

Spinning

The spinning wheel has become the icon for the colonial era, although it was by no means a ubiquitous tool.⁶ As we have seen, the majority of households did not have fiber, and those who grew it had to either sell it or make further investments in equipment and time to spin it into yarn. Moreover, although yarn making was the responsibility of women, not all were proficient at the task, nor did all households have the spinning and yarn-winding equipment with which to perform the work. Averaged over the eighteenth century, about 60 percent of Chester County decedents had these devices listed among their personal property. That so many households (40 percent) did not have these tools was partly because not all women knew how to spin or they were wealthy enough to hire others to do it, and partly because spinning equipment required a lot of expertise to make and usually had to be purchased. Some women inherited their wheels, but, like any items used regularly, the tools needed replacement as they wore out. When this happened in Chester County, people could buy imported wheels, purchase them from Philadelphia artisans, or obtain them from the professional spinning-wheel makers working in the county.⁷ In any case, as with fiber processing devices, spinning equipment represented a further capital investment.

Spinning wheels were specialized tools. Most wheels were designed and built to accommodate the different properties inherent in flax and wool. In addition, another apparatus, a reel used for winding and measuring the finished yarn, usually accompanied spinning equipment. Finally, the majority of the households engaged in spinning had more than one wheel on which to spin both fibers, or to allow several people to work at the same time.

Spinning was one of the core components of female training and culture, transmitted from generation to generation. Indeed, even the terminology for various parts of the wheel reinforces the gendered nature of spinning (see Fig. 11). Most obvious is the *distaff* that holds the flax for spinning—a word now associated with a woman's side of the family. But the names for the spindle and bobbin mechanism were also female oriented; the uprights that held it were called the *maidens*, the yarn was threaded through an *orifice*, and the entire unit was called the *mother of all*.

Women could learn how to produce serviceable yarn in several ways. The most common method was for a mother to train her young daughters, for as soon as her children could operate a wheel, they expanded the family labor force. Some women became apprentices, with formal indentures, to learn the skill from people outside their families. Elizabeth England “put her Daughter Apprentice unto Nathaniel Jefferies of East Bradford . . . to Learn to Sew, & Spin.” As part of the agreement, Jefferies was to teach the girl to read and write and give her “Two Suits of Cloths one intire New.”²⁴ Because he failed to comply with these terms, England took him to court in 1772.²⁵

Once trained, females would spin for their own use, for wages, or for both, regardless of their marital status. Women who could spin, with access to the appropriate equipment, would have performed the work when they could fit it around other household duties.