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## The Complexities of Wash Day in the 18<sup>th</sup> century- *“a thousand little occurrences... never foreseen”*

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As we hustle through our complex and well-situated twenty first century lives, common chores that seem, to the modern citizen, tedious, mundane and cumbersome, actually would seem astounding and miraculous if viewed through the eyes of our ancestors that lived at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A simple task, such as washing a load of laundry, which can be completed in its entirety in less than ninety minutes today, was a “project” that required several people an entire day to complete. So multifaceted and intricate were these chores that even contemporary writers from the 18<sup>th</sup> century referred to the complexities and the tediousness of the everyday occupations that occurred on plantations and farms such as Woodville. Following the death of his wife in 1787, noted attorney and teacher, George Wythe of Williamsburg wrote that *“necessary domestic duties occupied so much of his time”* that he became *“irritated and vexed by a thousand little occurrences that he had never foreseen.”* A brief look into the wash day habits and routines of nearly all late 18<sup>th</sup> century plantations or farms will surely leave both the casual and scholarly observer, not just sympathetic to, but more likely, in complete concurrence with Mr. Wythe’s astute assessment of the important task laundering clothes.

Laundering clothing, bedding, table linens and kitchen materials in the Federal period household was a well organized process that left very little to chance and bore little resemblance to the random and impromptu event that 21<sup>st</sup> century laundering has become. The day was generally “scripted” out to allow for proper time management and maximum utilization of the limited daylight hours, particularly during the shortened winter months. Even the day of the week, Monday, was chosen specifically to facilitate an expeditious completion of the monumental task of laundering for a plantation of at least 20 people. Since the largest meal of the week was usually prepared on Sunday, a day that was reserved for visiting friends and family members, logically this would be the day that produced the greatest amount of leftovers, thus reducing the need for a substantial amount of cooking on the following day. Therefore, on Monday, the cooks would simply be required to reheat the food prepared on the previous day, rather than prepare an entire fresh meal for the family. The extra time was then used to assist with, or in the case of a smaller household or plantation, complete the previous weeks accumulated laundering.

Laundry day or “Wash Day” required the laundress to awaken earlier than her usual 5:30 AM start to the day. (Laundering was generally a job that was relegated to a woman, usually a slave or servant girl. It would be highly unusual to have the task assigned to a man. An exception to this general statement would be in the case of a man completing the washing of fabric in preparation for its use in a manufacturing process, as is seen in the picture shown at the beginning of this essay, circa 1806.) Generally on wash day, the laundress and her crew would awaken at 4:30 AM in order to gather wood and prepare the fires used to heat the water. On an average day, cooking fires would require approximately 30 large pieces of wood to prepare all three meals for the day. The amount used on laundry day would most likely be double that amount, or 50-60 large pieces of

wood. Laundry fires were generally larger, and the heavier, knotty wood chunks that were unsuitable for the controlled cooking fires would have been used during the laundering process. Assuming that a large piece of split wood weighs approximately 3 pounds, an 18<sup>th</sup> century laundress would be required to move 150-200 pounds of wood, prior to even beginning the task at hand. Additionally, water needed to be drawn, either from a nearby stream or well. Water would have been carried to the boiling cauldron in buckets carried on the shoulders with a yoke. Assuming that each of these buckets holds 2 ½ gallons, the laundress would be able to transport 5 gallons per trip. At the Woodville site, the laundress would have several options from which to draw her water. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the closest location would have been from a pump located near the northwest corner of the porch, a round trip of about 100 feet. Another possibility would have been to draw water from the creek or nearby millrace, roughly 250 feet away and a 500 foot round trip. The worst case, and least likely scenario, would be drawing water from the field well, which was located in the western corner of the current property and necessitated a tiring 1000 foot round trip to obtain water. The boiler used to hold the heated water generally held 20-40 gallons of water per individual load, thus requiring a minimum 4 trips per load of laundry. (Not including 10 more gallons for the scrub and rinse water!) Thus, the laundress of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, walked a minimum of a tenth of a mile per load, while the unfortunate laundresses of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, would walk have walked between a quarter mile and mile per each load of laundry! (In actuality, this work would have been done by one of the slave or servant children, as drawing water would not have been considered a productive use of a skilled servant's time.)

Once the 20-40 gallons of water was obtained, it was added to a copper pot, which was often simply know as a "copper", and was brought to a boil. This pot was a multi-functional piece of kitchen equipment that was used for preparing food, beer making, rendering animal fat, and heating bath water, all in addition to being used for boiling the laundry water. The laundry process itself involved three steps and three different containers or vessels. Initially, the load of laundry was placed in the boiling water to clean the clothes and loosen any dirt. This load was agitated, by hand with a stick or "washing bat", a flat-sided wooden paddle that measured between 2-3 feet in length. After about 15 minutes in the "copper", individual articles were lifted out with the "bat" or wooden laundry tongues and moved to the warm water for spot treatment with lye soap. By the 1790's lye soap was being produced in large quantities and being sold throughout the U.S. and could have been purchased just as readily as producing it at home. Any remaining stains or soiled spots were rubbed with soap and scrubbed over a washing board or "scrubboard" until the stains had been lifted. There were numerous "receipts" for removing a variety of stains, ranging from brick dust and pipe clay for removing grease, to lemon juice for "coloured" stains like berry juice and blood. Frequently, urine (both human and animal) was used to remove stains, as it was a renewable and readily available source of ammonia. Finally, the articles were removed to the cold water rinse to remove any remaining traces of dirt and soap. The entire process from start to finish took hours to complete a single load.

Occasionally, stains and garments required special attention, particularly whites. Just like the laundress of the present day, 18<sup>th</sup> century laborers often used many varied and "unique" receipts for getting clothes and linens to be whiter. In ancient Rome, ash made of burned seaweed, was use to brighten fabrics. From the early middle ages until

just prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a process known as “crofting” and “bucking” was used to bleach fabrics. Perfected by the Dutch in the 1200’s, fabrics were “bucked”, or soaked in lye for several days and then washed clean. They were then laid out over the course of several weeks in a lawn with grass, and “crofted” for several weeks until the desired whiteness was achieved. This allowed the chlorophyll naturally found in the grass to be released through exposure to the sun, thus whitening the clothing. Finally, the fabric was treated with sour milk and washed again. This process fell out of favor in England and the United States by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as it used up large tracts of land that could have been more readily used for agriculture. Still, this was most likely one of the processes used at Woodville during the Neville and Cowan occupation, and possibly could explain a use for the expanse of grass located between the southern-most bed in the garden and where the remnants of the garden fence posts were located. It was not until after 1774, when the element of chlorine was discovered in Sweden, that the possibility of using chlorine bleach was developed. The French first began to expose fabric to chlorine gas in 1785, in an effort to achieve maximum whiteness, although the process was quickly abandoned due to the hazardous nature of the fumes. In 1799, Charles Tennant, invented a safer bleaching powder consisting of potash and slaked lime that was exposed to chlorine fumes.

Another household technique for brightening fabrics in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, gave rise to an often repeated myth at many historical sites today. Repeatedly, as one tours many 18<sup>th</sup> century historical sites in the United States, one can hear the quixotic story of the early frontier women that were so prudent in their household economic endeavors, that they saved the blue wrapping paper that the sugar cones were shipped in, in order that they would be able to boil them to dye their clothes blue. Upon investigating the pragmatic application of this scenario with an expert on dyeing and wool production at Colonial Williamsburg, I discovered that it would take hundreds of sugar cone papers to successfully dye a single garment. Considering the cost of sugar, it would actually have been less expensive to send the item off to be dyed by a professional, or even less expensive to actually purchase the fabric in the color desired. The reality that lies deep within the fictitious story is that when possible, the blue papers would have been added to the rinse water for white laundry, in an effort to brighten the whites by using bluing- a process that many people still use to this day. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, mercantile stores were selling “blue bags”, small muslin bags filled with indigo powder, which would achieve the same effect when added to the rinse water. A tiny bit of this bluing would bring the rinsed clothes to an extreme brightness and replace the need for extensive “crofting”.

Starching was also an occasional necessity for the 18<sup>th</sup> century laundress, although it was utilized on clothing far less than we do it today. The water that rice and potatoes was boiled in, was “skimmed”, strained, saved and used for the next load of laundry that required stiffening.

Once the laundry was completely rinsed, it was removed from the rinse basin and prepared for drying. The most common form of removing water from freshly washed items was to have two persons wring them. Occasionally, wealthy households of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century would have a box mangle, a frame with a box filled with rocks or iron bars, that rested on a series of rollers. Laundry was laid flat and wound around the rollers, which were then rolled over by the heavy box. The weight of the box squeezed the water

from the items, thus preparing them for the final process of drying, either by fireside or in the open air. Box mangles were generally cumbersome and expensive, and would have been a rare item in even the most wealthy late 18<sup>th</sup> century households.

Following ringing, clothes were hung out to dry on rope clotheslines supported and propped up with wooden supports or sticks. This process places the laundress at the mercy of the weather, and frequently, during inclement weather, the laundry drying process had to be moved indoors and done over drying racks. Clothes maidens, folding wooden racks with several bars on which to hang garments, could be quickly brought out and assembled near the fire to hasten the time needed to dry clothes. This method was generally not preferred, since it added additional and excessive implements to a kitchen that was usually crowded already.

Once the clothes were dry, several methods were used to remove wrinkles and to press the garments and linens smooth. In most wealthy and middling households, sheets and linens were folded and compressed using a linen press. This useful item consisted of a table with a flat board above it, which could be corkscrewed down, thus pressing the items between the boards. The tables most likely had a drawer beneath, that could be used for storing the freshly pressed linens. Wealthy homes could have an iron, a very expensive piece of equipment found in only the wealthiest of households until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. These irons ranged from a pyg iron bar with a primitive handle attached to it, which would be heated simply by placing it in the fire directly to heat it, to a more sophisticated box iron, which had a removable heated “iron” bar that conveniently could be replaced with a hotter one as the ironing progressed.

Curious...then come visit Woodville and experience all of these processes first hand. (Well, almost all of them.) The interpretive staff at the site has been researching the laundry process for many years and is very excited to be able to present it to the public as a first person demonstration of the various laundry skills used during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. We promise it will give you an entirely new outlook, not only on one of the more mundane tasks of 18<sup>th</sup> century life, but also on the ease with which we can complete these same tasks today.

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