

# Fibers Used in Eighteenth-Century Clothing and Domestic Furnishings

The most commonly used fibers in the eighteenth century were linen, wool, silk, and cotton. Other fibers, such as mohair, were used occasionally but not in great quantities. Some fabrics, such as linsey woolsey, were combinations of fibers; silk and wool combinations were also known. These “mixed” cloths were not mixed or spun together; rather they were woven together, constructed of one fiber in each direction.

Linen is a plant fiber and is exceptionally long and strong. The linen fiber is contained in the stalk of the flax plant and is released from the plant through a process of retting (soaking to loosen the fiber from the woody tissue), beating to loosen the plant fibers, and hackling (combing). There are many different varieties of flax; some that were used in the past no longer exist. Flax is a cool-weather crop and needs steady amounts of rainfall. The quality of flax fiber is influenced greatly by climate. Linen was available in many different qualities, usually either bleached or unbleached rather than colored, because it takes dyes poorly. Linen can be gossamer thin or heavy weight. In the eighteenth century, linen was the most common cloth in the American colonies, used for clothing and domestic needs.

Wool is a protein fiber, most commonly the product of sheep. Different sheep breeds provide different qualities of wool, from the softest and finest so very coarse and scratchy. The wool of each animal is also divided into different qualities, meaning that, to have a uniform article produced from a single sheep, the wool must be thoroughly blended. Because it is a protein fiber, wool readily takes dyes. Its insulating qualities make it ideal for extreme cold. Woolen cloth is made of brushed wool yarns, with fuzzy fibers that go in all directions, trapping air and increasing warmth. Worsted cloth is made of combed wools with fibers arranged in parallel positions, giving the cloth great density and strength and making it virtually wrinkle-free. In the eighteenth century, wool fit well into anyone’s budget. England’s economy was based on wool, and mutton was very desirable as food.

Silk is the fiber produced by silkworms for their cocoons. The cocoons can be gathered in the wild or silkworms can be raised domestically. Silk fiber is either reeled off the cocoon in a continuous strand, or may be cut and chopped and then spun. If the silk fiber is reeled, the resulting fabric is lustrous. If the silk is cut, the fabric surface is dull. Silk takes dyes easily and produces lustrous deep or pastel shades. Silk is very lightweight, making it an excellent thermal fabric.

Cotton, like linen, is a plant fiber, is particularly comfortable in warm climates. In the eighteenth century, cotton was highly desired and expensive. The cotton that could be grown in Virginia was the hairy seeded type, and until the modification of the cotton gin in 1796, the seeds had to be removed by hand, making American cotton far too expensive to produce: it cost less to buy imported cotton. The majority of cotton used in the American colonies was imported from India and, as a finished product, often featured printed designs. Wood block prints and copperplate prints were in vogue. Some of the most fashionable chintzes (printed cottons) were as valuable as

plain silks.

[Click here to go to the next page.](#)

© 2008 *The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation*