

THE HISTORY OF WOOL *Fact Sheet*



Like human civilization, the story of wool begins in Asia Minor during the Stone Age about 10,000 years ago. Primitive man living in the Mesopotamian Plain used sheep for three basic human needs: food, clothing and shelter.

Later on man learned to spin and weave. As primitive as they must have been, woolens became part of the riches of Babylon.

The warmth of wool clothing and the mobility of sheep allowed mankind to spread civilization far beyond the warm climate of Mesopotamia.

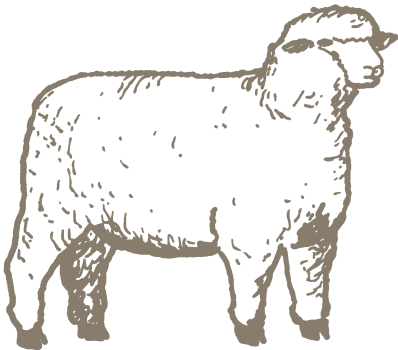
Between 3000 and 1000 BC the Persians, Greeks and Romans distributed sheep and wool throughout Europe as they continued to improve breeds. The Romans took sheep everywhere as they built their Empire in what is now Spain, North Africa, and on the British Isles. They established a wool plant in what is now Winchester, England as early as 50 AD.

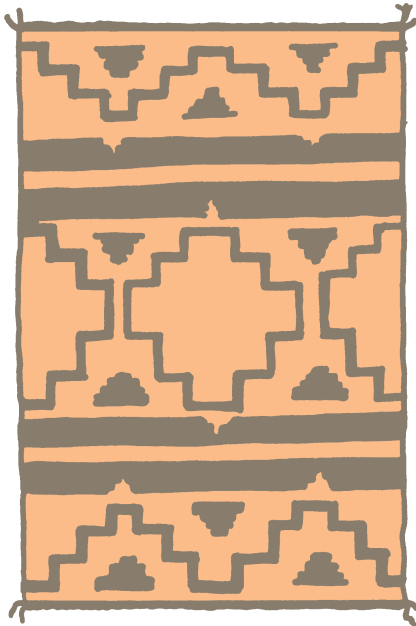
The Saracens, nomadic people of the Syrian-Arabian deserts, conquered Spain in the eighth century and established a widespread wool export trade with North Africa, Greece, Egypt and Constantinople.

During the twelfth century, weaving in Florence, Genoa and Venice was stimulated by the Norman conquest of Greece. The conquerors sent about a hundred Greek weavers to Palermo as slaves, and their extraordinary work was copied at once by Italian weavers.

Back in Spain a thriving wool trade helped finance the voyages of Columbus and the Conquistadores. Guarding its wealth closely, Spain levied the death penalty on anyone exporting sheep until 1786. That year King Louis XVI imported 386 Merino ewes to cross with sheep on his estate at Rambouillet in Northern France. The resulting Rambouillet breed is highly desirable today because of its fine and long-staple wool.

Just like Spain, England froze its borders to raw wool exports. In 1377 England's King Edward III, "the royal wool merchant," stopped woven-goods imports and the domestic weaving of foreign wools and invited Flemish weavers fleeing the Spanish invasion to settle in England where the industry thrived. By 1660 wool textile exports were two-thirds of England's foreign commerce.





Columbus brought sheep to Cuba and Santo Domingo on his second voyage in 1493, and Cortez took their descendants along when he explored what is now Mexico and the southwestern United States. Navajo and other Southwest Indian tribes are famous yet today for their magnificent woolen rugs and colorful wall hangings.

Although pelts may have been worn in Britain as early as the late Bronze Age (3000 BC) England's "empire of wool" peaked during the 1509-47 reign of King Henry VIII. He seized the flocks of the monasteries and redistributed them to court favorites. This caused unemployed shepherds to be sent to prison for non-payment of debts and was one of the unfair treatments which incited immigration to America.

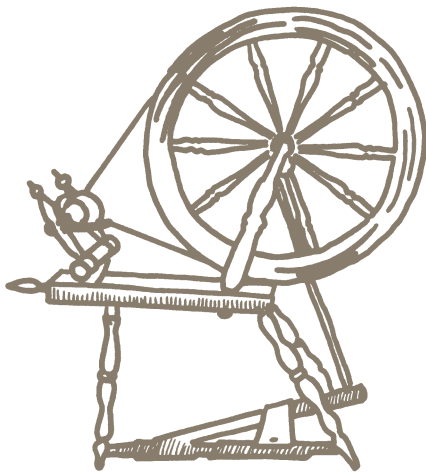
Despite the fact that England tried to discourage a wool industry in North America, a few smuggled sheep had multiplied to about 100,000 by 1665. Massachusetts even passed a law requiring young people to spin and weave. Traditions and folklore grew with the industry. Spinning duties fell to the eldest unmarried daughter in the family, hence the term "spinster." Spun yarn was wound on a reel (weasel) which made a popping sound when a given yardage was reached. Pop goes the weasel!

King George III of England made wool trading in the Colonies a punishable offense. Cutting off the offender's right hand was the chosen punishment. This policy, together with other oppressive actions including the Stamp Act of 1765, which required that revenue stamps be affixed to all printed matter and official documents in the Colonies, helped incite the Revolutionary War.

Despite the King's attempts to disrupt wool commerce, the wool industry flourished in America. Both Washington and Jefferson maintained flocks of sheep; both were inaugurated in woolen suits. New inventions like the spinning jenny, combing machines and water-powered looms, expanded the industry rapidly. Sheep moved West with civilization and beyond; at the turn of the 18th century small flocks in the hands of pioneers started the industry in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

Sheep are as versatile as the fiber they produce. All parts are used; they provide tender, delicious meat... and wool is a renewable resource. Sheep thrive in all 50 states and most nations of the world, often in rough, barren ranges, or high altitudes where other animals cannot survive because of lack of vegetation. Sheep can survive and flourish on weeds and vegetation other animals will not eat, therefore they convert to protein a group of natural resources which would otherwise be wasted.

Sheep fill our food and fiber needs today just as they have for centuries.



AMERICAN WOOL

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