

Fiber Production and Processing

Five kinds of fiber were grown with varying degrees of success in the American colonies: flax, hemp, cotton, wool, and silk. European settlers cultivated several types of plant fibers, the most important of which in Pennsylvania were the bast fibers—flax, used for linen clothing and household textiles and, less extensively, hemp, which was coarser than flax and used for rope and canvas.⁷ Cotton is a shorter fiber than flax or hemp and comes from a different type of plant. By the mid-eighteenth century, the warm climate of South Carolina induced farmers to cultivate cotton for domestic use in lightweight clothing and household textiles; by the end of the century, cotton had become an important staple crop and an item of export. Wool from sheep to make warm bedding and clothing was found most extensively in the colder, northern colonies, and the production of silk from a silk worm and used for luxury fabrics was attempted on an experimental basis throughout British North America. Because silk was even more labor-intensive to manage than the other fibers, it was not commercially suc-

Depending on the amount of land to be planted, a person could either do all the work alone or hire someone to do the job.³⁷ Men were responsible for plowing the flax and hemp fields, which they did in conjunction with their other agricultural activities, but women as well as men sowed the seed.³⁸

Throughout the growing period, the flax required regular weeding to ensure long, strong fiber. Even this seemingly simple job required skill. As it was in Europe at the time, weeding was probably the job of women and children. Aldred urged caution in the kind of workers one employed, however, and warned against the use of “young and unskillful persons [as they] frequently pull up and spoil the flax,” and if children worked at this task “they ought to be mixed with those [people] of more experience.”³⁹

Hood, Adrienne D. *The Weaver's Craft: Cloth, Commerce, and Industry in Early Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2003. 41, 42, 47