

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
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OF
NEW ENGLAND

1620—1789

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They range in importance from woollen homespun, through rum and iron to flaxen fabrics and a few attempts at making various necessaries. The manufacture and use of homespun woollen cloth — such a prime necessity — was so thoroughly incorporated in the domestic habits of the people, that its relative industrial importance escaped much especial notice. Written testimony does not indicate the large amounts certainly produced by this diffused industry. We have seen the presence of spinning-wheels and looms in most farmsteads and many village homesteads. Dorchester altered its old powder-mill¹ into a fulling-mill, and a mill had been located in almost every hamlet.² The greater part of these cloths was consumed at home, or in the petty barter of neighborhoods. The governor of New York, in his report to England about 1746, says the country made and had made “their homespun, so termed, of Flax and Wool to supply themselves somewhat with necessaries of clothing.”³ Statements of this kind were always couched in the most modest terms, not to offend British manufacturers.

There are evidences that enough cloth was produced in this way to export some to the frontier districts, not yet able to produce for themselves. In a cargo of assorted goods sent from Boston to Albany in the sloop *Sea Flower*,⁴ 1756, among the shoes, stockings, shirts, caps, and gloves there appear 200 homespun jackets. “White and striped” homespun appears in merchants’ stocks in 1747 and 1748. The price was from 14*d.* to 18*d.* per yard.⁵ There was a social interest and excitement concerning this homespun production, which confirms its economic importance. At the fourth anniversary in 1751 of the Boston Society for promoting Industry and Frugality, 300 “young female

¹ *Hist. Dorchester*, p. 627.

² Bishop, *Hist. Manuf.*, i. 344.

³ *Doc. N. York*, vi. 511.

⁴ *Mass. Arch.*, lxxxix. 82.

⁵ *Suffolk Prob. Rec.*, xl. 294, 295 ; xli. 196, 197.

spinners" spun at their wheels on the Common. Weavers were at their looms also. Advertisements called for yarn to be woven at the "Linen Man^s House in the Common" in 1750. Offers were made to purchase yarn at the same place.¹ Rev. Samuel Cooper,² a prominent divine, preached to the society in 1753, and £453 was collected on the occasion. In the same year Charlestown voted to turn its "old town-house" into a spinning-school.³

All this reveals a popular instinct for home production, groping about to increase its means and its stores. This crude social force was not yet formulated into the desire for economic independence; we shall see a manifestation of this powerful social factor ten to fifteen years later. The present movement went so far beyond its natural sphere that it was nicknamed the "spinning-craze." Another straw revealing the popular breeze is in the notice given by the "News Letter" to a deputation of 150 wool-combers in Cirencester, England,⁴ who waited on the Prince and Princess of Wales journeying to Bath through their district. The men were "adorned with proper colors of combed wool." The purveyors of news in our colonies gathered but few facts from the European world in those days, and only such as most interested their public. Wool and cotton cards were made and sold by Joseph Palmer in Boston in 1746.⁵

This homespun manufacture employed hemp and flax, as well as wool, in its fabrics. Many influential citizens of Boston were enlisted in forwarding the movement for home production, which was expected to cut off importations of linens. One statement is to the effect that £15,000⁶ was granted by the General Court for erecting

¹ *Bos. Eve. Post*, Dec. 17, 1750.

² *Mem. Hist. Boston*, ii. 462.

³ Frothingham, *Charlestown*, p. 263.

⁴ *Bos. News Let.*, Nov. 29, 1750.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Dec. 4, 1746.

⁶ *Mass. Arch.*, lix. 381.