

Antebellum Household Appliances

By Louise Pettus

Most households, especially rural ones in the pre-Civil War period produced homespun cloth as they had in the "old country."

Small farms generally grew patches of cotton and flax and kept a few sheep to shear for wool. Farm families had to be self-sufficient and production of cloth usually occurred in the home.

Estate inventories and records reveal what types of tools and equipment families used.

An 1804 York District inventory, for instance, listed among the tools and items for sale at the estate auction: a bag of feathers, basket of blue cotton, a flax hackle, bed hangings and furniture, shoemaker's tools, loom and tackens, chick reel, diaper tablecloths, spool frame, treadles and temples, one blue rapper (wrapper) and one homespun striped habbit.

Many of the terms have lost their meanings, but research has revealed the use for many of these tools.

The term "tackens" was sometime spelled "tacklings" and has a nautical origin that refers to a system of ropes and weights arranged to provide tension to the loom. A chick reel was a small hand reel used to wind coarse thread.

The "tredle" was a treadle the operator pedaled to move the frame of the loom while the "temple" was a device that stretched the cloth so the selvages were even. Sometimes the term "heddles and temples" is used. Heddles were a set of cords that provided a guide track or path for the shuttle to separate the warp threads. In effect, the heddle controlled the horizontal threads while the temple controlled the vertical threads.

The manufacture of linen on the frontier was an outgrowth of the Scots-Irish experience in Northern Ireland. People on the frontier copied the tools and used the same names. The "hackles" was a basic weaving tool. It was a comb with parallel steel pins and was used to split and comb flax fibers—very similar to cotton cards.

Before the flax could be combed, the tough reeds had to be broken up and softened. This was done by a "beetle," a heavy timber set in a frame that was lifted manually and dropped with force over the reeds.

The "diaper table cloth" was a cloth woven in a special pattern. Either cotton or linen was used. Especially prized was diaper cloth that used contrasting colors for diamonds, for example red diamonds on a red background. If colors were used the term "florio" might be added. There was as much individuality in the frontier woman's weaving as we find today in homemade quilts.

Rough cloth was called "fustian" or "jean fustian." The basket of blue cotton was probably died with indigo and intended to make what we call denim or blue jeans. In the early 1800s jeans were a combination of rough cotton and linen. Plain jean cloth was a twilled cotton. It was often white and could be satin.

A "habbi," or habit, was a robe of some sort. It was probably a loose gown because the term "clinch Habit" meant a dressing gown drawn tightly at the waist.

The carding of cotton or wool, the spinning, dyeing and weaving was merely the preparation of the cloth for cutting and sewing.

It took many hands to clothe the people of a plantation. An 1817 estate inventory showed that a family of eight with 19 slaves had eight spinning wheels and two looms. With 27 people needing clothing and bedding there was probably no surplus cloth, but any surplus could easily be traded with other craftsmen of the neighborhood or with storekeepers.

John Springs had a store at Springfield plantation, north of Fort Mill. In the year 1808, Peter Perry brought Springs 94 yards of cloth and received 6 and one-fourth cents a yard. Springs' account book shows that over the year Perry traded the cloth for 9 gallons of whiskey , 5 quarts of salt and 7 bushels of corn and oats.

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