

DOMESTIC TEXTILE PRODUCTION IN EARLY NEW BRUNSWICK

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The St. James Textile Museum is devoted to the domestic arts primarily of the 19th century. Besides a representative sampling of carpenter and blacksmith tools, we are fortunate in having an excellent collection of the various devices used in the production of home-made woolen and linen fabrics, including a loom dating from about 1800. Known as the *Beachkirk Collection*, it was given to the Westmorland Historical Society in 1985 by Pamela Black, a scion of one of this area's most prominent families. Most of the items come from southeastern New Brunswick and constitute one of the most important collections of its kind in the Maritimes.

These artifacts are from a world very different from our own, one that was not without its attractions, in spite of the hardships it sometimes inflicted. One major difference between those days and these is the degree to which people were self-sufficient. If most of us living today were deprived of our supermarkets and shopping malls, stocked with items from every corner of the globe, we would very soon starve or freeze in the dark.

Not so the farming, fishing and lumbering families of early New Brunswick. It would be an exaggeration to say that they were completely self-sufficient. Given the province's easy access to the sea and its well developed commerce, people had no difficulty obtaining imported manufactured goods, as well as luxuries such as chocolate and fine china. Even many staple items like molasses and rum came from abroad. But, to a much larger degree than today, they produced most of their own basic food, clothing and shelter.

It is the clothing, or more precisely, the textiles, that is the focus here. Most everyone knows that rural families of earlier generations raised their own meat and vegetables, made their own bread (as well as the jams and jellies to go on it), grew their own apples, etc. What is less well known is that, besides making their own clothes, many of them also spun the wool and flax, and wove the cloth. Besides making enough cloth for their own use, those with special weaving skills could do custom work for others and even sell or barter their surplus production to local merchants, thus earning extra income for their families.

In New Brunswick, these practices continued much longer than in the United States and Ontario. Here the tradition of homespun cloth making flourished from the time of the first European settlement down to the end of the 19th century—and lingered on in isolated pockets as late as the 1930s. One reason for this was that cotton and woolen mills came late to the province and there were never very many of them, so they couldn't meet all the demand. Another reason was that hand-woven woolen cloth, as well as hand-knitted woolen socks and mittens, were much tougher and warmer than the factory variety and therefore much preferred by men who worked outdoors, especially in winter—which was a lot longer and colder than it is today. It was common, rather than exceptional, for snow to arrive in early November and

linger on till May, while January and February temperatures often dipped into the minus thirties. New Brunswick had many outdoor workers relative to its total population because the economy largely depended on farming, fishing, shipbuilding, and lumbering, all of which required a copious supply of warm clothes. A dozen pair of socks and several pairs of mittens was standard issue for a lumberjack working in a winter camp. Starting in the mid 1850s, the building of the railroads became another source of demand. Even after factory-made cloth became widely available during the latter half of the century, many people used it only to make their ‘Sunday-go-to-meeting’ finery while continuing to use homespun for their work ware.

At times, wearing homespun became a point of pride, even among the elite. The Planter and Loyalist settlers from colonial America brought with them a Yankee tradition of frugality and self sufficiency, and the farmers among them often regarded store bought cloth as a sign of bad management, too easily leading to that worst of economic sins—debt. During the 1840s and early 1850s, New Brunswick suffered a deep depression, thought by some to be caused by too many imports and not enough exports. For a while, it became a sign of patriotism to wear homespun in order to avoid extravagance and help the local economy. Some members of the provincial legislature even made it a point to wear homespun suits, preferably made of wool from their own sheep.

The amount of home weaving actually increased until well after 1850. Of course, this partly reflected the growth in population, but it was also actively encouraged by the agricultural societies—often dominated by the social elite—that were trying to encourage better farming methods and, in good Victorian fashion, to inculcate virtue into the population. Fairs were organized and prizes given, not only for the best livestock and garden produce, but also for homespun textiles of various kinds in order, in the words of one promoter, “to excite and reward the industry of the country’s female population.”

This reminds us that much of this work was done by women and girls.

It was not always thus. Women had always been spinners, particularly girls and single women—so much so, in fact, that the word ‘spinster’, which originally just meant someone who spins, took on the meaning of an unmarried woman. But in Europe weaving on a big upright loom was men’s work. The marvelous brocades and tapestries that can still be admired in the museums of Europe were the work of professional male weavers, highly trained in a long apprenticeship. In spite of discouragement by the British government, which wanted the colonies to import most of their textiles from the mother country, a weaving trade dominated by professional male weavers also developed in colonial America. After the expulsion of the Acadians, and particularly after the American Revolution, a number of them made their way to the Maritimes, where they were joined not long afterwards by others from Scotland and Ireland. There were no textile mills in their new homeland, but some found work as custom weavers, often going from house to house and boarding with their customers while they wove their store of linen or yarn into cloth. Some of the better-qualified ones set up dedicated weaving shops from where they did fancy work, such as elaborate coverlets and shawls for affluent patrons.

Professional or semi-professional male weavers continued to practise their trade, although in diminishing numbers, throughout the 19th century. But most weavers were women who worked mainly in their own homes and produced mainly for their own families, although some also did custom work for others, or sold cloth to the local stores, along with their eggs and butter. This was a departure from earlier times, and particularly from European practice. The reason was that, during the first few decades after arriving in an undeveloped land, much of it heavily forested, the priorities for men and boys were chopping down trees and building houses, barns and, in many places, boats—to say nothing of the regular farm work which everyone took for granted as a matter of survival. As a result, weavers who turned to farming, as many of them did, tended to pass their weaving skills on to their daughters rather than to their sons. Within a couple of generations, the idea took hold that domestic weaving was a female occupation—and a bit of a sissy thing for boys to do.

Of course, weaving is only one of the many steps in cloth making. First, the wool or flax has to be spun into thread and before that, in the case of wool, the sheep have to be shorn and the fleece thoroughly washed, combed and carded. After being woven, the cloth was normally fullled, essentially by soaking it in a foul solution and pounding the daylight out of it with a club, or in some cases even with the naked feet. This was in order to thicken it and make it shed water.

Flax was even more work. It had to be pulled from the ground by hand, dried in the sun or over a fire, turned and spread several times, then have the seeds combed out of it. After that was done, it had to be wetted down in order to soften it, dried again, then broken on a flax break and finally ‘scutched’, ‘swingled’ and pounded to remove the last bits of crud—and all this before spinning, let alone weaving, could even begin.

Although some of these processes, especially wool carding and flax breaking, were very hard work, a lot of it, too, was done by women. However, they often relieved some of the drudgery by working together with friends and neighbours in what the Loyalist settlers called ‘frolics’—a combination of work bee and social gathering with ulterior motives. Writing in 1828, a British visitor to New Brunswick described them this way:

The term ‘frolic’ is peculiar, I believe, to America in the different senses in which it is used. If a good wife has a quantity of wool or flax to spin, she invites as many of her neighbours as the house can well accommodate; some bring their spinning wheels, others their cards; they remain all day at work and, after drinking an abundance of tea, either go home or remain to dance for some part of the night: this is called a spinning frolic. They are on these occasions as well as at other frolics, joined by the young men of the settlement, and in this way many of their love matches are made up.

Men also organized frolics, but their ulterior motive was a little different. For example, when a farmer needed some woods cut down, he bought a few gallons of rum and had a ‘chopping frolic’.

In the case of wool working, at least, a better way of relieving the drudgery was to take it to a carding and fulling mill run by a water wheel. These were fairly common in New Brunswick

from an early date, usually built by Loyalists who had known them in their homeland. Almost every town in Colonial America had one by the late 18th century. Amos Botsford, a leading Loyalist from Connecticut, built one at Westcock in 1812. It could also saw timber and grind grain. About 1805 Gideon Palmer, another prominent Loyalist, built a carding and fulling mill on what is still called Palmer's Pond in Dorchester, the site of a later shipyard.

A carding mill gets the wool ready for spinning by means of a revolving drum studded with fine wires that align the fibres. It could card as much in an hour as a pair of human hands could do in a week, so if there was one within traveling distance, any serious spinner or weaver would take his or her raw wool to it, usually paying for the service with a percentage of the wool.

It was the carding and fulling mills that made it possible for home weavers to produce significant quantities of woolen homespun, both for home consumption and the market. The 1851 census reports that more than 5400 New Brunswick households had a loom, which represents about 40% of the total. Of course, virtually every one had a spinning wheel.

Linen was another story. The first Anglophone settlers certainly spun some flax, but it was mainly for making the warp threads for weaving wool. But when machine-spun cotton warp thread came to be imported, beginning in the 1840s, flax spinning waned among Anglophones and most linen in New Brunswick came to be produced by Acadians, who, of course, also spun and wove woolen textiles. Among the Acadians, both spinning and weaving, as well as much of the preliminary preparation, was done by the women. There seems to have been few, if any, professional male weavers. One of the British military officers involved in the Deportation observed that Acadian women were very industrious and particularly adept at carding, spinning and weaving of wool, flax and hemp. Another British observer noted in 1828 that "the industry of their wives and daughters is wonderful; they are at work during the spring and harvest on their farms; they cook and wash, make their husbands' as well as their own clothes; they spin, knit and weave, and are scarcely idle during their lives."

Acadian textile production was mainly for home use, and Acadian families depended even more upon it than did Anglophones, as they were generally poorer, and in any case not much interested in new fangled ideas. Besides being generally unable to afford store bought cloth, there was another reason for their continuing to make their own textiles and garments. Acadians clung fiercely to their religious, linguistic and cultural identity, and no small part of this was their distinctive dress, which set them apart right down to the end of the 19th century. They were particularly noted for their love of bright colours, especially reds and blues. Although it was homespun and relatively simple in pattern, their workmanship—or more accurately their 'workwomanship'—was very good, and in the latter half of the 19th century there was a ready market for Acadian linen, most of it produced in the Memramcook Valley. During early summer, when the flax was in flower, practically every Acadian farm would have accented the lush green valley with splashes of bright light blue.

Not all the textiles produced in the home were for strictly practical purposes. This was more or less the case during the earlier period of the province's history, but after about 1850 a new ideal of womanhood and women's role in the family began to emerge. It first took root among

the middle classes and then trickled down the social ladder through the influence of farm journals, mainly American, sections of which were reprinted in some New Brunswick newspapers. Although primarily dedicated to encouraging better agricultural methods, they always included a section on practical tips, as well as moral advice, for the ladies. Instead of just being a workhorse, the ideal farmer's wife was now supposed to develop her artistic talents and create an aesthetically pleasing, as well as a comfortable, home for her family. Of course, she still had to cook and sew, wash and clean, look after the children, the chickens, the garden—all the things ordinary women did in those days—and many continued to spin and weave, even if some considered it a drudgery inappropriate for the new style woman. But there was also an increasing emphasis on decorative work such as coverlets, doilies, cushions, fancy needlework and embroidery of all kinds—things that gave aesthetic pleasure as well as the satisfaction of being a good homemaker.

Whether it was for decorative or practical purposes, home textile production was a very important part of the rural New Brunswick economy right into the early twentieth century. It was also an integral part of family life, and one of the many ways in which women played their part in creating a world whose remnants are now a valued part of our own heritage.