

LAUNDRY

Items Used:

- Fabric swatches (numbered)
- Instructions for Fabric Matching Challenge
- Raw fibers: cotton, flax, wool, silk
- Laundry Recipes and Instructions
- Iron (reproduction)
- Bar of soap

Activity Suggestions:

1. Try the Fabric Matching Challenge! You will need the instructions, numbered fabric swatches, and four bags of raw fibers. Optional ideas: divide into individuals or groups, and offer prizes!
2. Take the recipes and instructions for laundry, and pass out one to each participant. Participants read the 1700s instructions, and decide if they would follow these instructions today. Discussion questions:
 - a. Are the ingredients still available? Are any of them toxic?
 - b. How labor-intensive are these instructions compared to the cleaning we do today?
 - c. What details do we need to pay attention to with modern laundry? Do you think it was the same in the 1700s?
3. Pass around the iron. Discussion questions:
 - a. How does its weight compare with a modern iron?
 - b. How difficult do you think it is to gauge the temperature?
 - c. Pop quiz: why was it called a "sadiron?" (*Answer: "sad" used to mean "heavy."*)
4. Examine the soap. Discussion questions:
 - a. Have you ever used soap like this?
 - b. How effective do you think it is for washing clothes?



Information:

"Our people here have been busy to day, washing, we hir'd a dutch woman nam'd Rosanna, to assist – washing at home is a new business to me, having been in the practice ever since we were married to put out our washing..."

Elizabeth Drinker, July 7, 1794

Laundry

Washing clothes in the 1700s was an arduous task. Everything, including filling and emptying the wash tub was done by hand. There was lots of scrubbing, wringing, and beating. Once scrubbed, the clothes then had to be rinsed in a separate tub. Cotton and linen clothes were usually boiled as well, while wool and silk were treated more gently. Each type of cloth had to be handled differently, depending on what it was made out of, whether it was dyed, and how sturdy the fabric was. Stains had to be treated differently depending on the fabric and the nature of the stain.

To save time and labor, some families sent household linens like handkerchiefs and sheets to laundresses.

The frequency of doing laundry varied. The wealthy could have more undergarments and go a much longer time between washings, employing someone to do weeks' worth of laundry at a time.

Some families had a regular weekly schedule, with Monday the favored day for doing laundry. One woman's diary records her initially washing on an irregular schedule, then settling into the routine of washing nearly every Monday or Tuesday and ironing on Saturday for 41 years. But, not every family did laundry every week, and clothing was not usually washed after being worn once. Outer clothing in particular might be worn for months between washings, while underclothing would be washed more frequently.



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Soap

“Lye soap” gets a bad reputation – and quite undeserved. You cannot even *have* soap without lye. What we know of as soap (detergents are a different matter) is the result of a chemical combination of a fat or oil with sodium hydroxide or potassium hydroxide, commonly known as lye. Check the label of any bar of modern soap. But read carefully! Often companies disguise the ingredient lye because they know many people are wary of it. For example, on the ingredient list of a bar of Irish Spring soap you will find “sodium tallowate” (which is lye + tallow), “sodium cocate” (lye + cocoa butter), and “sodium palm kernelate” (lye + palm oil). They manage to list the ingredients without using the word lye.

So why the bad reputation? There are a few possible reasons. Poorly made soap can have too much lye and not enough fat or oil to combine with it, which results in small pockets of lye that will damage skin. And, soap that has not cured for long enough after it is made can also be too harsh. People who know what they are doing and can make soap well end up with a product that is no more harsh or unpleasant than any modern bar soap.

Some people made their own soap in the 1700s, and some bought it. You can find advertisements in colonial newspapers for chandlers selling soap and candles, and offering to purchase ashes. In George Washington’s records, soapmaking occasionally happened at Mount Vernon, though that would have been the more common type of soap for utilitarian purposes like laundry; wealthy and even not-so-wealthy people could easily buy professionally-made soap for their personal hygiene.

Soapmaking depended on having a large quantity of both fat and wood ashes available. To make lye, put ashes in a large barrel with holes in the bottom, then pour water through the ash. As the water drips out the bottom it will carry lye with it, and appear a dark red-brown color. This lye water is then heated with a fat or oil, which combine chemically to make soap.



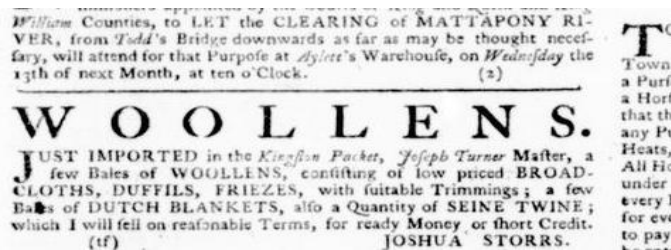
Ironing

Ironing followed laundry, and was an especially detested chore. You had the choice between two kinds of irons. A sadiron (from “sad” meaning “heavy”) was a solid piece of iron that you needed to use in pairs so that you could use one while the other sat near the fire to heat. Or, you could use a box iron, which had a hollow space for an iron slug which you heated separately. They both had their disadvantages; sadirons could transfer soot and dirt from the fire onto your nice clean clothes, while box irons heated unevenly. Both offered the possibility of overheating and singeing your clothes, and both started out hot and gradually cooled off so that you had to keep switching sadirons or slugs.

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, fewer than half of households had a spinning wheel,

while considerably fewer (6%-20%) 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.

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