Daily Life of the Colonial Woman

The early colonial households were almost 100 percent self-sufficient. Except for some sugar or linen goods which arrived occasionally by ship, everything a family had was produced in the home, and more likely than not it was produced by the woman. Life for the colonial woman was an unending string of chores—none of which could be ignored. If a woman was lucky enough to have several older children, they helped with these chores. Still, the main responsibility for getting everything done was hers.

Heat and Light

Central to the household was the fireplace. Everything depended on it, and it is not surprising that many chores involved its use. Therefore, keeping the fire going was of prime importance. Starting a fire from flint and steel was extremely tricky, taking a half an hour or more. Consequently, it was much better to make sure the fire never went out. At night the coals were banked and in the morning blown into a flame. Gathering wood, splitting it, and stacking it all became a woman's job although splitting the larger pieces was usually done by the husband. Cleaning the fireplace was a daily chore since ashes accumulated quickly in a fire that burned constantly.

A colonist relied on a variety of candles all of which needed attention. Rushlights were made by soaking the pith of a dried rush in grease. This was then held by the jaws of a special holder. The making of the rushlight and the constant tending of the light as it burned down was a chore. Candles eventually replaced these crude lamps, but it took a lot of time to make them. Tallow, a fat extract from sheep and cattle, was melted in a kettle and wicks tied to a pole were dipped, cooled, and dipped again repeatedly until a candle of sufficient thickness formed. This job was seasonal, usually being performed in the autumn when animals were slaughtered. It was an all-day job for several days because enough candles needed to be made to last a year. On a good day a woman could make a couple hundred candles.

Cooking

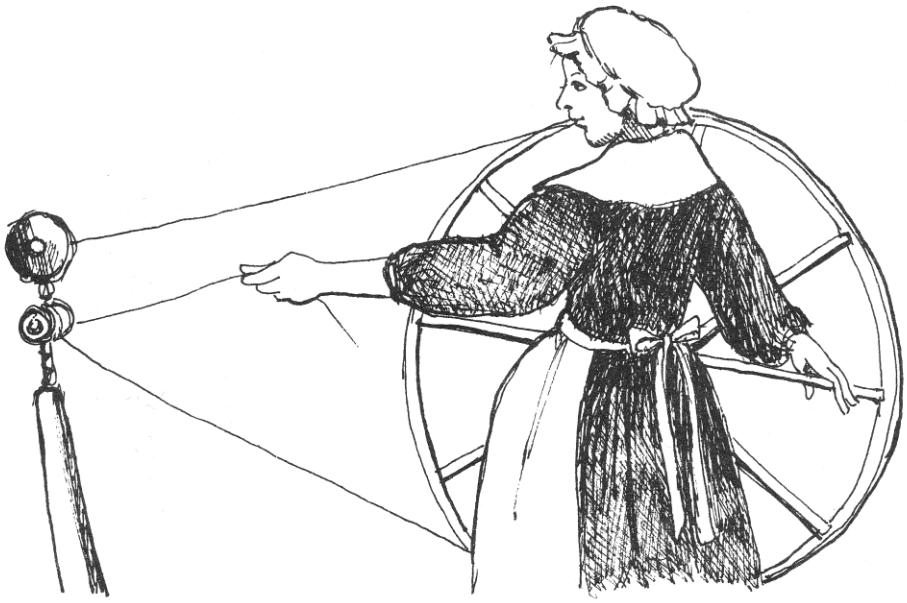
Cooking was a never-ending job. Everything the family ate had to be made from scratch. Corn had to be milled either with a samp mortar or with a small mill called a *quern*. The resultant corn-meal was used in the making of porridges, puddings, and breads. These meals, along with stews, made up the main fare on a daily basis. They required less tending than the more elaborate fried or broiled meats which required constant turning and tending to prevent burning. While a kettle of stew simmered, a woman was free to do other cooking-related tasks such as milking the cow, churning the butter, tending the garden in the summer, helping to slaughter animals in the autumn, as well as salting or smoking the meat.

Clothing

No one living in the colonies had the wardrobe found in today's homes. The average wardrobe consisted of two sets of clothing per person. All clothing was made in the home and involved many separate jobs.

If wool were used, it had to be first washed and dried and usually dyed at this time. Dying, of course, required the gathering and preparing of specific plants which was another chore. The washing and dying took out many natural oils so the dried wool needed to be saturated with oil or lard before being carded. Carding fluffed the wool making it possible to spin it (i.e., twist it into thread). Not every household had a spinning wheel, so in many cases a hand spindle had to do. The thread that was produced was woven on a loom into cloth about 30 inches wide. Three yards of cloth 30 inches wide was a good day's weaving. Finally with cloth available, the clothes could be hand sewn to fit any member of the household; blankets were also made in this fashion.

Flax was used to make linen and involved a 20-step process. These steps were so heavy handed and time consuming that they were often left for winter work when both the husband and wife could be involved. Flax was not commercially grown in New England until 1640 and wool production began after that. Consequently, people wore their clothes until they were literally worn out. It is no wonder that some of the first trades that developed in the colonies involved the making of clothing.



Cleaning

Besides cleaning the fireplace, general sweeping was as constant a job as cooking. Muddy boots and shoes tracked in plenty of dirt, requiring the floor to be swept several times daily. Cookware was also cleaned regularly (though not nearly as regularly as today's pots and pans cleaned in the sink or dishwasher). To do this task required water which, of course, had to be hauled in from outside. Therefore, early colonists built their homes near streams or lakes. Later, wells were dug. Either way the only method of getting the water was by a bucket at a time.

Bathing was infrequent by today's standards. Water in a bowl splashed upon the face and hands was the norm. Soap was used but had to be made in the home—once again by the woman. Ashes from the fire were layered in a barrel with straw. Water poured over this leached out lye. The lye was then combined with grease in a kettle and cooked (most definitely in the open air because of the unbelievably horrible odor) and stirred constantly. As it boiled down, a soft soap formed. If hard soap were needed, salt was added. This soap could then be used for the cleaning of clothing, although, again, this was much more infrequent than today.

Where Were the Men?

Considering all the work being done by women, one might conclude that the men were lazy sluggards living off the toil of their wives. This is a tempting conclusion but not valid. The success of living off the land depended upon getting crops planted. The rocky and unyielding soil of New England combined with the very poor farm tools available made planting and growing crops backbreaking work. Fields had to be cleared of trees using axes not designed for such work. Stumps had to be dug out and removed. The soil had to be prepared using a wooden plow that could barely turn over the soil without breaking. In addition planting, harvesting, threshing, mending tools, keeping the house weather tight and digging wells filled up the typical man's day.

The division of labor we often associate with men and women today may very well not have existed in colonial America especially in the seventeenth century. Numerous researchers refer to the relationship between husband and wife as a partnership. Both wanted to succeed and shared the labor (enough of which to keep 10 people busy). In the end, a woman in colonial America could be found helping with harvest as easily as a man could be found making soap.

Required Other Duties

The chores of the keeping of a household did not stop here. Whatever arose that needed to be done became part of daily life. Infants and very young children needed to be tended and watched. Later their education became the woman's duty. If a household kept bees, which many did, beekeeping was added to the list. When things broke or tore, mending was necessary.

Not only were there a large number of jobs, but most jobs were quite difficult. In fact, very few jobs involved just one step. Arriving at a finished product such as clothing, soap, or a meal involved many tasks. The women colonists of New England during the seventeenth century took on all or most of these chores. Indentured servants helped relieve the woman of some of this work but only if she were wealthy enough to purchase one. In the South, where plantations were staffed by slaves, women were involved less with daily chores but were more responsible for overseeing the work. Plantations were much larger and their operations much more involved. Consequently, a woman living on a southern plantation still had a full day's work.

Into the eighteenth century, village life began to change the amount and type of work for women. Men who had worked a farm now practiced a trade or a business in the village. Consequently, bartering and purchasing made it possible to obtain items that earlier were only made in the home. Women became involved in the businesses; and if their husbands died, they may even have run them.

The Role of a Woman in Colonial America

Many women came to America to find a better life. They were indentured servants (in some cases auctioned off for tobacco), who faced many hardships. These hardships included not only the unending work described in this chapter but many others as well.

The first leading cause of death was childbirth. There were no doctors or hospitals. Children were born with the help of a midwife, if they were lucky. The cold and unstable environment of New England and the high incidence of disease in the South were hazards for both the mother and child. Men generally outlived women in colonial times. Women, however, who made it past their childbearing years usually outlived their husbands. Nonetheless, the high death rate of infants only added to the grief of a colonial woman's life.

Since the colonial woman worked so closely with the fire, she often risked dangerous burns. It was not uncommon for these burns to create infections that led to death. In fact, the second leading cause of death for the colonial woman was infection caused by burns.

The life of a colonial woman was a paradox. In the early colonial days men and women were more partners in the effort to succeed on the farm. Laws were developed that specifically called for the sharing of property equally and for the caring of widows should the husband die. As time progressed and the move was made to towns and cities, the role of women in the household changed as did their status. Legally, they became inferior to men. By law they could not vote or hold office. In some colonies they could not own a business. Marriage was expected of all young women, and staying unmarried was a social scandal. Religion, which dominated some communities like that of the Puritans, further promoted the inferiority image. It was the women, after all, who were always accused of witchcraft–never the men. In reality, however, women were strong, inventive, and courageous in the early colonial times; and they were often the brains, innovation, and drive behind a successful businessman in later years.