



Colonial Linen: A Step Towards American Independence.

Description



In 1794, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin. Perhaps no other historical fact has been so ingrained into my mind as this. Year after year, I would learn about the infamous cotton gin and it's epic impact on America as we know it.

The all-mighty cotton gin makes it seem that life, or proper living, did not even exist in the new American colonies before it walked onto the scene. That just can not be!

I think you know where I'm going with this. What trusty fabric was there when cotton was busy being a diva and requiring special equipment for production? That's right- LINEN.

Linen saved the day for American colonists who were trying to claim their new-found independence. Life is fairly easy for us now with all of our needs conveniently located in supermarkets, shopping malls, and online. Our old American roots can easily be forgotten in this mess of consumerism, but let's try to imagine this strange past for a moment.

The Colonial Period:



The English settlement of Jamestown, Virginia in 1607 marks the beginning of the Colonial American period, which spans until 1775 with the beginning of the Revolutionary War in 1775. Great Britain set up a trade system which

made it easy for them to obtain raw materials from the new colonies, while providing colonists with their own manufactured goods.

Early settlers in Colonial America soon realized that their dreams of independence were still being squashed by Great Britain. The trade system had been arranged to fully benefit Great Britain and guarantee that the colonies rely on British goods.

Colonists fell into this trap partially because they still considered English goods to be the highest qualities. They favored materials from the mother country rather than their utilizing their own resources.

What was going on here? They made a really long and dangerous journey across the ocean with hopes of freedom and happiness! So where was all the prosperity hiding? The issue of escaping religious persecution had been mostly alleviated, but not the whole “better life” part.



Thankfully, after some time, the colonists finally got some sense knocked into them. Although they still considered themselves to be subjects of Great Britain, the colonists began standing up for themselves with small patriotic steps. This spirit of independence led the colonists to begin spinning and weaving their own cloth. The production of fabrics, most notably linen and

wool, became a practical and patriotic practice.

It comes as no surprise that the British did their best to discourage colonial cloth manufacture. To ensure the continuation of trade with the colonies, higher tariffs were placed on looms and spinning wheels. They also passed acts forbidding the export and sale of cloth woven in the colonies. These acts, along with others passed, only increased the the colonists' sense of independence.

Later, this patriotism would develop into a strong revolutionary sentiment. Before it grew to that point, however, cloth production in colonial America was one of the significant ways ties were beginning to be severed with Great Britain. Many families began to grow flax for linen and raise sheep for wool. Woodworkers began producing the necessary textile equipment, such as spinning wheels and looms.

Small steps were finally being made towards independence. We all know how that tale ends; a glorious war resulting in a free country full of promise! Hoorah!

Okay, there was a little more to it...but let's just focus on the linen again. As I reminded us, life was hard back then! Farming was not an easy task, especially when it was your livelihood. The growing and harvesting of linen demonstrates the demanding life of farming.

Growing & Harvesting Flax:

(Just a note- these photos are not from the Colonial period. They just nicely demonstrate the process of harvesting flax.)



Flax was easily grown as an annual crop even in the difficult and short New England growing season. Linen quickly became the fabric of choice in colonial America. The flax plant contains a fibrous center in the stalk of the plant. A series of procedures separates the fiber from the rest of the plant, enabling it to be spun into thread, and then woven into a linen fabric.

Why not cotton? Well, while cotton was grown in North America during this period, it was incredibly tedious and time-consuming to produce. Before the invention of the cotton gin, it just did not make sense to devote so much energy into the manufacturing of cotton.

Linen could be produced and spun in much larger quantities than labor-intensive cotton, and in a fraction of the time. Linen is also an wonderfully strong and durable fabric. It's long wearing ability made it the perfect fabric during a period when resources where not as readily available as they are now days.

Flax seeds tended to be sown in April or May and were carefully weeded until the plants reached about five inches high. Children helped with

weeding because their small, bare feet would not damage the delicate crop.

Around June, blue flowers would blossom from the tops of the plants. These beautifully flax fields would be 18 to 36 inches high by August.



When the time was right, the harvesting could begin! Groups of usually women and children would pull the ripe plants up by the roots. After shaking the dirt off the roots, the stalks bundled and tied.

These bundles were arranged in *stooks* (groupings shaped like small huts) to dry in the field. The dried stalks were spread out and turned several times.

They were then *rippled*, or combed, with a heavy wire comb to release the seed pods. The seeds were kept for next year's crop.



After the seeds were removed, the stalks were wet down in order to soften the stalks and rot the leaves. This is *retting*, and it helps to separate the fibers from the central woody core of the plant. The moisture is what breaks down the connective gums in the plant.

Following this, the stalks were cleaned, dried and tied into bundles.

The *braking* stage uses a flax-brake to break the stalks and separate the fibers. This task required some muscle!

After this strenuous process, the stalks were *scutched* or *swingled*. This step removed the bark and also took a great amount of strength. These process was done twice and then the fibers were pounded to be softer.



The flax would then be *hackled*, or drawn through *hackles* (combs) to remove any chaff that is left and detangle the fiber until it resembles golden hair.

Tow are the short, knotted pieces that are left in the hackles. These lesser quality fibers were often used from utilitarian textiles such as feed sacks (tow sacks) or dishtowels.



The other fibers continued to be pulled and combed through the hackles until they reached their fine state.

In fact, many young girls would save a small amount of *hetcheled flax* in her dowry chest. They would continue to add to this stash and re-hetcheled it each year to make the fibers incredibly fine over time. This beautifully soft flax would be spun into gossamer thread and used for the the lace on her wedding gown.



However, most flax fibers made their way to be spun into thread or yarn, where they could then be used for knitting and weaving into fabric.

Linen's strong and absorbent nature made it useful for almost any textile. Clothing, towels, sheets, upholstery, and curtains were all woven of linen during the Colonial period.



It is a cool fabric that becomes more beautiful with age. Hand spun linen fabric would last several generations of use in a family before it wore out. It was not unusual for linen textiles to be mentioned in people's wills during this period too.

Linen played an important role in early colonization of North America. Until the cotton gin came about, linen was a major fabric for colonists. In fact, linen continued to be used and is still used today!

*How did you like our shift to American history and seeing the role linen played outside of Europe? We'd love to hear your thoughts! Leave us your comments and visit our [Facebook](#) page.

CATEGORY

1. TEXTILES
2. TEXTILES IN HISTORY

Category

1. TEXTILES
2. TEXTILES IN HISTORY

Date Created

September 29, 2011

Author

novembrino