

WEAVING AND LINEN

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, FASG

It isn't uncommon to find in a probate inventory that an ancestor owned several yards of "lining." To understand this term, we first need to remind ourselves that our ancestors didn't care all that much about spelling and that they spoke with accents unlike our present-day American accents (see IT'S AN AUDIO WORLD). *Lining* was the most common way of spelling *linen*. This even gives us a clue of how it was pronounced.

Linen yarn could create a variety of fabrics—from delicate underclothing and fine handkerchiefs to sturdy sheeting and practical outerwear. *Linsey-woolsey* was a common fabric woven from both linen and woolen yarn.

Linen was made from flax. Edwin Tunis in *Colonial Living* says of flax, "It took about twenty operations, all laborious, to reduce the plant to a state that would allow its fibers to be spun." In FLAX, we reviewed a Cliff's Notes version of the process for turning flax into linen yarn. Spinning (see THE DISTAFF SIDE) added an additional set of operations before weaving could begin. Like preparation and spinning, weaving has many parts.

LOOMS

A loom was not a simple item. It occupies a significant floor space and has complicated parts. We see references in inventories to *gears*, *slays* or *sleys*, *harness*, *tackle*, and other weaving equipment. These could determine the specialty of a specific weaver. In Martha Ballard's diary, we see that some of these pieces—and their installation and set up—were part of the borrow-and-barter economic system.

Warp refers to the sturdy threads that run the full length of a piece of fabric. The warp threads have to be mounted on the loom before weaving can begin. In effect, they go from a roller near the weaver to a roller at the far end of the loom. Periodically, as the warp within reach of the weaver is woven into cloth, warp is unrolled from the far roller (the *warp beam*) and rolled up on the near roller (the *cloth beam*). Setting the warp of a loom required both a significant amount of time and specialized skills.

The *weft* is the thread that alternately passes over and under the warp. The purpose of a loom is to create a mechanical way of alternately raising and lowering particular warp threads so that the weaver can use a *shuttle* to throw the weft thread from one side to another. Until the invention in 1733 by John Kay of the *fly shuttle*, the shuttle was thrown by hand from one side of the loom and caught at the other. The fly shuttle automated this process to the pressing of a pedal. The mid-1700s also saw the invention of equipment to facilitate special weaves, such as the Jacquard machine.

GENDER ROLES

In Europe, weaving was a male occupation. It was learned by apprenticeship, and although a man could be described simply as a weaver or clothmaker, often the type

of material was described in the occupation. I have seen records in England, France, Germany, and Holland referring to linen weavers, woolen weavers, and say makers.

Both women and men were spinners, but weaving was exclusively male. It took several spinners to supply one weaver and his loom. So why do we envision the early American housewife seated at her loom?

With the collapse of the clothmaking industry in Europe, many weavers came to America for what they hoped would be economic opportunity. (I don't pretend to be familiar with the specifics of the changes, but one factor was increased cotton production, which caused a decline in the linen industry because cotton could be prepared and woven much more quickly.)

When emigrants arrived, if they were in a rural area and had been lucky enough to obtain a farm, the focus had to be on survival, with the priority on accumulating food to make it through the winter. Although self-sufficiency was an ideal in New England, it was less so elsewhere, and New Englanders realized that it was wiser to buy cloth than to invest the time in creating it. Thus, much cloth was purchased. Some was imported from Europe. In American towns and cities, a weaver might still be able to support himself as farms became established and it became practical to raise flax and sheep for linen and wool yarn that could be taken to the weaver to turn into cloth.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich studied this shift in the gender of weavers in a 1998 article. She concluded that weaving as a female occupation developed most fully on the margins of settlement, away from cities, after women were able to shift their attention from helping with tasks related to establishing the farm, crops, and livestock to household activities. Once a loom was properly set up, weaving was an activity that could be started and stopped without interference with other household activities—and a good way to keep teenage girls productively occupied.

I had the opportunity to ask Ulrich if the mechanical improvements such as the fly shuttle were a factor in this gender shift, but she told me that she thought it was entirely the result of economic- and social-environment factors.

OTHER WEAVING TASKS

Yarn was usually *sized* before it was woven. This meant applying a starchy substance to the yarn to keep the threads from sticking out in all directions and hindering the shuttle. (If you remember the years before spray starch, you have a concept of what was involved.) In early times this was often done to the yarn before it was set on the loom, but sizing could be brushed onto the warp on the loom.

Fulling was an important process between weaving cloth and sewing it into clothing. It shrank the yarn, thereby tightening the weave, and softened the fabric. Fulling required first soaking the cloth and then beating it.

Although fulling could be (and was) done manually by individuals, it was exceptionally tedious. Fulling mills quickly became popular as the preferred method for this step.

Other important steps in cloth preparation were bleaching or dyeing. Linen didn't take dye well. If appearance mattered, the cloth was bleached by sprinkling it and spreading it in the sunshine.

Dyeing could be done to the yarn after the spinning and before the weaving, or it could be done to the whole cloth after the weaving. If a decorative item such as a bed coverlet (usually to be seen in inventories as a *coverlid*) was desired, it was popular to dye the yarn to be used for the warp and the weft in contrasting colors.

A technique called *overshot* could be used to create a pattern from contrasting yarn. Basically, this means that instead of the shuttle going over-under repetitively across the width of the cloth, the pattern would vary. I have modern throw rugs in my house that have patterns of stripes, rectangles, and diamonds created by this technique.

Natural country dyes could be made by pounding and then boiling various plant parts such as bark, berries, flowers, leaves, and roots. Often women would trade such dyes amongst themselves, each making more quantities of one or two types than they would need. Dyes were also purchased at the local store. Polishing was used on nicer fabrics to give them a glossy finish.

RESOURCES

Edwin Tunis's *Colonial Living* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1957), 45–52 is illustrated with pen-and-ink drawings of the tools involved in cloth production, beginning to end.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), winner of the Pulitzer Prize in History.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Wheels, Looms, and the Gender Division of Labor in Eighteenth-Century New England," *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 55(1998): 3–38.