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“Without Being Obligated to Send 3000 Miles for the Cloth”: The American Wool Industry, 1789-1815

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On December 28, 1809, the editor of the *Raleigh Register* wrote, “We anxiously look forward to the day, when a man may furnish himself with a good Coat, for either winter or summer, without being obliged to send 3000 miles for the Cloth.”¹

Why was it necessary for people in the United States in 1809 to be “obliged to send 3000 miles for the Cloth?” Good quality cloth, that is, superfine wool broadcloth, that was suitable for men’s apparel, was primarily imported from Great Britain. Broadcloth was so called because it was woven on a wide loom creating in fabric that was 54 to 63 inches wide. High quality broadcloth also required expert dyeing and finishing. Finishing processes included fulling, using heat and moisture to shrink up the fabric; napping, to raise the fibers; and shearing, to trim the nap evenly. As E. E. Perkins said in 1833,

They are distinguished from others by their stoutness, and are good in proportion to the fineness and closeness of the weft, the reasonable shortness of the nap, the soft, silky, but not spongy feel, and the goodness of the dye.²

While Americans were producing a variety of wool textiles, usually in the household or on the plantation, domestic manufacturing of fine wool fabrics, using specialized equipment operated by skilled workers, was in its infancy. One early attempt at the production of wool broadcloth was the Hartford Woolen Manufactory, established in 1788. This firm supplied 13½ yards of brown broadcloth that George Washington had made into a suit for his inauguration as the first president of the United States on April 30, 1789. Washington deliberately chose to wear an American-made suit, noting, in a letter to the Marquis de Lafayette, “I hope it will not be a great while, before it will be unfashionable for a gentleman to appear in any other dress. Indeed we have already been too long subject to British prejudices.”³

As Jeremiah Wadsworth, one of the founders of the factory, put it, “I do hope it will be worn by one whose example will be worth more than any other encouragement that can be given to our infant Manufactures.”⁴ Wadsworth had been Commissary General for the Continental Army in the War for

¹ *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Weekly Advertiser*, May 25, 1809.

² Cited in Florence Montgomery, *Textiles in America 1650-1870* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 177.

³ George Washington to the Marquis de LaFayette, January 29, 1789; TeachingAmericanHistory.org/library/index.asp?documentprint=387.

⁴ Stephen Decatur, Jr., *Private Affairs of George Washington* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933), 10.

American Independence. In that capacity, he would have had experience procuring wool fabrics for uniforms.

One of the New York papers reported, “We feel a satisfaction in adding to the account given in yesterday’s paper of the inauguration of the President,—that his Excellency on that great day, was dressed in a complete suit of elegant broadcloth, of THE MANUFACTURE OF HIS COUNTRY.”⁵ A brown wool suit belonging to George Washington is in the collection of Mount Vernon, although it is not certain that this is indeed his inaugural suit. Mrs. Washington, too, was praised for the riding dress made of “fine Hartford brown Cloth” that she wore for the trip from Mount Vernon to New York for the inauguration.⁶

In his first annual message to Congress in 1790, Washington noted that the “safety and interest” of a free people “require that they should promote such manufactories, as tend to render them independent on others for essential, particularly for military supplies.”⁷ This would, of course, include wool fabrics for army and navy uniforms. Washington wore a suit of American manufacture when he gave this speech.⁸ Jeremiah Wadsworth himself, Vice President John Adams, and Connecticut Senator Oliver Ellsworth all had suits of Hartford cloth, as well.⁹

Washington’s Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, delivered a report on manufactures to Congress in 1791. He, too, advocated the need to promote “such as will tend to render the United States independent of foreign nations for military and other essential supplies.”¹⁰ When reporting on wool, he wrote, “In a country, the climate of which partakes of so considerable a proportion of winter, as that of a great part of the United States, the woollen branch cannot be regarded as inferior to any, which relates to the clothing of the inhabitants.”¹¹ Hamilton found a great deal of household manufacturing, but he mentioned “the promising essay towards the fabrication of cloths” at Hartford. While he saw the need to “bring to maturity this precious embryo” he went on to advocate the raising and improving of sheep breeds to provide the raw material for manufacturing,¹² which will be addressed later.

Despite claims to the contrary, the output of the Hartford Manufactory was not of consistent quality, nor were prices competitive, and the firm went out of business in 1795. There were subsequent efforts to establish factories. Both wool carding and wool fulling were mechanized by this time, and these processes could be combined with spinning and weaving under one roof to produce finished fabric. For example, English emigrants John and Arthur Scholfield, who came to the United States in 1793, first

⁵ New York *Daily Advertiser*, May 2, 1789.

⁶ Decatur, *Private Affairs of George Washington*, 18-19.

⁷ “First Annual Message to Congress,”

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?documentprint=234>.

⁸ John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington 1748-1799*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1925) 4:68.

⁹ *Salem Mercury*, March 30, 1789; Diana Ross McCain, *It Happened in Connecticut* (Guilford, CT: TwoDot, 2008), 50.

¹⁰ *Alexander Hamilton’s Famous Report on Manufactures Made to Congress December 5, 1791, in his Capacity as Secretary of the Treasury* (Boston: Home Market Club, 1892), 5.

¹¹ *Hamilton’s Report*, 77.

¹² *Hamilton’s Report*, 78.

built a spinning jenny and a hand loom, and they added a wool carding machine of their own design by 1794. With financial backing, they established the Newburyport Woolen Manufactory in Massachusetts. A few years later, the Schofields left to begin their own business in Connecticut. Eventually Arthur decided to concentrate on producing wool carding machines, and John moved his wool factory to Stonington, Connecticut.¹³ Following the lead of Washington, President James Madison wore a suit of fabric from a Schofield factory for his 1809 inauguration.¹⁴

It was the policies of James Madison and his predecessor, Thomas Jefferson, that really stimulated the wool industry. Despite their belief in the agrarian way of life, these Democratic-Republicans recognized that economic independence from Great Britain was necessary for the well-being of the United States. (Jefferson himself established a so-called factory intended to produce fabric to clothe his 130 slaves.¹⁵)

Further, the conflict between Great Britain and her allies and the Napoleonic empire was spreading well beyond the continent of Europe, and the United States was caught in the middle. The Non-Importation Act of 1806 was followed by the Embargo Act of 1807, both of which cut off the supply of British textiles. This was followed by the Non-Intercourse Act of 1809 which interdicted trade with both Great Britain and France.

More local wool factories began to spring up. In 1807, a mill was established at Peace Dale in Rhode Island.¹⁶ In 1808, a committee was appointed in Baltimore, “for the purpose of collecting information relative to, and devising a plan for the establishment of woollen and cotton manufactures” which were “of such immense importance to the welfare and independence of the U. States.”¹⁷ George Booth set up a factory in Poughkeepsie, New York, about 1808. Some individual states or local societies began to award prizes or premiums to encourage local manufacturing and Booth won prizes in 1810 and 1811.¹⁸

In 1809, an article in the Maryland Gazette reported from Hagerstown,

*Our country is becoming Independent in reality. Since the infamous policy now pursued in Europe commenced, we have in this country made rapid progression towards supplying ourselves with cloathing of our own manufacture. . . . We now know, and men of every political sect agree, that we have resources within ourselves, which amply supply the want of that commerce, denied by the belligerents of Europe.*¹⁹

¹³ Grace L. Rogers, *The Scholfield Wool-Carding Machines*. Contributions for the Museum of History and Technology. United States National Museum Bulletin 218. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1959.

¹⁴ William R. Bagnall, *The Textile Industries of the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1893; repr., New York: A.M. Kelley, 1971), 60.

¹⁵ “Textile Factory,”

<http://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/textile-factory>.

¹⁶ Cynthia Dimock, “Rhode Island Military Uniforms: Conservation and Exhibition” (master’s thesis, University of Rhode Island, 1997), 93.

¹⁷ *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Weekly Advertiser*, February 25, 1808.

¹⁸ James H. Smith, Hume H. Cale, and William E. Roscoe, *History of Dutchess County, New York: with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Some of its Prominent Men and Pioneers* (Syracuse, NY: D. Mason & Co., 1882; archive.org/details/cu31924100747272), 463.

¹⁹ *Maryland Gazette*, October 18, 1809.

That same year, “the manufactory of woollen cloth was begun in the vicinity of Newport, Delaware, and there were put in motion one carding machine, two hundred spindles, five broad looms, and one fulling mill, &c.”²⁰ A woolen factory at Danville, Pennsylvania, on the Susquehanna River was reported to be producing a profit after only 9 months.²¹

In 1810, Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin was directed to report to Congress on American manufactures. He found that most wool was spun and woven in private families. He did gather information on 14 factories, although he acknowledged that this list was incomplete. He added, “All those cloths, as well as those manufactured in private families, are generally superior in quality, though somewhat inferior in appearance to imported clothes, of the same price.”²²

With the declaration of war with Great Britain in 1812, supplies of British goods were once again cut off while demand for wool textiles to outfit soldiers and sailors grew. The Providence Woolen Manufacturing Company, the largest woolen mill in the country, was founded that year. This mill was one of the first to use steam power in the United States. After the war, though, the factory closed down.²³ During the war years, there were also new mills in New York, Virginia, Ohio, and Connecticut.

Just how successfully U.S. industries geared up to meet the demands of the military were summarized in a report to the Senate in 1814, “Articles, Foreign and Domestic, Consumed in clothing the Army and Navy of the United States, for the year 1813, and an estimate for 1814.” The Army did better than the Navy, with about 70 per cent of wool items produced domestically, while the Navy only sourced about 15 percent domestically.²⁴

Throughout the period, the lack of a generous supply of good quality raw wool was admitted to be an obstacle to domestic manufacture of fine broadcloth. For example, in 1809, William Milnor, a Federalist representative from Philadelphia, argued that, “it is very well known that in this country, although the coarser cloths were manufactured to a great extent in domestic circles, we could not get into the manufacture of fine clothes. There were not the materials for it. He was happy to have seen a disposition to improve the breed of sheep.”²⁵ Gallatin echoed in his 1810 report that available wool was “still deficient both in quality and quantity.”²⁶ Therefore, American farmers worked to improve the wool supply during this period.

The wool used for the finest fabrics was short in staple and of a fine gauge, with the fleece of merino sheep being the most highly prized of the fine wools. In 1789, the US sheep population was still recovering from the Revolutionary war. The common sheep that survived the war were small, scruffy, and produced wool suitable for only coarse goods. In 1792, prominent Pennsylvania farmer, Richard Peters wrote to George Washington commenting on the sheep industry.

²⁰ *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Weekly Advertiser*, August 30, 1810.

²¹ *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Weekly Advertiser*, August 23, 1810.

²² *Report from the Secretary of the Treasury, on the Subject of American Manufactures, Prepared in Obedience to a Resolution of the House of Representatives* (Boston: Farrand, Mallory, & Co., 1810), 12.

²³ Dimock, “Rhode Island Military Uniforms,” 98.

²⁴ *American State Papers*, Senate, 13th Congress, 2nd Session, Finance, vol. 2, no. 410, pp. 815-820.

²⁵ *National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser*, June 5, 1809.

²⁶ *Report from the Secretary of the Treasury*, 12.

*For some time hence this will not be a great sheep country.... As to fleece it is but scant pounds per sheep being rather an over calculation. Wool is now in some demand but I have known it unsaleable. I hope manufactures will continue to increase demand but the prospect of this is distant....I know none who have tried the sheep business and succeeded.*²⁷

Developing an American breed of sheep that was suitable to produce fine cloth became one of the national agricultural initiatives of the early United States.

To improve existing American sheep, farmers imported breeds such as the Tunis, also called Barbary sheep, and other fat-tailed sheep from North Africa and other places such as East Asia. The Tunis of this time was not like the cinnamon-colored Tunis of today. They were multi-colored and stored fat in their tails much like camels store fat in their humps. The fat-tailed breeds adapted easily to life in American pastures. Benjamin Franklin once boasted in a London newspaper that American sheep grew so much wool on their tails that they needed little carts to trail behind them to carry the weight.²⁸ This boast might have been to counter the fact that Spain jealously guarded her merinos and England had reenacted old laws forbidding the exportation of sheep, effectively preventing America from obtaining the best fine wool sheep in the world.

Undaunted, the Founding Fathers became the Founding Farmers. Each pursued creating an American breed of sheep in different ways. Washington had 800 sheep in 1788 but his breed improvement efforts were derailed by his term as president. When he returned to Mount Vernon in 1797, he had only 200 sheep and they were only producing about two and a half pounds of wool each.²⁹ In the two years before he died, he purchased a nice Persian ram and ewe and also obtained a number of sheep from Barbados. Wool samples from the offspring were sent to Arthur Young in England, one of the first experts to publish books on agricultural practices. Young pronounced them as good as “Kentish wool.”³⁰ Kentish sheep were a type of Southdowns and their wool was used to make a variety of clothes such as military uniforms and it was mixed in with fine cloth, but not solely used for fine cloth.³¹

Thomas Jefferson favored the Tunis and he crossed them with the local common sheep. He also had a high quality Shetland ram. Despite his best efforts, a wool manufacturer in Philadelphia proclaimed that Jefferson’s fleeces were only suitable for blankets.³² Regardless, Jefferson continued breeding sheep and expounding on the virtues of his Tunis breed as being more suitable for American farmers. He demonstrated this by proudly wearing clothing made entirely from his plantation’s homespun. The Tunis

²⁷ Richard Peters to George Washington, June 20, 1792.

²⁸ Janet Vorwold Dohner, *The Encyclopedia of Historic and Endangered Livestock and Poultry Breeds* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 81.

²⁹ United States Bureau of Animal Industry, *Special Report on the History and Present Condition of the Sheep Industry of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1892), 57.

³⁰ George Washington to Sir John Sinclair, July 20, 1794, *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, 16:395-396.

³¹ William Youatt, *Sheep: Their Breeds, Management, and Diseases* (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1837), 239.

³² James Ronaldson to Thomas Jefferson, October 25, 1808. *Thomas Jefferson Papers*, Library of Congress.

might have caught on as the America breed of choice had not the merino craze intervened with the beginning of the War of 1812.

After George Washington's death, his step-grandson, George Washington Parke Custis, bought Washington's Persian ram and some of his flock and started breeding sheep at his new Arlington Plantation. He bred the Persian ram with local common sheep to get the Arlington Longwool breed. The Longwool was described as such, "It is admirably calculated for hose, camblets, serges and other fine worsted fabricks and it would be a pity to see it diverted to any other objects or to the making of fine cloths...."³³

Custis also discovered a flock of feral sheep on Smith Island that were said to have wool as fine as any merino. Custis crossed the Smith Island sheep with his Persian ram and another longwool ram named "Bakewell" (not to be confused with the Bakewell breed of sheep, also known as Leicester Longwool) and created the Arlington Improved breed.

Wanting to encourage local farmers to also work towards improving American sheep, Custis started annual sheep shearing contests, which were a combination of a traditional English sheep shearing and an American agricultural fair. Prizes were given for the best rams as well as the best homespun Virginia cloth. The first shearing was held on April 30, 1805, and only had one competitor, Thomas Lee of Cotton Hall, who showed his ram "Bakewell." Bakewell weighed an impressive 140 pounds and his fleece weighed 12 pounds, far more than any common sheep of the area. Custis purchased Bakewell for \$40 and added him to his breeding flock.³⁴

The next year's shearing saw another local ram take top prize. In 1807, the merinos started to take over the shearings. Custis had a brief victory in 1809 when two of his Arlington Improved breeds won, but two merinos showed up two days late and snatched the top prizes away from him.³⁵ Merinos or part-merinos won the shearings until the last one was held in 1812, right before the war with Great Britain.

It was no coincidence that merinos started taking the top prizes at Custis' shearings in 1807. By then, the United States was starting to feel the pinch of the trade embargos that prohibited importation of fine wool from England. Domestic cloth manufacturers needed fine wool to keep up with the demand. Given that native American sheep still did not have the quality of fleece needed, manufacturers turned to the merino.

The first merino to be imported to the United States in 1801 was a ram named Don Pedro. The DuPont family brought him over from France, and he was quite the sensation. He was passed around among local farmers to improve their sheep. In 1802, Col. David Humphreys also imported 100 merinos, 25 rams and 75 ewes from France.³⁶ While the wool of these sheep was far better than any domestic breed, there was as yet little economic incentive to breed merinos. They were expensive to purchase and

³³ Robert Livingston, *Essay on Sheep* (New York: T&J Swords, 1809), 5.8

³⁴ Murray H. Nelligan *Arlington House: The Story of the Lee Mansion Historical Monument* (Burke, VA: Chatelaine Press, 2001,) 73.

³⁵ Nelligan, *Arlington House*, 85.

³⁶ <http://connecticuthistory.org/david-humphreys>.

smaller than domestic sheep making them unsuitable for mutton. The merinos were little more than a novelty for rich farmers until the trade embargos made them a hot commodity.

Starting in 1809, merino prices started to climb as there was suddenly a demand for fine wool. Sheep started selling for hundreds and then thousands of dollars. Like parents after hot toys at Christmas, enthusiasts would pay just about any price for a sheep. In 1810, Thomas Jefferson scoffed at the news that a local man paid \$6000 for four merino rams.³⁷

Had that man waited just a bit longer, he would have gotten his merinos for a bargain. Napoleon's march into Spain caused a crisis in the country and Spaniards started eating their prized merinos for food. Spain exported 20,000 merinos to the United States in 1810. This was win-win as Spain needed the money and the United States needed the sheep. Even stalwart American sheep enthusiast Thomas Jefferson caved to the merino craze and bought a few merinos. While there was still a demand for them, prices eased off after the sudden influx. After the War of 1812 ended in 1815 and cheap fine English wool was again available in this country, there was a surplus of merino. The poor sheep found themselves served up as mutton as farmers off-loaded the excess stock because it just wasn't cost effective to raise them any longer.

George Washington Parke Custis expressed his hopes for American wool textile manufacturing in this toast at his next to last sheep shearing fair: "By virtue and industry shall a nation flourish! Speed to the plough—Enterprize to the rudder—Independence to the loom!—May these vital interests become "*Tria juncta*" in uno "*Pro Patria semper!*"³⁸

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³⁷ www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/sheep.

³⁸ *National Intelligencer*, May 7, 1811.

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