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WOMEN'S EARLY INDUSTRIES

1746 to 1820

The women in the early days had no easy time. Days were long, families large, and general living conditions hard.

They arose early by the light of a candle they themselves had hand-dipped; either of melted tallow, bay berries or a mixture of the two. They lifted the wicks up and down in a large kettle of melted grease, hanging them on a stick placed over the backs of two chairs, and when one coat had cooled and hardened, patiently doing the same thing all over again.

She cooked the breakfast of cornmeal mush or hominy in the fireplace. If she was too great a distance from the gristmill, she may have prepared the grain herself, either pounding the kernels of corn on some flat stone, or in a wooden mortar, with a pestle, as she was obliged to do with all the herbs picked or grown for seasonings. The dishes were few and usually of wood; or pewter brought from England.

The children stood while eating, or sat on a "stool" or "settle," in the chimney corner. The long days were spent in spinning or weaving. Flax was a product of almost every farm. In the Fall it was pulled and placed on the ground, where it lay for several weeks, sometimes all winter until the woody part had rotted and the fiber had become soft. Then it was separated into small pieces. It was then beaten or "swingled" by a hard wooden paddle called a "swingling knife;" combed and made ready for the distaff, and spun by foot-power, made into linen cloth, table-covers, sheets, etc.

There are still to be found articles of homespun linen made from flax grown spun and woven by the women of this Town. This industry was brought by the Scotch Irish to Londonderry where it spread to other parts of the Colonies.

The women raised their own wool, often starting with the baby lambs, which they carefully fed and tended. They washed and carded the wool and spun it into yarn. Some times they took it to the mill where it was made into rolls for spinning. Two such mills were in this Town. This was warm clothing called linsey woolsey plaid. They also wove woolen blankets and carpets and cotton rag rugs.

They made their butter in an old-fashioned up and down churn. If it refused "to come," (for the more superstitious of them) a red-hot horseshoe was placed inside the churn to drive the witches out.

All food was chopped in a wooden tray, with a chopping knife. All clothes were hand sewn; quilts were usually sewn "over and over." Both knitting and sewing were early taught to the girls, and hard it was for the mother who had no girls in the family. Their soap was hand-made and in addition to these duties, the mother was often called on to care for the garden, help with the chores, especially the milking.

The Burnap sisters, daughters of the first minister, had other ideas of a woman's usefulness. It is claimed that in this Town, they invented the making of "Leghorn hats" or bonnets, as they were called. Some of these bonnets were of black leghorn straw trimmed with peach colored crepe, and crowned with a beautiful bouquet of half-blown roses, lilacs and field flowers. They were also often ornamented with a bow of ribbon, long ends or streamers on one side. A bouquet of wild poppies was sometimes placed in front surmounted by a plume of marabout feathers. The ribbon was either straw colored or striped. A little later the style changed. Pieces of brim was cut away at the back and drawn up at the crown with a large bow. Strings and rosettes were over the right ear. Some were sold in Boston for as much as \$50. John Stark bought one for his wife Molly and it can be seen in the Historical Building (at Concord).

They not only made bonnets but other things from grass or platted straw. This certain kind of straw was known as "Dunstable straw." Surely those early women deserve to be remembered for their spirit of industry.