

Kentucky Extension Homemakers Association
Cultural Arts and Heritage Educational Program
FIBERS • Program of Work Focus • 2026 – 2027

Wool Fiber Processing

The industrial revolution started in Great Britain in the mid-1700s. Technology advancements lead to a boom in textile production and rapid industrial growth. Before the start of the Industrial Revolution, cloth was made on a small scale and mostly at home. The textile industry in American began in New England during the late 1700s. By 1820, textile production was going strong. But, let's back up! What is a textile? We all use textiles every day. People use textiles to make clothing, towels, sheets, tablecloths, upholstery, carpets, boat sails, flags, and many other things.

Textiles are made from fibers that are either natural or man-made. Examples of natural fibers are wool, cotton, flax, or silk. Man-made fibers include polyester and nylon. There are many other fiber contents. Fibers are spun into yarn, thread, or rope; and this is either woven or knit into fabric or cloth.

Let's look more closely at warm and fuzzy natural wool! Wool production has been around for centuries. Wool is a natural fiber that comes from sheep. Wool fibers are hygroscopic, meaning they can hold water without feeling wet, as opposed to cotton, which will drip forever until it's dry. Wool fibers also retain heat, so if your wool socks are wet, they still keep you warm! If wool fibers are stretched, they hold their shape. Wool clothing lasts for years. Durability in clothing was a necessity two hundred years ago, since fabric was expensive. Before the introduction of woolen mills, most of the work was done at home. Whole families participated in making clothes, from tending sheep to spinning yarn, weaving cloth, and sewing.

To make wool yarn and fabric, first, you need raw wool. Sheep are sheared in the spring, which allows the sheep to be comfortable in the summer heat. Next, the raw wool is sorted based on quality and color. Wool then goes through a series of steps to become a finished product:

- **Scouring:** preparing and washing raw wool to remove grease and dirt
- **Picking:** removing the burrs, dirt, and sticks from the wool
- **Carding:** detangling and combing wool fibers, so they all line up in one direction
- **Spinning:** twisting the combed fibers to make yarn
- **Weaving:** interlacing yarns/threads at right angles to form cloth, usually on a loom
- **Fulling:** beating, shrinking, and felting the cloth
- **Napping/Shearing:** raising the fibers on the cloth's surface and shearing them for a smooth finish

Improved machinery allowed factories to create finished fabric much more quickly. Power looms for weaving wool were in heavy use by 1841 and significantly reduced the cost of wool cloth. Water-powered mills and factories were positioned carefully along the rivers to take advantage of the swiftly flowing water and, more importantly, to use the water's weight to turn mill wheels and turbines. Remember, this is before electricity!

By the middle of the century, families no longer had to spend time spinning and weaving. The textile mills and factories provided a wide, affordable variety of textile products. For many decades the industry prospered. The factories were an important source of jobs. People moved from farms to growing towns and cities to work in the factories and the many support businesses that grew up around them.

Today, wool clothing and accessories are still very popular. Most retailers and manufacturers produce these items using a blend of wool and other fibers to make a less expensive product. These products are mainly manufactured outside of the United States. Woolen mills and factories are nearly gone in America. But, the industrial revolution completely changed the way people work and live. The commercial and economic systems created by the industrial revolution live on today.

This summary is based on content, used with permission from:

- Maine State Museum, WOOL and WEAVING
<https://mainestatemuseum.org/learn/msm-at-home/wool-and-weaving/>
- Learn more at the website listed above

Other External Resources:

- Visit the [Cultural Arts Chairperson webpage](#) for a list of resources to support the FIBERS Program of Work focus

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