

## ABOUT COTTON FABRIC WIDTH

I used to think that the older the fabric the narrower it was likely to be, and that one could use the width of cloth as a general guide to its age. But such is not the case.

As recently as 1942 when 36 inches was the most commonly found fabric width, Sears, Roebuck and Co. advertised in their Winter catalogue: "Shaker Flannel--for outdoor sleeping garments, winter sheets--27 inch and Cotton plisse--cool, soft, permanently crinkled--width, 29 inches."

In their 1902 catalogue the same company advertised cotton dress goods with widths of 25, 26, 29, 30, 32, 33, 36, 40 and 68 inches. Silks were offered in widths of 18, 21, 24, 27 and 44 inches. Wool and wool-and-silk yardage listings included widths of 22, 36, 38, 40, 42, 46, 48 and 50 inches. With such a variety of widths, it is not possible to say that any particular measure was the standard of the time.

Although there were no mail-order catalogues in England in the 18th century, a remarkable record of the then available dress materials exists in the form of an "album" kept by Barbara Johnson between 1746 and 1823. This album is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. However, a complete photographic record of the album is in the files of Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia where I obtained this information.

Barbara Johnson was born in Buckinghamshire, England, in 1738. The album begins in 1746. For seventy-seven years Miss Johnson fastened into her album small swatches of the cloth used for her clothing, with a date and a brief note written by each swatch. Mostly she recorded a description of the fabric and the kind of finished garment. "Flowered cotton jacket" (1747), "red and white linen short sacks" (1754), "Purple and white copper plate linen gown" (1771)--are examples of the earlier notations.

As the years passed, Miss Johnson began recording the width of the fabrics. Some of her entries read:

- 1778--Chintz (gown) ell wide"
- 1779--"Chintz (gown) & petticoat, ell wide"
- 1780--"Calico (gown) ell wide"
- 1781--English chintz, ell wide"
- 1781--"Red and white chintz (gown & petticoat) yard wide"
- 1789--"Ell side calicoe (gown & petticoat)"
- 1796--three entries of "calicoe for gown, ell wide"
- 1812--"A blue spotted muslin (gown) ell wide"
- 1813--"Purple calico (gown) 3 quarters wide"

Although 'yard wide' is occasionally mentioned, an ell is the most frequent unit of cloth width used by Miss Johnson. An English ell is equal to 45 inches.

Thus it can be seen, though the documentation provided by Barbara Johnson's album so faithfully kept, that cotton fabric was hand-loomed two centuries ago in the same width we most frequently find in the fabric stores of today.

--Sally Garoutte--  
Mill Valley, CA

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