Caribbean—powered by water, wind, animals, or humans—processed more than a half-million pounds of cotton. As Lakwete argues, "Ginning technology was not a bottleneck as the nineteenth century dawned" (p. 45). These gins, though, relied on traditional technology that pinched off the fiber from the seeds as the cotton was fed through a series of rollers. Whitney's contribution was developing a gin with wire teeth that pulled the fiber from the seeds. Gin makers and planters eventually substituted fine-toothed circular saws for Whitney's wire teeth.

Whitney's contribution was important, but it hardly represented a revolutionary breakthrough. For many decades, textile manufactures preferred roller-ginned cotton because it produced long fibers that were easier to convert into yarn. Saw-toothed gins, on the other hand, were faster, cheaper to use, and required less labor than the roller gins.

They were particularly well suited for the short-staple cotton of the Southwest. Lakwete convincingly demonstrates that planters adopted the saw-toothed gin only after a long-transition period, which lasted until about 1830. Its victory, though, was hardly assured—the saw-toothed gin became dominant only after southern manufacturers (some of them using slave labor) developed important incremental improvements. The Whitney legend, Lakwete argues, obscures both the important continuities of ginning and the technological contributions of southern gin manufacturers.

Lakwete's detailed refutation of the Whitney legend is persuasive. While the text sometimes becomes bogged down in technical descriptions and detailed chronologies, Lakwete nevertheless clearly and forcefully explains the subtleties of technological change If the importance of a book can be measured in terms of textbooks revised and lectures rewritten, then *Inventing the Cotton Gin* is clearly a significant achievement. That being said, Lakwete's broader argument that cotton-gin manufacturing represents a long-neglected southern success story is less persuasive. Many of the most significant cotton-gin "southern" manufacturers, as Lawkete herself notes, were in fact northern born. Lakwete does not adequately analyze why northern-born entrepreneurs helped shape a decidedly southern industry. Perhaps more critically, southern success in gin manufacturing did not have any significant "spillover" effects: the networks of mechanics (both slave and free) who continuously improved the cotton gin did not help southerners gain a foothold in other industries. In this respect, the cotton gin was emblematic of the South's ambiguous manufacturing triumphs. Success in certain industries—often related to the processing of staples such as tobacco and cotton—never translated into widespread industrialization. Lakwete, perhaps too focused on overturning the reigning mythology of cotton ginning, misses an important opportunity to put gin manufacturing within a broader context of southern economic development.

The most fascinating chapter is the conclusion, entitled "Machine and Myth." Here Lakwete traces the origins of the Whitney myth and why it was so compelling to many northerners. She argues that northerners perpetuated the Whitney myth to reinforce images of southern manufacturing incompetence. She also asserts that the Whitney myth was part of an effort to discredit African American economic achievements, a way of bolstering the stereotype that slaves "were not machine users and certainly not machine

makers" (p. 190). While post–Civil War images of slaves using rude gins or ginning cotton with their fingers certainly convey a sense of primitiveness, it is not clear that such stereotypes were meant as an attack on African Americans themselves, as Lawete suggests, or as a critique of the degrading nature of slavery. If one can disagree with some of Lakwete's specific interpretive claims, few will dispute that this book will change how historians think about the rise of King Cotton and the nature of technological change.

John Majewski is associate professor in the history department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The author of A House Dividing: Economic Development in Pennsylvania and Virginia before the Civil War *(2000), he is currently writing a study of how the supporters of southern secession imagined the economic future of the Confederacy.*