

**THEME:** Colonial Life

**TOPIC:** Colonial Laundry

**PREPARATION / PROPS:** A large galvanized wash tub, 2 large rocks, several 3' long sticks, a laundry bag full of "dirty clothes"

**LESSON:** Let the kids hold the laundry and sticks and stand at the wash tub while you tell them about colonial washing. How did they wash clothing back in Colonial Days? Back then there was no running water and no electric water heaters. All hot water had to be heated over a fire. Colonial women and children would have scrubbed the clothes with rocks and boards to get clothing clean. There were no washing machines - everything was done by hand. Wash day was an all day affair. They often made their own soap. It was called Lye soap and was made from ash lye and animal fat. Soaking laundry in lye, cold or hot, was an important way of cleaning white and off-white cloth. It was called bucking, and aimed to whiten as well as cleanse. Colored fabrics were less usual than today, especially for basic items like sheets and shirts. Ashes and urine were the most important substances for mixing a good "lye". As well as helping to remove stains and encouraging a white color, these were used as degreasing agents.

The "Grand Wash" or the "Great Wash" were names for the irregular "spring cleaning" of laundry. Soaking in lye and bucking in large wooden bucking tubs was similar to processes used in textile manufacturing.



So was the next stage was drying and bleaching clothes and fabrics outside. Sunshine helped bleach off-white cloth while drying it. Sometimes cloth was sprinkled at intervals with water and/or a dash of lye to lengthen the process and enhance bleaching.

Towns, mansions, and textile weavers had an area of mowed grass set aside as a bleaching ground, or drying green, where household linens and clothing could be spread on grass in the daylight.

Early settlers in America established communal bleaching areas like those in European towns and villages. Both washing and drying were often public and/or group activities. People dried clothes by spreading them on bushes.

Large houses sometimes had wooden frames or ropes for drying indoors in poor weather. Outdoor drying frames and clotheslines are seen in paintings from the 16th century, but most people would have been used to seeing laundry spread to dry on grass, hedgerows etc. Clothes pegs/pins seem to have been rare before the 18th century.

Bucking involved lengthy soaking and was not a weekly wash. Until the idea of a once-a-week wash developed, people tended to have a big laundry session at intervals of several weeks or even months. Many women had agricultural and food preparation duties that would make it impossible for them to "waste" time on hours of laundry work every week. If you were rich you had lots of household linen, shirts, underclothing etc. and stored up the dirty stuff for

future washing. If you were poor your things just didn't get washed very often.

Lye soap was the soap of pioneer America. It was a mixture of boiled animal fat and lye. Lye was made by running water through ashes from a wood fire. This had been the basic recipe for many centuries and produced a dark soft soap known as black soap. The lye could be used on its own for laundry and with soap as a second line of attack. The dictionary says lye can be "any detergent material used in washing" and may even be "urine used as a detergent". Chamber lye was a useful laundry product, even though it couldn't be made into soap. Precious urine collected from chamber pots, its many uses included stain removal and pre-wash soaking. It also removed natural oils from wool, and set dyes, not to mention its many uses in medicine.

Here is an interesting quote: "Before that you suffer it to be washed, lay it all night in urine, the next day rub all the spots in the urine as if you were washing in water; then lay it in more urine another night and then rub it again, and so do till you find they be quite out." Hannah Woolley, *The Compleat Servant-Maid*, 1677

### DISCUSSION POINTS:

- How would you like to soak your clothes in urine to get them clean?
- Washing clothes was very time consuming in colonial days. Eventually, the washing machine was invented. Can you think of something that is time consuming and something you could do or invent to make it more efficient?

### ACTIVITY:           Homemade Bubbles – Outdoor Activity

**Materials:** Large bowl or square, flat bottom plastic container, ½ cup liquid dish detergent, 4 ½ cups water, spoon for stirring, 4 tablespoons glycerin, pipe cleaners, plastic straws

**Method:** Slowly stir ingredients together and mix. Bubble solution gets better as it sits. Insert ends of pipe cleaner into plastic straw to form a circular bubble wand. Submerge the bubble wand into the solution and gently wave wand upwards. You can create huge bubbles using this method. Experiment to see what you can create and have fun!



**REFERENCES:** *The American Revolution for Kids: A History with 21 activities* by Janis Herbert, [www.About.com](http://www.About.com), [www.eesortement.com](http://www.eesortement.com), [www.Oldandinteresting.com](http://www.Oldandinteresting.com), [Noahwebsterhouse.org](http://Noahwebsterhouse.org)