

A WOOL STORY TIMELINE

EXCERPTS FROM “TEXTILE HISTORY: A TIMELINE” BY PAULA VESTER

----Here is some interesting facts about the History of Wool, for the complete book go to my website: worldinaspin.com

- 25,000 BC.** Figurines show loin cloth of twisted strands.
- 20,000 BC.** Invention of the needle.
- 8500 BC.** Sheep are domesticated in the Near East.
- 7000 BC.** Spindle whorls found in Mid-East sites.
- 6400 BC.** First archaeological evidence of the invention of the loom.
- 4000 BC.** It is about this time that the people find that the domesticated animals can provide uses without killing them. Sheep may be just beginning to have wool that can be spun into useable thread, but they are still shedding it.
- 3500 BC.** Sheep with wool instead of hair and kemp are introduced to Europe through the Balkans from the Near East.
- 2300 BC.** Sheep herding is a major part of economy on Crete.
- 1000 BC.** The Phoenicians are carrying on active trade in raw wool and all types of woven goods with the Spaniards in the port of Cadiz.
- 715 BC.** Wool dyeing is established as occupation in Rome.
- 450 BC.** Indigo is used in the Mediterranean to produce blue.
- 200 BC.** Romans cross breed native ewes with rams from Colchis to produce Tarrentine, ancestor of Merinos. Distaffs are used in China.
- 100-144 BC.** Columella, a Roman in Cadiz, develops Merino sheep.
- 256 AD.** Earliest fragment of knitted fabric found at Syrian site.
- 768 AD.** Charlemagne establishes silk weaving centers at Lyons and Rouen, begins cloth fairs around Western Europe, and makes first agreement with England to import monastery wool.
- 900 AD.** Alfred the Great encourages wool industry in England. His mother sets up cottage spinning network.
- 1000.** Flanders becomes the great wool weaving center of Europe.
- 1066.** After the Norman conquest, Bristol and Exeter join York as major English wool centers.
- 1111.** England's King Henry I begins the Scottish woolen industry on the River Tweed, between England and Scotland.
- 1120.** Henry I relocates skilled Flemish weavers throughout English villages to spread their advanced textile skills among his people. He sponsors first woolen cloth guild.
- 1128.** Cistercian monks from France settle in England to raise wool. Within 15 years they build more than 50 abbeys, some with flocks of 15,000 sheep.
- 1153.** First annual cloth fair is held in England, in reign of King Stephen.
- 1164.** Fuller's guilds are established in England.
- 1195.** When King Richard the Lion-hearted is captured by Saracens while on a Crusade, part of his ransom is paid in wool.
- 1212.** Florence, Italy publishes a guild directory of spinners and weavers.

- 1221.** Henry III orders every piece of cloth containing Spanish wool to be burned, to protect English wool workers; but imports continue. He encourages English silk, and a thousand knights wear silk to his daughter's wedding.
- 1304.** The Weavers Guild of York, England petition the King claiming they are unable to pay their yearly license money because the rural weavers of York are making cloth without license.
- 1305.** Venice has 17,000 woolen spinners and weavers; Louvain, Flanders 150,000 journeyman weavers plus spinners, 30,000 weavers in Florence produce 100,000 lengths of wool cloth a year, plus cotton, silk, and linen. Hadleigh, Suffolk, England exporting wool cloth.
- 1327-77.** Edward III, the "Royal Wool Merchant", offers his protection to all who will immigrate to England to help improve textile skills. Flemish weavers pour in and firmly establish separate woolen and worsted industries.
- 1349.** During the Black Plague, sheep so outnumber people they create havoc.
- 1436.** Coventry, England is known for its woolens and woolen caps.
- 1463.** England forbids the importation of woolen goods.
- 1468.** The Parish of Halifax, England produces one-fifth of Yorkshire's woollen cloth.
- 1488.** The Capper's Act fixes prices in an effort to stop cap knitters' profiteering. The term "knit" is becoming common.
- 1490.** 16,000,000 sheep in Spain keep Spanish spinners busy. Ferdinand V expels the Saracens from Spain. Among them are more than 10,000 woolen spinners and weavers.
- 1527.** A capknitter's guild is founded in Paris; its patron saint is St. Fiacra. The nuns of Birgittiner Cloister in Nadendal, Finland support themselves after the Reformation by knitting stockings.
- 1530.** London weavers riot against Venetian merchants who are granted permission to buy wool by Henry VIII, although Henry VII has passed a law forbidding foreigners to buy wool for export between May and Feb 2, due to a wool shortage. After 60 arrests, the wool is eventually exported.
- 1540.** Spanish bring sheep to the New World.
- 1570.** Elizabeth I begins English tradition of nobles kneeling on a sack of wool when swearing loyalty to the crown. Members of Parliament and London's Lord Mayor sit on wool sacks, as a reminder that England's power rests on wool.
- 1588.** England sinks the Spanish Armada, and Spain signs treaty agreeing to send prized Merino sheep to England. They delay delivery for 200 years.
- 1599.** Knitted monmouth caps are at height of popularity - for wear under steel military helmets and by sailors.
- 1634-38.** First American fulling mill and weaving establishment built at Rowley, Mass.
- 1654.** Textile craftsmen are forbidden to emigrate to the American Colonies from England, to prevent their bringing trade secrets; but some slip out.
- 1656.** Linsey-woolsey, kersey, flannel and worsted serge are America's most popular fabrics, and remain so until the Civil War. Massachusetts Colony prohibits exportation of ewes and requires all inhabitants not employed in other useful occupations to spin.
- 1660.** Halifax, England has a Cloth and Linen Hall to sell its fabrics.
- 1664.** Laws made by General Court of Mass. requires all children to learn to spin and weave.
- 1665.** American colonists now have enough sheep and family workshops to be self-sufficient. Each household in Massachusetts required to spin at least 3 pounds of wool, cotton or linen in proportion to the number of females in the household.

- 1667.** England produces more wool cloth than it can sell, so enacts The Flannel Act which stipulates "all dead must be buried with woollen cloth".
- 1669.** Laws prohibit American Colonies from trading "all woollen manufacture whatsoever". They smuggle wool to France for linen, and to Spain for wine.
- 1680.** Oldest piece of twined knitting, in a grave in Falun, Sweden, is a glove. Indian uprisings in the Southwest drive out the Spaniards; the Native Americans continue to keep sheep and sell wool to white traders.
- 1696.** Irish can weave wool more cheaply than the English, so attempts are made to suppress Irish industry.
- 1716.** From the diary of Joshua Hempstead of New London, CT - he purchased 9½ yards of cloth made from 4 sheep.
- 1724.** Governmental quality inspections cease in England, and poorly woven cloth using cheap wool blends begins to spread.
- 1757.** The poem "The Fleece" by John Dyer praises in more than 6000 verses, wool in all its shapes and forms.
- 1765.** Spain finally fulfills the Treaty of 1588 and sends the Merino sheep to England. They cannot be successfully raised because of the climate.
- 1768.** The Harvard graduating class all wear suits spun and woven in the colonies - in protest against English restrictions. Spinning and weaving contests are held to oppose the Stamp Act.
- 1770.** George Washington imports Merino rams to improve his Mount Vernon flocks.
- 1780.** Sheep are brought to Australia and breeding begins. Australia ultimately becomes the largest wool producer in the world. Huddersfield, Halifax, Bradford and Colne in England all have Piece Halls for the trade of cloth.
- 1787.** Machines appear for spinning long wool, flax and hemp.
- 1799.** Washington orders woollen broadcloth for a suit from the Hartford Woollen Co in CT.
- 1814.** In Barrowford, England, a handloom woollen weaver made 1.30p.
- 1820.** In England mechanized looms are only used for coarse cotton and worsted cloths. Fine and fancy fabrics, and woollen cloths are still handwoven. There are 14,150 power mills in England.
- 1825.** In New York State 10 yards of cloths per person is produced at home. It is still punishable by death to export sheep from England. The Erie Canal is built in the U.S. and becomes important for transporting wool.
- 1826.** "The Power Loom Riots" in England do little to stop the progress of the textile machine development. New England there are 400 buildings reportedly engaged in textile manufacture. 280,000 spindles spin 98,000 bales of yarn per year. One third of the weaving is now done on power looms.
- 1827.** Williamsburg, MA has 90 acres of cultivated teasels for fulling cloth. The first complete cylinder-printing machine is imported from England.
- 1830.** In Barrowford, England, the weekly wage of the handloom woollen weaver is only 23p. Circular Fulling machines developed.
- 1830-50.** Sheep raising is major industry in Maine, Vermont, & New Hampshire.
- 1838.** Cards used for wool and cotton are manufactured in Halifax, England employing 20,000 people, mostly women and children.
- 1841.** At Fieldans, England, 520 weavers on 1058 looms weave 3900 cuts each 46 yards long by 36

inches wide in one week.

- 1845.** New Zealand becomes important sheep producers. Flocks built of Lincoln, Leicester, Border Leicester, Romney Marsh, and Southdown. J. Sellars of Burnley, England invents a loom brake.
- 1850.** There are 1600 woolen plants with 50,000 workers in the U.S.' 32 states. Georgia has 35 cotton mills, some also producing woolen cloth and 3 woolen mills.
- 1851.** Collier in England invents a steam-powered carpet loom and increases production in a Halifax mill 12-fold. Carpets are no longer just for the rich.
- 1852.** Dick Wooten drives 9000 sheep from Taos, NM, arrives in Sacramento, CA a year later and sells the sheep for \$50,000.
- 1853.** John Petre invents an automated wool scouring machine.
- 1860.** Carpets become popular, using nine million lbs. of wool annually. The U.S. consumes 100 million pounds of wool. Glazed wadding, the forerunner of modern non-woven fabric is made. Georgia has 512,618 sheep.
- 1861.** Union soldiers wear uniforms that are largely machine-made, but Confederate uniforms are still mostly handspun and handwoven.
- 1866.** One million gallons of water are used per day by Dean Clough Mills in Lancashire, England for wool washing and dyeing.
- 1880.** Laws in Mass. state the minimum age for child labor is 13. There are no such restrictions in the South until 1933. Mansfield, Ma cocoon production drops to 5000 lb. 1000 fulling mills in America. Georgia has 40 mills.
- 1884.** More than 50,000,000 sheep are being raised in the U.S. spread from coast to coast, nearly equal to the human population, of 55,000,000. Georgia mills import 200,000 pounds of Egyptian Cotton to blend with wool.
- 1900.** Georgia now has 75 mills, with 913,346 spindles and 21,903 looms.
- 1920.** Lopi is used experimentally in machine knitting by a home knitter.
- 1929.** Richmond County, Ga. has over 200,000 spindles in its mills. Eleven counties, including Fulton & Muscogee have 100,000 to 199,999 spindles, 39 counties have fewer than 50,000 spindles, including Dekalb; the rest have 0.
- 1930.** 95% of all American looms are automatic, compared to 5% in Britain. The high speed loom is invented. Industrial sergers are introduced to the U.S. market.
- 1939.** The Wool Products Labeling Act: mandatory fiber content by percentages of all fibers present in all products containing wool.
- 1947.** Dornier, the German aircraft manufacturers, start making textile machinery. There are 398,000 looms in the U.S. Loom operation amounts to 486 million hours. Seventeen million pounds of wool processed into Chatham Manufacturing's blankets at Elkin, N.C.
- 1948.** Textiles are the 2nd largest industry in America employing 1.25 million people.
- 1949.** Georgia, Alabama, Carolinas, Tennessee & Mississippi produce 75% of America's textiles. Chatham Manufacturing, Elkin, N.C. imports fleeces from Scotland, Australia, Argentina, South Africa, New Zealand, & Uruguay. Southern Mills such as Matthews Mill in Greenwood, South Carolina has Day Nurseries for working mothers.
- 1953.** Flammable Fabrics Act authorizes the Secretary of Commerce to establish flammability standards for wearing apparel and interior furnishings.
- 1958.** The Textile Fiber Products Identification Act requires mandatory fiber content labeling by

- percentages of all textile fiber products used for wearing apparel, costumes and accessories.
- 1968.** 41,460 tons of fibre were processed in Lyon; 544 tons of it silk, 1065 tons of wool, 14,500 tons of rayon, 2339 tons of cotton, and the rest various synthetics.
 - 1978.** New England only has 65,000 textile workers compared with 282,000 in 1948.
 - 1980.** In England, there are 50,000 textile workers as compared to 275,000 in 1890.
 - 1988.** The May issue of NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC focuses on WOOL.
 - 1990.** IBM-compatible computer sewing machine for home sewers is introduced.
 - 2003.** A process to stretch merino wool fibers, decreasing the micron up to 20% is developed and the new fiber “Optim” is introduced.
 - 2019.** Forty pure breeds are being raised in Georgia, USA, in flocks all around the state. Shepherds are also crossing breeds to improve their flocks. Bathing trunks & hiking t-shirts made of wool are coming into popularity again.
 - 2020.** Archeologists find string made between 41,000-52,000 years ago by Neanderthals in SE France.

CREDITS: compiled by Paula J. Vester, 2025

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* BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era) now the preferred designations by historians to give was previously BC (before Christ) and AD (After death).