

Spinning, Weaving, Cloth

We never had an interior trade of any importance. Our exterior commerce has suffered very much from the beginning of the present contest. During this time we have manufactured within our families the most necessary articles of cloathing. Those of cotton will bear some comparison with the same kinds of manufacture in Europe; but those of wool, flax and hemp are very coarse, unsightly, and unpleasant: and such is our attachment to agriculture, and such our preference for foreign manufactures, that be it wise or unwise, our people will certainly return as soon as they can, to the raising raw materials, and exchanging them for finer manufactures than they are able to execute themselves.—*Jefferson in The Notes on the State of Virginia, 1787.*

THE spinning wheel, the common loom, and the hand card made up the machinery of Jefferson's spinning establishment during the early years at Monticello. It was not until 1811 that he purchased from William Maclure a Spinning Jenny and a loom with flying shuttle to add to his shop. Mr. Maclure had settled near Monticello, under Jefferson's auspices, in order to teach Jefferson's people the art of spinning and weaving.

Before the War of 1812, Jefferson bought from merchants most of the coarse cloth, all of the fine cloth and blankets, for the use of his plantations. The embargo of 1808-1809 and the War of 1812 so completely cut off the importation of goods to the United States that Jefferson, along with other planters, was compelled to resort to more home manufacture. During the War of 1812 Jefferson greatly increased his business of home manufacture. Writing to Thaddeus Kosciuszko, on June 28, 1812, he says, ". . . my household manufactures are just getting into operation on the scale of a Carding machine costing 60. Dollars only, which may be worked by a girl of 12. years old, a Spinning machine, which may be made for 10. Dollars, carrying 6. spindles for wool, to be worked by a girl also, another which can be made for 25. Dollars, carrying 12. spindles for cotton, & a loom, with a flying shuttle, weaving it's 20. yards a day. I need 2000. yards of linen, cotton, & woolen yearly, to cloathe my family, which this machinery, costing 150. Dollars only, and worked by two women & two girls, will more than furnish. . . ." Earlier in the year Jefferson had ordered two improved spinning

machines, one from Ebenezer Herrick and the other one from Oliver Barrett. The Herrick machine arrived at Monticello in July, but the Barrett machine did not reach Monticello until early in 1813. Because of their complexities the Barrett and Herrick machines proved so unsatisfactory that Jefferson continued to use the simpler Spinning Jennies that could be repaired by his own workmen.

Early in 1813 Jefferson bought from the firm of Alrichs & Dixon a hand-carding engine for carding cotton. Hand-carding was so laborious that the carders were unable to keep up with the spinners. Writing to Richard Fitzhugh, in the spring of 1813, Jefferson remarks, ". . . we still want carding machines in our neighborhood working at such moderate prices as to relieve us from hand-carding. with this convenience the clothing our family would be a thing really of neither trouble nor expence. . . ." In this same letter to Mr. Fitzhugh, Jefferson mentions that at Monticello, ". . . We have in our family (including my daughter's) three spinning Jennies agoing, of 24. & 40. spindles each which can spin 11. pounds of coarse cotton a day, and our loom fixed with flying shuttles, which altho' they do not perform the miracles ascribed to them, do, I think double the effect of the common loom. . . ."

During the following years Jefferson became interested in other improved spinning machines, looms, and carding machines. They were either too complex in their machinery or their prices were too high for him to buy them. He continued to use the simpler Spinning Jennies and looms of the kind that he had purchased from Mr. Maclure in 1811. By 1814 he had four of the Spinning Jennies running, three of them with twenty-four spindles and one of them with forty spindles. For weaving coarse cloth he had two common looms with flying shuttles.

Spinning and weaving, as the following letters tell, became an important occupation at Monticello and Poplar Forest, especially from 1811 until a few years before Jefferson's death. Cotton, wool, flax, and hemp were the four kinds of fibers used in the manufacture of cloth. Cotton was by far the most important of the four. This fiber being difficult to buy, especially after the farmers of Albemarle and most of the other counties of the state stopped growing it, wool, flax, and hemp partially took its place. See "Spinning," "Spinning Jennies," "Spinning Wheels," and "Weaving," in the *Garden Book*.

Jefferson, Thomas, and Edwin M. Betts. *Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book, with Commentary and Relevant Extracts from Other Writings*. Charlottesville: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1999.