The Colonial Hearth

Spinning the First Threads of a Nation · 1600–1760

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

GUIDING QUESTION

Was colonial cloth-making a private household chore or a public duty controlled by government?

PART 1

Before you read

1. Read the guiding question. Write down what you already know, or think you know, about it.

2. Predict one way your answer might change after reading the sources.

PART 2

Read

In the early colonies, textile production was a matter of survival. The hearth was the center of the industrial world, and every household a producer—turning fields of flax and flocks of sheep into the shirts, sheets, and blankets of a fragile new society.

English and Dutch settlers arrived with sheep, flax seed, and the embodied knowledge of village craft. Production was localized, manual, and deeply seasonal. Carding, spinning, and weaving were daily chores braided into cooking, dairying, and childcare. Colonial governments alternately encouraged and commanded this work: when English supplies faltered in the 1640s, the Massachusetts General Court urged towns to multiply their sheep, and in 1656 it assessed every family a quota of spinning. Britain's mercantilist policy, by contrast, sought to keep the colonies as buyers rather than makers of cloth. The Wool Act of 1699 did not forbid colonists to weave, but it barred them from shipping woolen goods out of any colony, even to a neighboring one. This tension—between domestic self-sufficiency and imperial dependence—planted political seeds that would flower in the 1760s and established the 'homespun' tradition that later became a weapon of protest.



Spinning in the colonial American kitchen, where nearly all household cloth began. Engraving from Joel Dorman Steele and Esther Baker Steele, "A Brief History of the United States" (1885). Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

PART 3

Timeline

For each event, write one sentence on why it mattered.

1643 — **The Rowley Fulling Mill**
At Rowley, Massachusetts, settled in 1639 by Yorkshire cloth-workers, a fulling mill begins finishing homespun woolens-traditionally counted as the first in the English colonies.

1645 — **The Massachusetts Sheep Order**
The General Court urges every town to preserve and increase its sheep and asks colonists to have more brought from England, to ease dependence on imported cloth.

1656 — **The Spinning Order**
Massachusetts assesses each family for a whole, half, or quarter spinner; a whole spinner owes three pounds of yarn a week for thirty weeks a year, on pain of a fine.

1699 — **The Wool Act**
Parliament forbids the export of wool and woolen manufactures from the American colonies, even to other colonies, to protect English clothiers.

1750

The Iron Act

Parliament bars new colonial slitting and rolling mills and steel furnaces—another sign of the imperial rule that colonies supply raw materials rather than finished goods.

PART 4

Key terms

Write the letter of the matching definition beside each term.

_____ **Homespun**

_____ **Mercantilism**

_____ **Selectmen**

_____ **Fulling**

_____ **Flax**

A. Cloth spun and woven at home rather than bought from a merchant or factory.

B. A plant whose stem fibers are spun into linen thread; one of the most common fibers grown on colonial farms.

C. An economic system in which a nation controls trade with its colonies so that the home country gains the most wealth.

D. Elected officials who ran the day-to-day business of a New England town.

E. Beating and washing woven wool so the fibers shrink and lock together into a thicker, stronger cloth.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

These excerpts are quoted word for word, including the spelling and language of their time.

DOCUMENT A

Order of the Massachusetts General Court on Spinning

Massachusetts General Court, 1655

> That all hands not necessarily imployed on other occasions, as Women, Girls and Boyes, shall and hereby are enjoyned to Spin according to their skill and ability; and that the Select men in every Town do consider the condition and capacity of every family, and accordingly do assess them at one or more Spinners; ... And every one thus aforesaid, for a whole Spinner, shall for time to come, Spin every Year for thirty Weeks, three pound a Week of Linnen, Cotton or Woollen, and so proportionably for half and quarter Spinners, under the penalty of twelve pence a pound short.

Context: Facing a shortage of imported English cloth, the Massachusetts Bay colony's legislature turned household spinning into a legal obligation enforced by town officials. The order shows that the "homespun" economy was organized and policed by government, and that it depended on the labor of women and children.

Source: Labor and Trade in Colonial America (Beyond the Textbook). TeachingHistory.org, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media. 1655-. https://teachinghistory.org/history-content/beyond-the-textbook/labor-and-trade-in-colonial-america/

Historical context

What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience

Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose

Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view

Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

DOCUMENT B

The Wool Act

Parliament of England (10 & 11 William III, c. 10), 1699

> Whereas great quantities of the like manufactures have of late been made, and are daily increasing in the kingdom of Ireland, and in the English plantations in America, and are exported from thence to foreign markets, heretofore supplied from England ... be it further enacted ... no wool, woolfells, shortlings, mortlings, woolflocks, worsted, bay, or woollen yarn, cloth, serge, bays, kerseys, says,

> friezes, druggets, cloth-serges, shalloons, or any other drapery stuffs, or woollen manufactures whatsoever, made or mixed with wool or woolflocks, being the product or manufacture of any of the English plantations in America, shall be loaden or laid on board in any ship or vessel, in any place or parts within any of the said English plantations, upon any pretence whatsoever.

Context: Parliament passed the Wool Act to protect England's woolen industry, its largest export, from colonial competition. The law did not ban colonists from making cloth for themselves, but it barred them from exporting it, a core example of mercantilist trade policy.

Source: Colonial Trade Laws (Legal Studies 261 open text). University of Wisconsin-Madison. 1699-. https://wisc.pb.unizin.org/ls261/chapter/ch-2-2-colonial-trade-laws/

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Corroborate
Compare "Order of the Massachusetts General Court on Spinning" (Massachusetts General Court, 1655) with "The Wool Act" (Parliament of England (10 & 11 William III, c. 10), 1699). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. What did the 1655 Massachusetts order require a "whole Spinner" to produce each year, and who decided how many spinners each family owed?

2. Who wrote each of these laws, and whose economic interests was each written to protect?

3. The Massachusetts order pushed colonists to make more cloth; the 1699 Wool Act forbade them from shipping it. How might a colonial family in 1700 have experienced both laws at once?

4. Governments today still use laws to encourage or restrict domestic manufacturing, such as tariffs and "Buy American" rules. Is it fair for a government to tell households or businesses what to produce or where they can sell it? Use both documents to support your argument.

PART 7

Write: claim, evidence, reasoning

Answer the guiding question in one paragraph, using the documents and the reading.

Claim	Answers the guiding question directly in one or two sentences.
Evidence	Cites at least two primary sources by name and at least one fact from the reading.
Reasoning	Explains how each piece of evidence supports the claim.
Sourcing	Notes at least one limitation of a source: who made it, when, and why.

PART 8

Exit ticket

1. In one sentence, how would you answer the guiding question now?

2. What piece of evidence would most change your mind?

Keep exploring

MATERIAL CULTURE

The Agony of Flax

The long, many-stage process that turned a blue-flowered plant into a linen shirt.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/agony-of-flax

INNOVATION

Two Wheels, Two Worlds

How the great wheel and the flax wheel divided the colonial household.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/great-wheel-flax-wheel

IMPACT

Sheep, Statutes, and Survival

How colonial law conscripted the household into a textile economy.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/homespun-economy

SOURCES AND CREDITS

Susan M. Ouellette. All Hands Are Enjoined to Spin: Textile Production in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts. University of Massachusetts Amherst (doctoral dissertation). 1996. https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_1/1224

Wool Act 1698 (10 Will. III c. 16), section XIX. legislation.gov.uk (The National Archives, UK)-. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/aep/Will3/10/16/section/XIX/enacted

Primary Sources: British Regulation of Colonial Manufacturing. American Legal History to the 1860s (University of Wisconsin). https://wisc.pb.unizin.org/ls261/chapter/ch-2-2-colonial-trade-laws/

The Jewel Mill and Stone Arch Bridge. Historic Ipswich. 2023-. https://historicipswich.net/2023/03/29/jewel-mill-and-bridge-rowley/

Image: Engraving from Joel Dorman Steele and Esther Baker Steele, "A Brief History of the United States" (1885). Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

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