



# 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY CLOTHING

## THE MAKING OF CLOTH

The whir of the spinning wheel and the clack thump of the loom were familiar sounds to many Trans-Allegheny pioneer families. While clothing of leather could be easily produced and was long wearing in spite of the rigors of wilderness living, it was not comfortable, according to those who wore it. Even the native peoples wore linen shirts when they could get them! At least one family in three owned hand carders for preparing wool to spin. Almost every family owned a spinning wheel (many had more than one). Depending on national background, family size, and proximity to trade routes, these families were producing on the average between 40 and 78 yards of cloth per year. (A man's shirt requires three yards of cloth.)

Until Eli Whitney, a Yankee schoolmaster, invented the cotton gin in 1792, cotton was not the economical fiber it is today. Cotton cloth was in the American colonies, but most of it was coming from elsewhere. It never formed one of the homespun industries of the Middle Colonies nor in New England. Even in England, no cotton fabrics were made until after 1760. Cotton sewing thread was unknown in England. Much of the cotton cloth used in England and the American Colonies was coming from India, especially Calcutta, hence the term calico. When calico reached the frontier about 1770, a woman who could purchase enough for a gown at \$1.00 a yard could assume queenly airs. This was in a time when a simple gown required at least four yards of cloth and a wage for a worker was \$60 a year.

For a while, families on the Trans-Allegheny frontier were forced to rely more on their own and each other's resources than they had been before moving here because they were now so far from any base of supplies. Cloth and made-up garments were available at Fort Pitt and Winchester, Virginia, but these areas of trade were cost-prohibitive to many frontier families. Many of these families had to make their own clothes from scratch. Producing one's own clothes meant not merely sewing them; it also meant weaving the cloth to be sewn, spinning the thread to be woven, and raising and preparing the fibers to be spun!

For man, linen was first, because flax can be sown in May and harvested in July. Wool takes a full year to grow on the sheep, and it takes some years to develop a flock of sheep by breeding. In New England, flax was grown as early as 1640 and by 1644 there were 3000 sheep there. That was still not enough to clothe the population of New England. That was almost surely due in part to most of them being of the mutton breeds used for meat production with little regard in their breeding for good wool production. There were many restrictions placed on the colonies regarding wool manufacture, including no wool breeds of sheep being sold to the colonists. The growth of the wool industry in any colony was regarded by England with jealous eyes. Wool was a pet industry and principal staple of Great Britain. Thus, wool in the American Colonies was used carefully and was often in short supply, especially on



the frontier. Add to England's inhibiting restrictions on wool culture the difficulty of raising any kind of livestock on the frontier, especially sheep, the shortage of wool early on is better understood.

## LINEN

Since many people had to make their own clothes from scratch, they planted flax as soon as enough land was cleared to permit it. A safe rule of thumb was to plant  $\frac{1}{4}$  acre of flax per household member. It took about twenty operations, all quite laborious, to change the plants into spinable fibers! The most important of those operations follow.

The flax plants were pulled up roots and all in midsummer, dried, and rippled in the field. Rippling was dragging the stalks through a coarse wooden comb to strip off the seedpods, which were saved to be pressed for their oil and/or to plant the next year. Then the stalks were rotted in frequently wetted piles on the ground to weaken the core and outer bark between which the useful fibers lay. After two or three weeks, or when the stalks were the right shade of gray and gave off just the right stench, they were dried again and stored for further processing in the winter months when there was more time, or processed immediately.



To prepare flax for spinning, the now brittle woody parts of the stalks had to be shattered by the flax brake. The brake was about 5 feet long, 3 feet high, and supported by stout legs. The plants were held across the edges of a set of fixed parallel planks, called knives. A second set of knives, which meshed with the first set, was hinged to it at one end and brought down repeatedly and with force on the stalks. This shattered the stalks into chaff that fell to the ground, but did no harm to the long, hair-like fibers inside the stalks that would eventually be spun into linen thread.

Next, the broken flax had to be scutched or swingled to knock the bits of chaff out of the fibers. This involved draping the fibers over an upright plank and striking it with a wooden "knife" until most of the chaff had fallen out. The process also softened the natural resins in the flax that needed to be washed away later because they would resist the dyeing of the linen after it was spun into thread before weaving. The last of the impurities were removed and the fibers were combed out by drawing them through a series of "hetchels" that had increasingly finer teeth. Also removed were the short coarse fibers known as tow. Tow was spun and woven into a coarse cloth or used in fire starting or in the cleaning of the family gun after the day's hunting.



At long last, the flax was ready to spin on the little or flax spinning wheel. The spinster sat at her work with her foot on the treadle of the spinning wheel. The treadle was connected to the flywheel crank arm by a stick that moves up



and down the edge of the wheel guide a double belt of strong thread. One loop of the belt drove the horseshoe-shaped flyer that did the actual twisting of fibers into thread. The other loop controlled the bobbin that collects the thread as it is spun. The diameter, amount of twist, and quality of the thread are in the hands of the spinster!

## WOOL

By the 1780s wool culture was becoming more common on the frontier. It began each spring with the shearing of the sheep. Some families washed the sheep three days before shearing to remove most of the dirt and grease that had accumulated in the fleece over the year that it had been protecting the sheep. Other families washed the wool in hot water and homemade soap after shearing. It was dried in the shade and then stored in bags until winter when there was more time to work on it, or the processing could begin immediately.



Young children 2 to 3 years of age were very qualified and often more than willing to pick or tease the clean wool. The fibers were easily pulled away from one another, allowing little bits of grass or other particulate matter to fall away from the wool. Burrs might have needed to be removed as well.

Older children then carded the wool. These often homemade tools consisted of a pair of rectangular paddles, both set thickly with wire teeth that curved back a little toward the handles. A small handful of clean wool is combed onto one of the cards. The other card is drawn across the wool. The wool is stroked between the cards until the fibers lay parallel to each other. Then it is ready to spin.



The little wheel used to spin flax was invented in Germany in 1503. The wheel favored by many American women to spin their wool is about 1000 years older in origin. It is the spindle wheel that evolved from the hand spindles used to spin threads for thousands of years. The wool, or big wheel, as the spinsters of old called it, was simply a hand spindle on its side supported by a post in a long bench and driven by a large flywheel and band. To use this kind of spinning wheel the spinster turned the fly wheel, with her right hand and controlled the diameter and amount of twist of her yarn as she walked first backward to spin the yarn and then forward to collect it on the spindle.





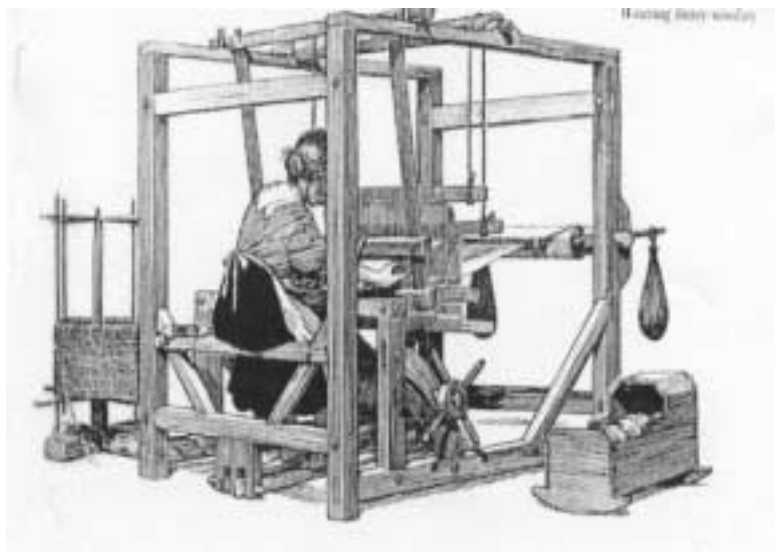
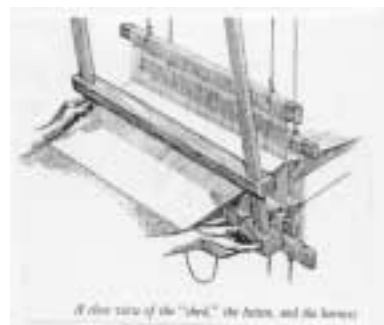
## DYE

Most often, color was put to the fibers after spinning and before weaving. Skeins of thread were scoured in hot water and soap so that they would be receptive to the chemicals of the dye processes. In a large pot over an outdoor fire, plant materials were cooked to cause them to release their magic. These plants may include black walnut hulls for brown, goldenrod plants for yellows or golds or greens, fermented sumac berries for gray, or perhaps even some indigo traded for to get blue. The thread may be cooked in a mordant solution, such as alum, copper, or iron before dyeing, or the mordant may be added to the dye bath. The mordant helps the fibers take and hold the color from the dye and can influence the color you can obtain from dye plants. After the threads have been cooked and stirred in the dye bath for an hour or so or until the desired hue has been obtained, they are removed from the solution, cooled, and washed free of excess dye. We are ready to weave them into cloth!

## WEAVING

On the frontier, most weaving was done at home or on a neighbor's loom. These looms were usually built by the family and were large, clumsy-looking affairs that rarely resided in the family's cabin. For plenty of light, they were set up in a barn, under an overhang, or in a separate building called a loom house. Cold weather and fall ended weaving each season and many looms were taken apart and stored until spring.

To warp a loom or prepare it for weaving, hundreds of threads, fifteen to twenty, or more, yards long were measured and wound onto the back or warp beam of the loom. One by one, in predetermined pattern, they were brought through heddles (string loops) and then the reed, and tied onto the front or cloth beam. The heddles are supported by frames that are attached to foot treadles, one treadle for each heddle frame. A brake on each of the two beams keeps the warp threads tightly stretched across the loom.



The weaver sits at the loom, presses down on the treadles in a repeat patterned way. The threads are lifted and lowered by this, allowing a shuttle carrying weft or wool thread to be carried back and forth among the warp threads forming a web of cloth. Each time the shuttle is thrown, the weaver pulls the battern or the beater bar towards her and the reed it carries presses the new thread into place against the new cloth. As the new cloth builds, the weaver must stop periodically, release both brakes, and roll the beams so that more threads come forward to be



woven and the finished cloth is collected on the front cloth beam.

Wool cloth, or the very popular linsey, also called linsey-woolsey (linen warp, wool weft, very sturdy, used less wool) needed to be fullled. This might be done at a fulling party. The cloth, fresh from the loom, was saturated in hot sudsy water. It was then thrown out on the puncheon floor of the cabin. The guests, sitting on stools and benches around the cloth, stomped on it with their bare feet. They entertained each other with songs, riddles, or stories to pass the time. When the party was over, the cloth was rinsed and hung or laid out to dry. It was at last ready to cut into pieces and sew into garments.

## ARTICLES OF CLOTHING

In 1794, a Methodist minister named Henry Smith traveled through the Monongahela area. In his journal, he wrote some interesting observations regarding the dress of the local people. This is an excerpt from his journal:

I pushed ahead through Clarksburg, and met my first appointment at Joseph Bennett's, about fifteen miles above Clarksburg. The people came to this meeting from four or five miles around and among them Joseph Chiveront, quite a respectable local preacher. They were all backwoods people and came to the meeting in backwoods style, all on foot, a considerable congregation. I looked around and saw one old man who had shoes on his feet. The preacher wore Native American moccasins, Every man, woman, and child besides was barefooted. Two old women had on short gowns, and the rest had neither short nor long gowns. This was a novel sight to me for a Sunday congregation....I did my best, and soon found if there were no shoes or fine dresses in the congregation, there were attentive hearers and feeling hearts.

Jacob Parkhurst was born in 1772 and lived with his family on North Ten Mile Creek in what is now Washington County, Pennsylvania. When he was 76 years old, he wrote his memoirs. These excerpts are of interest here:

About this time our living was venison and hominy with some mush and milk and some corn cakes ground on a hand-mill and sifted through a splinter sieve. Our common dress was tow linen or dressed deer skin, when we had clothes, but boys, such as I and my twin brother, till about 8 or 10 years of age, had to do with one long shirt a year, which came down to the calf of the legs. When that had worn out we had to go naked or nearly so, till the next crop of flax was manufactured into linen, which was done in the winter, for in the summer we had to live in the fort, and if we could manage to raise a little corn and potatoes we felt thankful for the supply for the winter. About in this manner we passed on, forting in the summer and staying home in the winter. The snow fell early, more than two feet deep, but we had not our new shirts yet; therefore the twin boys were nearly naked. I began to contrive for myself and accordingly I found a small deer skin that had been killed out of season, too thin to dress, so I put strings on it, turned the hair



side to my belly and wore it as an apron. Then I was well prepared to face the winter winds, my feet and legs still naked, and my old shirt all gone except for the collar and a few threads hanging around.



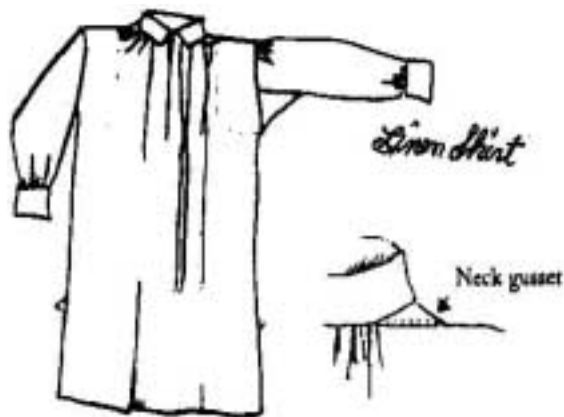
Where people lived had a lot to do with how they lived and dressed, what was considered necessary and what was available. A town did not always soon follow the backwoods cabin. Some areas remained isolated for decades. Conventions were often relaxed on the frontier if they conflicted with need. Just before the Revolution, Charles Woodsman describes his backwoods parishioners with dismay. Their dress is a “Great Novelty,” he writes. “The Women bareheaded, bare-legged and barefoot with only a thin Shift and under Petticoat--yet I cannot break [them] of this-- for the heat of the Weather admits not of any [but] thin Clothing.” A traveling Anglican minister, Woodsman had recently come from England, where such dress would have been most unusual and shocking to many. In the back-country America, it may not have been so unusual.

In many modern illustrations, the rugged pioneer hero appears clad from neck to toes in fringed buckskin. He did find leather the best covering for his legs, but unless nothing else was to be had, he did not use it for his hunting shirt as there is no colder and clammier garment than wet leather one. The basic garment of the man was his shirt. Most shirts were made of linen, the utilitarian material of the 18th century. It ranged in quality from very coarse and inexpensive to quite fine and bleached very white from the natural light brown of the flax from which linen was made. The everyday shirts of the working class and back-country men were lesser materials and usually without ruffles at the neck and sleeve. Many men in this time period managed quite well without the underdrawers worn by the rich. Instead, their shirts served as both outerwear and underwear. In view of the generous, mid-thigh or longer length of the shirt's tail, there was plenty of material to tuck down into their breeches, where the softer short fabric acted as a liner.





Knee breeches on the frontier were often saved for special events such as “marryin’s and buryin’s” and worship services. These pants tied or buttoned just below the knee, buttoned in front (no zippers yet!), and were gathered in the back. This back fullness allowed freedom of movement to sit or mount a horse, but the waist and knee bands stayed in place. For more durable, more protective lower body wear, pioneer men frequently opted for the breechcloth and leggings borrowed from the Native Americans. The cloth breechcloth and thigh high leather or wool leggings were held in place by a band around the waist.

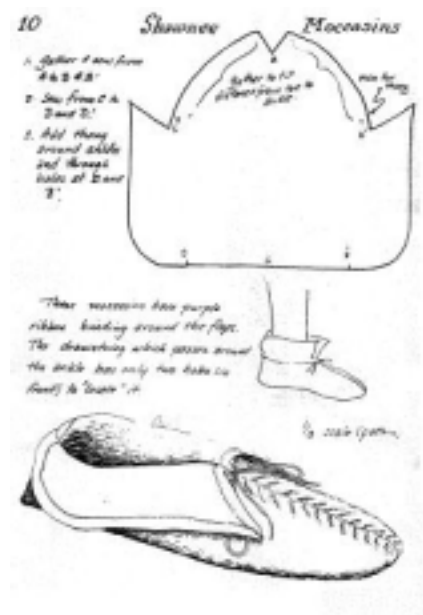


The hunting shirt was a loose garment without buttons, reaching halfway down the thighs and lapping over full width of the body in front. Its sleeves were generously wide. The collar was usually small or absent, but there was a shoulder cape with fringe. Sometimes there were two capes, one a bit smaller than the other. A belt held the hunting shirt closed. The overlap of the shirt in front served as a pocket in which a man carried some journey cake, pouch of parched corn, extra pair of moccasins, some jerky, or some tow. The belt also gave the wearer a place to tuck his mittens. He slung his tomahawk from its right side or at its back, and to its left side he attached the leather sheath of his big knife.

Moccasins, described as a decent way to go barefoot, were the same style as those worn by the Eastern Woodland Native American. They were one piece of leather sewed at the heel and a seam at the toe and called center seam moccasins. They were stuffed with leaves or deer hair or rabbit fur for winter wear. They wore out or at least needed to be patched very quickly when worn by the very active frontier men, women, and children.

“Back East” shoes with their hard soles made by a cobbler using a last and other specialized tools required great skill. They were, therefore, expensive and not often seen on the frontier. Those fortunate enough to own a pair saved them for special occasions to make them last for years! In winter, shoepacks were worn by many. The tops were high, 8 to 10 inches, but the foot part was adopted from the moccasin. Most shoepacks were had soles and were sturdier than moccasins. They could be made at home and did not require the skill of a professional cobbler.

In summer, farmers wore straw hats plaited by their wives from rye straw, corn husks, or rushes. When the weather got cold, headwear changed to knit

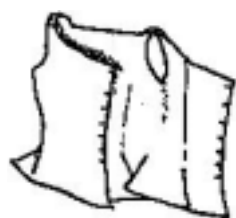




caps or fur hats. Some working men wore close fitting linen caps to keep their heads clean and to absorb sweat, keeping it from running in their eyes.

Stockings were mostly homespun and hand-knit of wool or linen, or rarely, of cotton in the back-country. Silk stockings were for the rich -- the very rich! Stockings were custom knit for the wearer and were mid-thigh in length for men, women, and children. Some people wore ill-fitting woven cloth stockings.

Women generally wore more layers of underwear in the late 18th century than we do today. A loose fitting white linen shift or chemise that had sleeves to the elbows and came to just below the knees was the undermost garment. Most English and American women did not wear under drawers or pantalets until the 19th century. Because shifts were worn at all times beneath a woman's clothing, they helped body oils and perspiration from soiling and staining the garments. Shifts were also worn as sleepwear. A poor women slept in the same shift she wore under her clothes in the daytime. Shifts were sewn with careful, close stitches that would not pull out under vigorous and frequent washings. The linen inner-most garment in the back-country may have indeed been linen or tow (coarser flax fabric) and perhaps even hemp! With little time to spare for the stylish bleaching of the linen, the frontier shift most likely began its life natural flax tan and grew whiter with washings.



*unboned jumps  
or  
bodice*

The next undergarment for nearly all English, and many American, women were her stays, jumps, or bodice. Boned stays were worn for support and to give the wearer the cone shape to her torso that was so fashionable. Stays were seen with and without shoulder straps and went from mid-breast to the waist, being laced tightly shut. Back East, many working women wore

stays as support garments, though their stays were not laced as tightly or boned as heavily as those worn for dress occasions. Women sometimes wore lighter support garments called jumps in place of stays. Unboned or partially boned bodices were worn informally at home or whenever a less stiff garment was required. Evidence indicates few stays in the back-country of the Trans-Allegheny frontier, as earlier quoted accounts report in this writing.

Women wore one or more petticoats. These resembled skirts but were not intimate undergarments, as petticoats are thought today. The work skirt does not commonly appear in reference to women's clothing until the 19th century. The length of petticoats ranged from shoe top to mid-calf. The former being more formal and the latter a more practical length for a woman at work, especially when working around her "stove," an open fire. At least one petticoat was worn as an upper petticoat and more in cold weather. Petticoats were woven linen, tow, and linsey-





wool. Upper petticoats had slits on each side to allow access to the pockets worn underneath. Pockets were a separate garment, usually in pairs on a cord around the waist. Pockets were sewn into men's clothing then much as they are today. The waist of most petticoats were closed by drawstrings, making them adjustable. That was a handy feature in a time before maternity clothes were seen! Quilted petticoats were wonderful for warmth in the winter.

Few gowns (which would have been worn on top of all the garments described above) are mentioned in first hand accounts in the back-country. Two jacket-like garments are referred to fairly often, especially in the middle colonies. Both short gown and the bed gown were commonly used as work garments for the lower classes. Both garments were simple to construct without set-in sleeves. The short gown had sleeves that end above the wrists and was pleated in the back. The short gown reached to the hips. The bed gown had no pleats, had turned back sleeve cuffs, and the bottom of the gown reached mid-thigh. Both of these gowns were often lined with light linen, the outer shell being linen, tow, or linsey. They were held shut by straight pins, ties, or concealed hooks and bars. Buttons were rarely seen on women's clothing, but seemed to have been reserved for men's garments.



The apron for the rural housewife was a very practical item of clothing and protected the petticoat from soiling. It was worn under the peplum of the short gown by some women and over it by others. Bed gowns were often overlapped in front and held shut by the apron being tied around. Aprons were of linen, tow, and occasionally linsey. They were any color, though white was sometimes saved for Sunday by the back-country women. Some aprons were woven stripes or checks. It was rare to find a woman at home without her apron on! She would appear strange, not fully clothed to those who saw her.



Head coverings and caps on the frontier varied often along the ethnic lines.

German style caps often featured long points on the cheeks, for instance. A scarf tied in a turban-like fashion was popular among French women. The English had any number of styles of day caps. In every case studied, caps were white, mostly of fine linen. Frontier ladies were known to tie a kerchief around their hair.

German, English, and many American women of the 18th century kept their hair covered, some for practical reasons. They were often working over an open fire and engaged in dusty work. Some kept their hair covered for religious reasons. (Check out 1 Corinthians 11 to understand how they felt about head coverings.) Some wore things on their heads to be fashionable! The kerchief was a part of the everyday clothing of the rural housewife. It was a square 22" to 36" folded in half to form a triangle and worn about the neck and over the shoulders, shawl-like. It was often snowy white for best occasions, but may be any color obtainable from the dyes at hand. It could be woven stripes, checks, or plaid. For warm weather, a single layer of triangular cloth was used. It was worn for modesty, warmth, or as a fashion statement. It



could be fine linen, tow, linsey, or wool. It may be worn with any other garment, such as the short gown, and pinned in front, or, the ends tucked into the front neckline of the short gown. The cap, kerchief, and, apron were worn as badges of womanhood.

When the weather grew cold beyond the edge of civilization, some frontier women may have wrapped themselves in a blanket as their Native sisters did. Peter Kalm wrote, “When they go out of doors they wear long cloaks, which cover all their outer clothes and are either gray, brown, or blue. Men sometimes make use of them when they are obliged to walk in the rain.” It is probably safe to assume these cloaks were not too common in the back-country. Also seen were capes and shawls, which required far less home-produced cloth than cloaks. Some pioneer women were known to wear their husband’s cast off hunting shirts or his capote (blanket coat).



Women’s footwear on the Trans-Allegheny frontier was almost while the men had to hunt, take their turn as scout, work the fields, and journey to Fort Pitt or Winchester, VA, to trade.

Children were simply dressed in shirts or shifts, depending on gender, until age eight or ten. Their garments were often remakes of a ruined adult piece of clothing or cut down. When past ten, they were dressed as their parents. Simple, practical, and economical were the keys to keeping 18th century back-country America clothed!



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