

FOOD & CLOTHING

Introduction

Thank you for using the DAR Museum's Food & Clothing Portable Education Program!

Following is a brief introduction to the concept of this program and some related historical information, meant as background information for the teacher. You may complete the five lessons in any order.

Lessons:

- **Clothing**
- **Fibers**
- **Making Clothes**
- **Recipes**
- **Table Manners**

People of all times and places have to feed and clothe themselves. In the 1700s in America, many things were different about *how* people ate and dressed. But, many things were also similar to the modern day. Throughout this program the students will be introduced to both the similarities and differences of the past.

Food

Most people were farmers. Even people who had a trade (blacksmith, carpenter, weaver, etc.) usually also had a farm. Rich people like George Washington were also farmers; they had hundreds of acres of farm land, and many people (both free and slaves) to do the work. Regular people either owned land, or rented it from someone else.

The kinds of food people ate depended on the time of year, where they lived, and how rich they were. Rich people could afford to buy expensive imported items like sugar and spices. Regular people might buy some of these things, but did not use them often. There were

regional and cultural differences in what kinds of food people raised. *In general*, wheat and was more common in the northern colonies, while corn was more common in the southern colonies, for instance. (This did not mean that people in the north did not eat corn, or people in the south did not eat wheat.) The country of ancestry played a role too; a community descended from German immigrants would cook different things than a community descended from English immigrants.

The time of year was very important. Now, we can go to the grocery store and buy almost anything, any time of year. Fresh produce is shipped or flown to us from all around the world. In the 1700s, food could only move as fast as a person could: on foot, a horse, wagon, or sailing ship. Fresh food would spoil before it went very far, and would certainly not last through the winter. Before refrigeration, freezing, or canning, people had to preserve their food so it would last. Pickling (with salt and/or vinegar), salting, drying, and smoking food were all ways to preserve it.

Food had to be cooked using a fire, since there was no gas or electric heat available yet. Sometimes the food was cooked directly over the flames, sometimes over the coals, and sometimes people used a fire to heat an oven for baking.

One misconception you might hear is that people from early America used a lot of spices to disguise the taste of spoiled meat. This is not true; spices were expensive, and the people who could afford lots of spices could also afford good food. Cookbooks of the time often include instructions on how to tell if your ingredients are fresh or spoiled... and if spoiled, they say, you should not use them! The combination and amount of spices used in early American cooking are different from today, and to a modern palette may seem strange, but it was how people liked their food at the time.

Clothing

People had rules about wearing clothing in the 1700s, just like we do today. The clothes you wore depended on gender, age, social status, time of year, and occupation. People in the 1700s dressed in ways that were appropriate in their culture. Today you would not wear your swimsuit to work, and it would look strange if you wore a heavy coat on a hot summer day. There were rules and customs about wearing clothes in the 1700s which made sense to the people at the time, even if we think of them as strange now.

Babies and young children, whether boys or girls, wore the same clothes for the first few years of life. Many portraits of young boys look like girls to us because the clothes were all frocks, or gowns. Once a boy was about 4-7 years old, he would start wearing smaller versions of men's clothing.

Older boys and men wore trousers (ankle-length) or breeches (knee-length), shirts, and waistcoats. A man would not wear only a shirt and breeches/trousers unless he was working hard doing heavy manual labor; wearing a shirt with nothing over it was underdressed. He needed at least a waistcoat, and preferably also a coat, to be completely dressed. Usually men and boys wore something on their heads, too: a cap (for informal times or doing work), a straw or felt hat (for outdoors), or a wig (for fancy wear). Stockings and shoes completed the outfit.

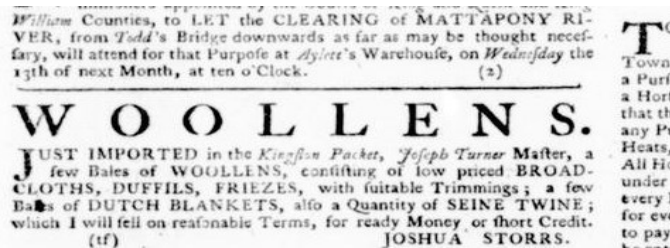
Women and girls wore a shift, and over it either a gown (one piece) or a petticoat(s) and jacket or shortgown. Pockets could be worn over the shift but under the gown or petticoat, and were reached by a slit in the outer clothes. Women and girls always wore something on their heads, unless they were wealthy and dressed their hair up very fancy for a special occasion. They wore a white cap, usually made out of linen, and over that a hat if they were going outside. If it was cold outside they could wear a woolen cloak. Stockings and shoes completed the outfit.

This program includes a boy's and a girl's outfit. They are not absolutely complete; shoes, stockings, and headwear would also be worn, but sanitary concerns have prevented us from including these garments.

Making Cloth

One of the common misconceptions about the 1700s is that “they made everything themselves.” Clothing manufacture was complicated, involving many steps and much labor. Almost nobody in America in the 1700s made all their own clothing from start to finish. To begin with, the colonists still relied heavily on England for imported goods. England, eager to have a wide customer base in America, even made the manufacture of some finished goods illegal in America from time to time.

Some people might purchase cloth to cut and sew into their own clothes; others might purchase second-hand clothing, or make some items of clothing while buying others. There are plenty of newspapers at the time with advertisements for cloth and clothing.



The Virginia Gazette, 1773

Some people owned a spinning wheel or a loom for making cloth. In many areas of the country throughout the 1700s, about half to two-thirds of households had a spinning wheel, while considerably fewer (6%-10%) had a loom. This shows us that most families were not making cloth at all, while others were spinning yarn or thread and then contracting someone else, a professional weaver, to weave it for them. Diaries of the time usually show textile production as a part-time occupation in addition to farming and other activities. In some areas of the country, home textile production was for home use. Others had a “household industry” in which family members performed some steps of clothmaking for commercial use.

Textile production was usually divided along gender lines. Women carded and spun, while men wove and did the finishing work on the cloth. Women did weave, but the majority of commercial weavers were men.

Around the time of the American Revolutionary War, the political sentiment shifted in favor of “homespun” (meaning American-made, not foreign imported) cloth. It became

fashionable to make some of your own cloth or buy from American manufacturers, although it still did not mean that every family made all their own clothes. England had been preventing the latest in textile-producing technology from reaching America, so America was not able to make cloth as efficiently or as fine as in Europe (especially England and France) and the multiple steps involved in clothmaking still made it inefficient for one person to do everything.

Works Referenced:

Baumgarten, Linda. "Looking at Eighteenth-Century Clothing." Colonial Williamsburg, <https://www.slaveryandremembrance.org/history/clothing/intro/clothing.cfm>

Benes, Peter, ed. *Textiles in Early New England: Design, Production, and Consumption*. The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings 1997: Boston University, 1999.

Glasse, Hannah. *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*. London, 1788.

Simmons, Amelia. *American Cookery*. Hartford, 1796.

Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *The Age of Homespun*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.

We Recommend the following Glossaries of Terms...

- Children's clothing:
<https://www.slaveryandremembrance.org/history/clothing/children/cglossary.cfm>
- Women's clothing:
<https://www.slaveryandremembrance.org/history/clothing/women/wglossary.cfm>
- Men's clothing:
<https://www.slaveryandremembrance.org/history/clothing/men/mglossary.cfm>