The Revolutionary Loom

Homespun as Political Defiance · 1760–1789

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

GUIDING QUESTION

Did homespun cloth help win American independence, or did it mainly make patriotism visible?

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

As tensions with Britain rose, the spinning wheel became a symbol of liberty. To flaunt British finery was to invite suspicion; to wear homespun was to declare allegiance. The quarrel with the empire was argued, in part, in clothes of American making.

Following the Stamp Act and the Townshend duties, colonial non-importation agreements pushed Americans to expand their own production. Between 1768 and 1770, women gathered by the dozens for spinning meetings—usually at a minister's house—that newspapers reported as patriotic demonstrations, turning a domestic chore into a public political act. In 1768 the Connecticut Courant reported that Harvard's graduating class had resolved to take their degrees in homespun. Towns competed in print over how many skeins their women had spun. In April 1789, George Washington took the oath of office in a suit of brown broadcloth from the Hartford Woolen Manufactory, a deliberate sartorial declaration that the new republic could clothe itself.



"A Society of Patriotic Ladies, at Edenton in North Carolina"-a London satirist's mocking view of the fifty-one women who pledged on October 25, 1774 to refuse British tea and "any Manufacture from England." The caricature is itself evidence of how seriously Britain took the colonial boycott of its cloth. Attributed to Philip Dawe, "A Society of Patriotic Ladies, at Edenton in North Carolina," mezzotint published by R. Sayer and J. Bennett, London, March 25, 1775. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Public domain.

PART 3

Timeline

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

1765

The Stamp Act Boycott

Merchants in New York and other ports sign non-importation agreements against British goods, including textiles, turning household looms into instruments of protest.

1768

The Harvard Commencement

The Connecticut Courant reports that Harvard's senior class has resolved to graduate in homespun—a calculated political performance covered in the colonial press.

1774

The Continental Association

The First Continental Congress bans the importation of British goods, including cloth, from December 1, formalizing the boycott as policy.

1789

Washington's Inauguration Suit

The first president takes the oath in brown broadcloth from the Hartford Woolen Manufactory, signaling that the republic could clothe itself.

PART 4

Key terms

Write the letter of the matching definition beside each term.

_____ **Non-importation**

_____ **Boycott**

_____ **Broadcloth**

_____ **Committee of inspection**

_____ **Manufactures**

A. An agreement to stop buying goods from a particular country as a form of political protest.

B. Refusing to buy, sell, or use something in order to pressure a government or company to change.

C. A dense, smooth woolen cloth used for high-quality coats and suits.

D. In the 1700s, goods made by hand or machine, as opposed to farm products or raw materials.

E. A local group elected under the Continental Association to watch merchants and publicly name anyone who broke the boycott.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

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

DOCUMENT A

The Articles of Association (Continental Association)

First Continental Congress, October 20, 1774

> That from and after the first day of December next, we will not import, into British America, from Great-Britain or Ireland, any goods, wares, or merchandise whatsoever ... 7. We will use our utmost endeavours to improve the breed of sheep, and increase their number to the greatest extent; and to that end, we will kill them as seldom as may be, especially those of the most profitable kind; nor will we export any to the West-Indies or elsewhere ... 8. We will, in our several stations, encourage frugality, economy, and industry, and promote agriculture, arts and the manufactures of this country, especially that of wool; and will discountenance and discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation ...

Context: Delegates from twelve colonies agreed to a coordinated boycott of British goods in response to the Coercive Acts, enforced by local committees. Producing wool and cloth at home was written directly into this founding act of colonial resistance.

Source: The Articles of Association; October 20, 1774. The Avalon Project, Yale Law School. 1774-. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/contcong_10-20-74.asp

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

Letter to the Marquis de Lafayette

George Washington, January 29, 1789

> Though I would not force the introduction of manufactures, by extravagant encouragements, and to the prejudice of agriculture; yet, I conceive, much might be done in that way by woman, children & others; without taking one really necessary hand from tilling the earth. ... I have been writing

> to our friend Genl Knox this day, to procure me homespun broad cloth, of the Hartford fabric, to make a suit of cloaths for myself. I hope it will not be a great while, before it will be unfashionable for a gentleman to appear in any other dress. Indeed we have already been to long subject to British prejudices.

Context: Writing months before he took office, Washington explains why he intends to wear American-made wool from the Hartford Woolen Manufactory. He did wear a brown Hartford broadcloth suit at his April 1789 inauguration, turning clothing into a statement of economic independence.

Source: George Washington. From George Washington to Lafayette, 29 January 1789. Founders Online, National Archives. 1789. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-01-02-0198

Historical context
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Corroborate
Compare "The Articles of Association (Continental Association)" (First Continental Congress, October 20, 1774) with "Letter to the Marquis de Lafayette" (George Washington, January 29, 1789). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. List the specific actions the Continental Association asked colonists to take regarding imports, sheep, and wool.

2. Washington wrote this letter privately to a French ally three months before his inauguration. Why might he describe his plan to wear Hartford broadcloth to Lafayette in particular?

3. Both documents rely on someone's cloth-making labor. Using Washington's phrase "woman, children & others," explain whose work made the homespun movement possible and how much public credit they received.

4. Consumers today boycott brands or "buy local" to make political statements. Compare these choices with the homespun movement: which is more effective at forcing change, and why?

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

LABOR

The Daughters of Liberty

Women as the economic engine of colonial resistance.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/daughters-of-liberty

MATERIAL CULTURE

The Spinning Bee as Political Theater

A domestic chore staged as a public act.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/spinning-bee-as-theater

BIOGRAPHY

The Hartford Broadcloth

George Washington's inauguration suit as policy statement.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/washington-broadcloth

Places: Connecticut

SOURCES AND CREDITS

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth. Alfred A. Knopf. 2001

T. H. Breen. The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence. Oxford University Press. 2004

Course documents: Connecticut Courant, 11 January 1768. Harvard University (HSB 41 course resources)-. https://legacy.sites.fas.harvard.edu/~hsb41/course_resources/documents.html

Washington's Inauguration in New York. George Washington's Mount Vernon-. https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-first-president/inauguration/new-york

Image: Attributed to Philip Dawe, "A Society of Patriotic Ladies, at Edenton in North Carolina," mezzotint published by R. Sayer and J. Bennett, London, March 25, 1775. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Public domain.

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