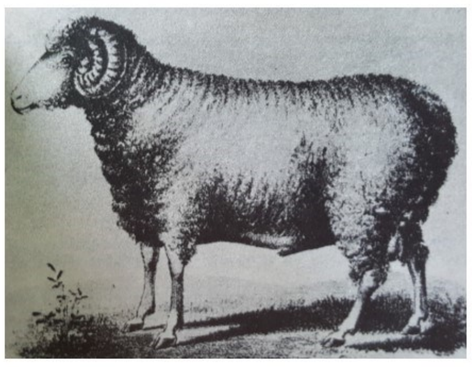
Liberty's Daughters:

Homespun Wool



SHEEP

SHEARS

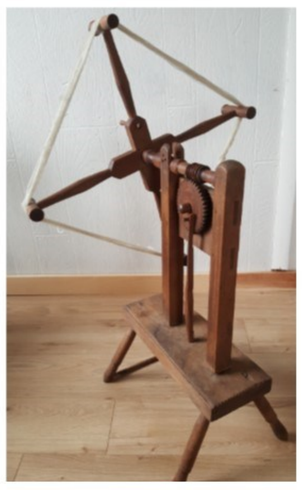
WASH

COULD BE DYED NOW

COMB (WORSTED)

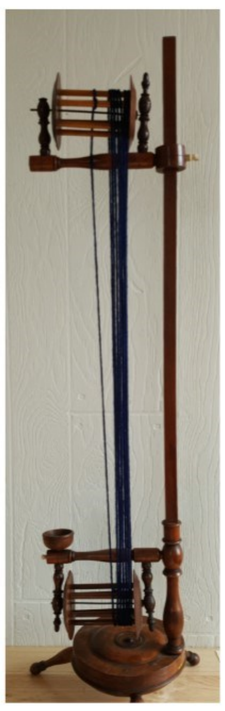
CARD (WOOLEN)

WOOL WHEEL (GREAT WHEEL)



REEL

WASH AND/OR DYE

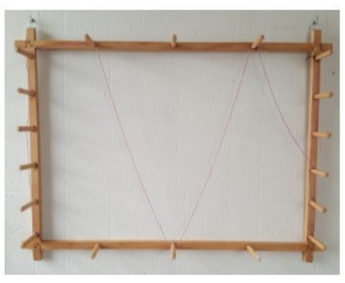


SWIFT

QUILL WINDER

WARP THREAD

SCARNE



WARPING FRAME

WEFT THREAD

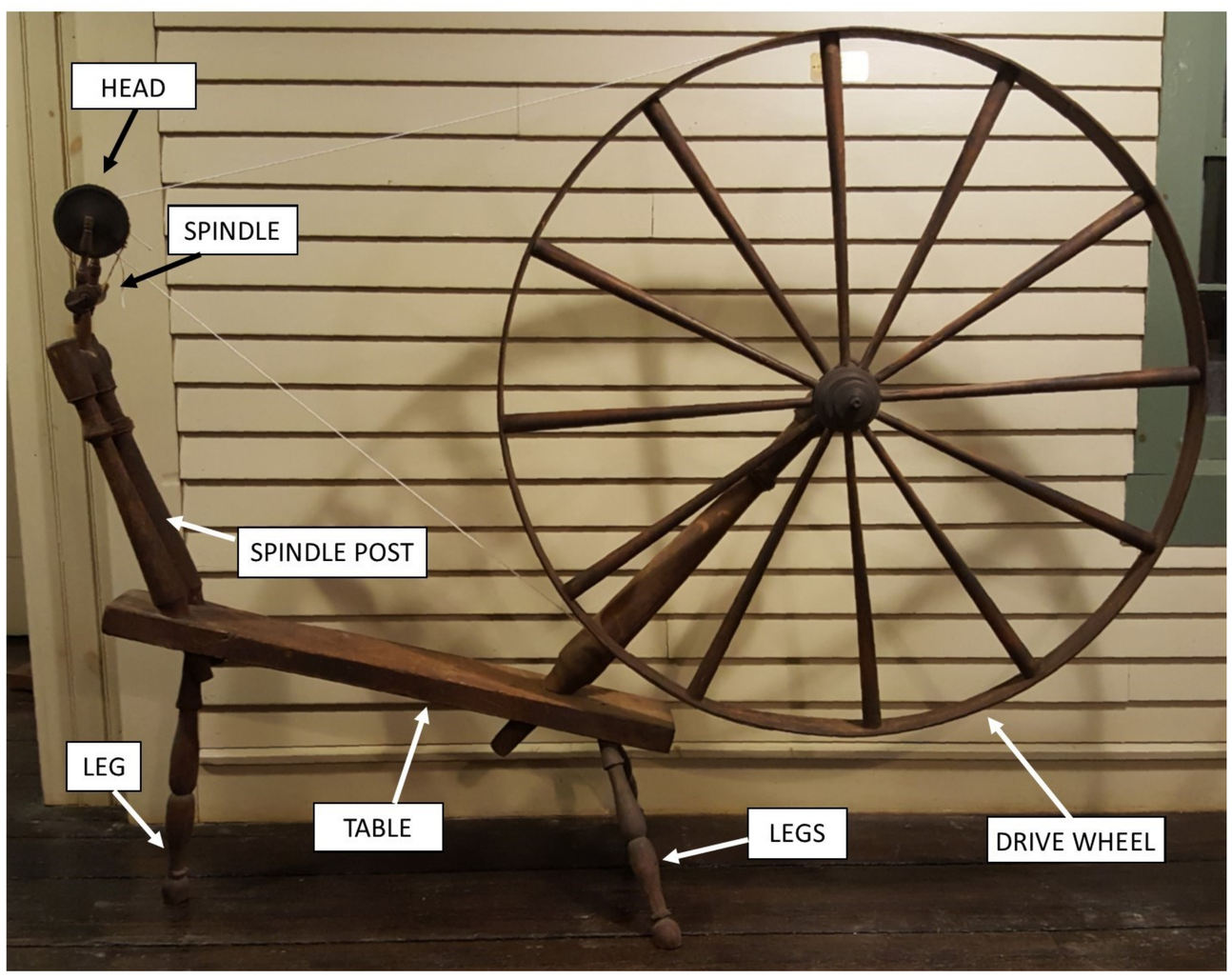
SHUTTLE

LOOM

NAPPING

CLOTH

In the Era of the American Revolution (1763-1783), thread and cloth were made by hand. Until the invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney, Catharine Littlefield Greene, and others in 1793, cotton — like silk — was an expensive luxury fabric. Far less expensive were linen (made from flax), wool, and hemp, all of which were produced on Connecticut farms. The chart above illustrates the complicated processes of making cloth from wool. (Sometimes linen and wool threads were combined to make cloth that was a mixture of the two, known as linsey-woolsey.) Making thread, yarn, and cloth by hand was laborious and complex. Skilled spinners and weavers utilized an array of intricate, mostly wooden, handmade, preindustrial devices and machines. Making woolen cloth by hand required a great deal of skill, knowledge, and experience. True, the male carpenters who built the wheels, looms, and other devices understood how they worked, and even affluent Patriot leaders like John and Samuel Adams, John Hancock, Samuel Huntington, Jonathan Trumbull, Israel Putnam, and Nathaniel Greene grasped the basic principles involved. But the skill required to actually use the machines required many hours of practice. At the time of the Revolution, few Connecticut men had the skills necessary to spin or weave, but many women did. As you look at the great wheels and other machines in the exhibit, think about how complex they are. Could the boycotts of British manufactured textiles have succeeded without the knowledge, skill, and support of the thousands of Patriot women who produced the homespun that replaced the imports?



Great Wheels

While linen was spun from flax on small, treadle-powered flax wheels, wool and cotton were more commonly spun on great wheels, also known as walking wheels. Great wheels were simpler and larger than flax wheels. Lacking treadles, they were operated entirely with the hands. Spinners stood, advancing and retreating from the wheel.

"Although most Americans can recognize a spinning wheel when they see one, few understand how it works…. The basic operation takes place outside the machine between the spinner's thumb and fingers…. A spinning wheel is a mechanical device for keeping a spindle in motion…. Th[e] spindle [on a great wheel] was attached horizontally to the post, then connected by a single cord to the drive wheel. Using one hand to give the wheel an occasional turn, the spinner drew out her fiber with the other. As the thread lengthened, she stepped backward inch by inch until she had gone as far as her arm could reach. Then she reversed the action of the wheel, winding the yarn onto the spindle as she moved toward it…. Wheels like this developed in … the late Middle Ages … for spinning wool. Some spinners used a wooden peg called a wheel finger to turn the wheel…. A worker had to pause frequently to wind her yarn. Bobbin-flyer wheels [such as those used with flax wheels] solved that problem…. A spinner using a flax wheel … threaded a leader of yarn through the tip of a hollow bobbin and out onto one or more of the metal hooks attached to a U-shaped device called a flyer. As the bobbin turned, it automatically wound the newly spun yarn onto the shaft. By the early seventeenth century many flyer wheels also had foot treadles that allowed a spinner to sit as she worked, using both hands to draw…. Treadle wheels were so convenient that one wonders why they didn't replace walking wheels. The reason is that different fibers required different handling."

—Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun*