

The "Scarcity" of Textiles

In the original documents of American history much information regarding textiles remains to be gleaned. It might seem that the manuscripts and records from colonial days have been thoroughly researched by now -- and by professional historians. Textile scholars must keep in mind, however, that most professional historians have not been in the least interested in textiles, and so we do not find significant references to textiles in their works. But that only means that textiles don't appear in the secondary sources; the primary sources are rich with textile references. Because most of us seldom see anything other than secondary sources or writings about American history -where textiles hardly appear-we are left with the impression that textiles must have been scarce in the early days of our country.

The illusion of scarcity is supported by the fact that few very old textiles remain to be seen. Except those few which have been preserved in the clothing of celebrities, in fine furnishings, or occasionally in a piece of needlework or a special bedcover, most textiles wore out and were recycled as cleaning rags or materials for making paper. Many "ordinary" textiles were simply discarded at the end of their usefulness. Examples of 18th century fabrics are rare indeed.

A third factor that tends to obscure the presence of textiles in our history is the non-specific kind of language that historians have used. They speak of "merchants" without giving us an idea of what those merchants actually did. They mention "manufacturers," "craftsmen," "traders," also without enlightening the reader. They write of goods, "merchandise," and "cargoes" and leave specifics to the imagination.

A fourth cause of confusion in understanding the real place of textiles in the 17th and 18th century world lies in the changes that have occurred in our use of words. What a particular word means today may be quite different from what it meant three hundred years ago. Words that now have a quite general meaning were far more specific three centuries ago when they described a much smaller group of things.

For example, "manufacture" (which literally means hand-make) was understood before the 19th century to mean the hand weaving of textiles, the dyeing or finishing of textiles, or the making of men's clothing. At that time, textiles were by far the largest and most important category of things that were made. The other kinds of object-making were called by their specific names: as ship building, cart making, wood turning, glass making and iron working. Although the word manufacture occasionally included the making of shoes and hats, the general understanding -- and the way it should be understood in the old documents -was that it meant the making and finishing of cloth.

In 1705 Robert Beverly, the first native chronicler of Virginia, wrote:

"For Encouragement of Manufacturers, Prizes were appointed for the Makers of the best Pieces of Linnen and Woolon Cloth, and a reward of Fifty Pounds of Tobacco was given for each Pound of Silk."

and also,

"Sir Edmund Andros was a great Encourager of Manufactures. In his time Fulling-Mills were set up by Act of Assembly." (1)

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Late in the 18th century -- April 1777 -- Abigail Adams wrote to John Adams in Philadelphia:

"I seek wool and flax and can work willingly with my hands, and tho my Household are not cloathed with fine linen nor scarlet, they are clothed with what is perhaps full as Honorary, the plain and decent manufactory of my own family."(2)

The following month John responded:

'You will see by the enclosed Papers, among the Advertisements, how the Spirit of Manufacturing grows. There never was a Time when there was such full Employment, for every Man, Woman and Child, in this City, Spinning, Knitting, Weaving, every tradesman is as full as possible. Wool and Flax in great Demand."(3)

Similarly, in that textiles constituted the great preponderance of salable goods in those days, a merchant was understood to be one who dealt in textile trading in some way. He frequently traded in a variety of things, but he nearly always bought and sold textiles. The great London company, the Merchant Adventurers, an offshoot of the Mercers' Company, was chartered in the 14th century for the export of English woolen cloth to Europe. Not until two centuries later did they receive a charter to also explore and colonize in the New World. They were wool merchants first and foremost.

In the 17th century Boston, John Hull always wrote "Goldsmith" after his signature; he is noted today for being the first Master of the Mint, and for being America's first artist in silver. However, he actually spent most of his time and made most of his fortune by trading in textiles. He eventually owned a fleet of six ships that engaged in the Boston to West Indies to England to Boston triangular trade -- always bringing textiles on the England to Boston leg.(4) Although listed as a goldsmith, he was in fact a textile merchant.

Given these negative influences on thinking about textiles -- language changes, non-specific descriptions, lack of physical evidence, and disinterest of historians -- is it true that a real shortage of textiles existed?

For hundreds of years the major commodity produced in England was wool and woolen cloth. The production and manufacture of wool, from the Middle Ages to the 19th century, was so important to England that it influenced all her political decisions. When Englishmen traded, they traded English wool or cloth for something else. After Ireland was brought into the realm, linen was added to the trade, and then cotton from India and the southern states of America.

Within written history, the cloth trade of England has usually been described by the major items for which the textiles were traded; the tea trade, the spice trade, the tobacco and fur trades. It is the "fur" trade that I wish to discuss now, but in terms of the other half of the trading process, namely the blankets and cloth that were traded for furs.

In fur-gathering, unlike fishing, the English enterprisers did not themselves capture the animals. They contacted Indians who provided the pelts in exchange for English goods. This practice of bartering with Indians was often called "trucking" in the New England colonies, and there are many references to "truck houses" and 'trucking cloth" in early accounts. The direct barter system requires that each party have on hand goods wanted by the other. High on the list of goods wanted by Indians was woolen cloth in the form of blankets and clothing. This was fortuitous, as woolen cloth was exactly what England had most of. The fur trade could just as well be called the blanket trade, as furs went one way and blankets went the other.

The early English explorers and fishermen traded with the Indians of America whenever they could, as did also the Plymouth Pilgrims and the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay. In 1632 John Winter was sent by Robert Trelawny of Plymouth (England) to manage his fishing post at Richmond's Island near Saco, Maine. A considerable correspondence was carried on between the owner and his manager. The collection of letters and inventories from the twelve year period of the fishing station's existence, owned by

the Maine Historical Society, is extensive enough to give a good idea of the activities of the time and place. Richmond's Island was a sizeable community. As many as sixty men were employed as fishermen, and some had their families with them. Supplies initially came from England, although efforts were made to grow their own food. The fishing was not always good, and Winter from time to time turned to cloth-trading for furs.

Among John Winter's letters to England are these two reports (spelling modernized):

"the 5th of May 1634 -The Barnstable men bring such store of these goods here to the Country that I think they get but little by it, for I know some of them have had here Coats and Ruggs this 3 year and are not yet sold; their Ruggs are made very fit for the Indians use. The time of trading with the Indians is best when our time of fishing is, ...but this fishing season being ended, I do propose, God willing, to send our shallop to the eastward to put away some goods if they can. '(5)

"The 18th of June 1634 -
The dry goods Come well Conditioned, but there wanted 2 pair of shoes & 2 pair of stockings & 2 shirts of the account. The Coats are good, but somewhat of the shortest, for the Indians make Choice of the longest; they pass best; but the Coverlets are not for this Country; they will not pass to the English nor to the Indians, for they must have them soft & warm. ...The trading here abouts with the Indians is not worth any thing, for here is no Indians lives nearer unto us than 40 to 50 miles, ...I bought some Coats and Ruggs the last year after Captain Smart arrived into the Country, hoping to have put them away to the Indians the last winter & could not; but now have put away the Ruggs again and 2 of the Coats... (The traders here put goods away) at such easy Rates that I think they hardly get any thing by them: Coats at 2 pounds of beaver a piece; Irish stockings at 2 pounds of beaver per dozen, & good shirts and waistcoats at 1/2 pound of beaver apiecethe traders do one undersell another.. "(6)

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By the 18th century, trucking with the Indians had become a major occupation of the English and French in North America. The Massachusetts Bay colony set up a regular network of trucking stations and truckmasters. On July 14, 1703 the General Court approved a list of "Prices of goods supplied to the Eastern Indians by the Several Truck masters...", beginning:

"1 yd broad cloth (=)	3 Beaver skins
1 yd 1/2 Gingerline	1 Ditto
1 yd Pwd or Blue Kersey	2 Do
1 yd good Duffelle	1 Do
1 yd 1/2 bro. fine cotton	1 Do
2 yds of Cotton	1 Do
1 yd 1/2 of Half Thicks	1 Do"

Farther down the list are items of clothing, foodstuffs and iron digging tools.

In New York the trade used the Hudson River access to the interior, Albany being a major exchange point. The trade with Montreal,

"engaged in by many of Albany's leading citizens, required little effort or risk, but produced good profits. The basis for the trade with Montreal was the inability of the French to acquire within their own system the excellent trading goods that the Western Indians desired, especially the kind of woolen blanketing known as strouds. ...The French merchants of Montreal sent bundles of fine furs to Albany and received in exchange good English woolens. The woolens, in turn, were sent from Montreal into the west, where they obtained still more furs." (8)

This same author says that duffells, a "finer and more expensive woolen fabric," was also wanted by the Indians, and that they were quite particular about the kinds of blankets they would trade for, preferring dark blue to a light type which tended to fade. He quotes Cornelis Cuyler, an Albany Merchant who wrote to his agent in London in 1732:

"The strouds which you have now sent me are Course Refuse old musty strouds, good for nothing..."(9)

And in 1734 Cuyler complained again:

"as for the four Blankets, which I have received by Capt. Stephens ...the Indians Dont Like them Beter than other new fashion Blankets, Because they are to Narrow for their Lenght, Neither is the stripe good, and no Markes as the french Blankets have, and not thick enough ."(10)

In the same year Philip Livingston wrote that the Indians were "a strange wimsecall people" who "will have good Choise goods and do understand them to perfection." (11)

William Johnson in 1752 wrote to his agent that the blankets sent him --

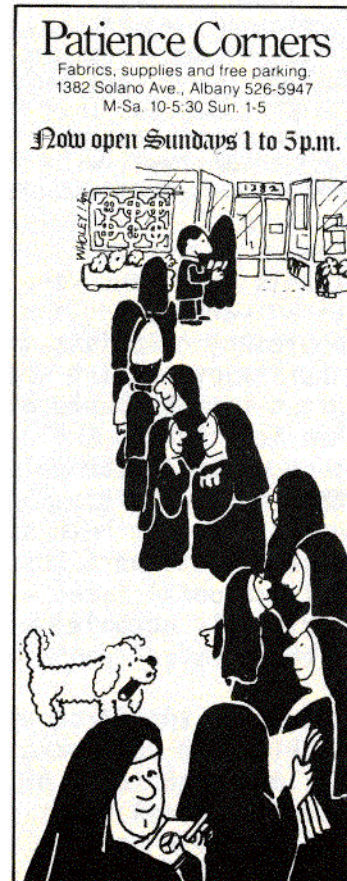
"were woven too Cloose, & the Wool too short & Coarse. besides the letters, and other marks, Selvage &ca were not exactly the Same of the Pattern, nor so neat, all which the Indians are verry curious In."(12)

So the blanket trade continued, gradually moving westward and becoming American instead of English. It was still going strong in the 19th century. In December of 1809 the ship

Derby, James Bennett, master, left Boston bound for the "North West Coast of America and Canton." Her cargo, "adventured in" by three Boston merchants, consisted of:

2060 pairs of woolen blankets valued at.....	\$12,101.46
11,984.5 yards of heavy woolen cloth worth.....	23,412.43
15 bales of Gurrahs (muslin).....	4,380.00
173 items of men's clothing.....	587.59
Other miscellaneous textiles.....	109.67
Total value of textiles in the cargo was.....	\$40,591.15

The remainder of the cargo worth \$16,483., consisted primarily of guns, molasses, rice and bread.(13) Textiles, therefore, made up 71% of the cargo, and blankets alone accounted for one-fifth of the goods carried by the Derby. The regular route at that time was around the Horn to south-western Canada with blankets and woolens to trade for furs, then to China with furs to trade for tea and porcelain to carry back to Boston. Such journeys often took two years or more to complete, but still brought excellent profits to the Boston merchants.



After examining even briefly this one kind of trade, I begin to realize that for a good 200 years blankets, textiles and clothing were the most important commodity in our colonial and national trade. Most histories do not give us any idea of that. It is necessary to go back to the original sources -- letters, account books, inventories, advertisements, and the like. When we do, and find out how prominent textiles were in the lives of our forebears, we must reassess the idea of constant scarcity of textiles in colonial times.

Most of the plantations in the American colonies did undergo hard times at first. However, it was the intent and stated policy of the wool-producing mother country to sell as much fabric as possible to the colonists. At the same time, it became the policy of the colonists to become self-sufficient in cloth production. In 1661 the English Council for Foreign Plantations reported that Massachusetts had --

"increased a Stocke of Sheepe to the number of neere one hundred thousand Sheepe, whereby not only this Nation & ye manufac-ture thereof are become less necessary to them but they are likely to be so stored with wool that the Dutch who trade freely with them, may supply themselves from thence." (14)

To combat this trend and keep the expanding American market, England passed many laws to prevent colonists from growing, manufacturing or selling woolens and linens. English textiles were often sold cheaper in America than in England as another way of encouraging the colonists to buy rather than make fabrics. Ship building was going on apace on both sides of the Atlantic, and ports were bustling from very early colonial times -- from all indications primarily occupied with the transport of textiles.

All in all, after the first years of Jamestown and Plymouth settlements, it does not seem likely that any of the colonies experienced a real shortage of cloth. The

primary sources of information appear to indicate the opposite -- that there was a great deal of fabric available. In order to throw more light on this question, much more research into original documents is needed.

--Sally Garutte
TEXTILE EDITOR

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