

# Kids Korner

## Sheep Popular On Early Colonial Farms

LINDA WILLIAMS

Bedford Co. Correspondent  
WILLIAMSBURG, Va. —

While much has changed in the world since the 1700s, life in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, has a much slower pace.

Each morning in this historic city, the people who go to work in the various trades of the 1700s, dress and speak as though time has stood still.

They talk about how we might gain our independence from England; about the new Spanish colony in the south (now Florida); about how ridiculous it would be to have the capital city located where Washington D.C. now stands. "There's nothing there but an infested river with slimy creatures in it," says a carriage driver.

In the 1700s, Williamsburg was the capital city of this new land. And, even with all its importance, the population was only 1,800 people and 900 of these were slaves.

On the outskirts of the city were farms. Oxen, sheep and even turkeys were often seen being driven on foot through Williamsburg for an auction destination.

The most common sheep of that day was called the Leicester Longwool and this breed is still being raised in Williamsburg. It is one of the very oldest breeds of sheep from England. England was the ruler of the colonies and the governor who was the highest ranking, richest, man in the new world lived in Williamsburg.

England was somewhat snobbish about their wool fabrics and those sent to the colonies were quite costly. Most of the people living near Williamsburg had little money but desperately needed wool.

Nearly all of their clothing was made from wool. The richer people wore finer wools and the poor and the slaves wore wools made from coarser fibers.

To avoid having to purchase all of their fabrics from England, the people living in the colonies began to raise their own sheep.

George Washington, the first president of the United States, had his own flock of sheep which ranged from 600 to 900 head.

That was a large flock for one farmer, as the average farmer had only 20 to 40.

Washington loved farming and experimented with crossing various breeds of sheep to see if he could get finer wools or more meat from his animals.

The Leicester Longwool, however, remained one of the most popular wool breeds of that day.

Today, in the United States, the Merino has replaced this earlier breed. At Colonial Williamsburg, those who manage the sheep feel it is important to keep this breed alive. "We never know when some disease might wipe out all of the Merinos and we would need to rely on these older breeds," says Elaine Shirley who does a lot of the work with the sheep.

While sheep farmers today can

be quite particular about the grasses on which their sheep graze, the early farmers around Williamsburg raised sheep because they were easy to feed.

Anyone with a 4-H sheep project knows parasites and worms are a problem. This is not a new problem, but the treatment is slightly different. Farmers today shove a pill down the sheep's throat to rid them of the parasites, colonists gave them tobacco juice. The worms which invaded the systems of the sheep could not tolerate the tobacco so would die and pass out of their systems.

"The sheep grazed on what grasses were growing so that is what we still let them do today," says Elaine Shirley.

Those who raise sheep today usually have a sheep shearer who travels from farm to farm each spring to shear the wool. At Colonial Williamsburg this was not an option.

Farmers could not afford this luxury and so they learned to shear their own sheep. Consequently there were more different ways to shear than there were breeds of sheep.

It has been learned by those who have researched and studied the early methods of living in the 1700s that wool was used in many more ways than we use it today.

In this city which still lives as though the calendar never shed its pages, wool is used for the same reasons as it was in those early days when George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were getting notions of independence in their heads.

Craftsmen who use wool at Williamsburg include the saddle maker, the shoe makers known as cobblers, printers, furniture makers, weavers, and even builders.

Wool was used for insulation to help keep homes warmer in the winter days which came even to this southern part of Virginia.

Saddle makers stuffed saddles with wool and furniture makers stuffed the cushions of chairs or sofas with wool.

In the print shops where the local newspaper was printed, wool was used on pads to help soak up excess ink.

Even back as far as the 1700s craftsmen learned that lanolin, was a valuable by-product of wool. By extracting the lanolin, cobblers were able to make the leather of shoes softer.

Wealthy ladies who were as concerned about their beauty as women still are today used lanolin on their skin.

Wool was woven into cloth and used to make dresses, suits, pants, skirts, and bonnets for both summer and winter. However, once the southern colonies learned how to raise and process cotton, it became more popular for warmer weather.

Anyone with a sheep project can feel proud that they are raising one of the oldest and most useful of farm animals in America.



Elaine Shirley is one of the people who take care of the sheep at Williamsburg, Virginia. Elaine, who has her degree in animal husbandry, studies about the uses of wool in colonial days. Her latest project is to learn how lanolin was extracted from wool in the 1700s.

### SUPER SNOWY FUN!

Try to find these wintery words! Be careful! They're slipping across the page up, down, sideways, and backwards!

SLUSH SLED SNOWSUIT FUN  
SNOW SLIPPERY ICE SKATING SMILE  
SLEET SAUCER SNOWMOBILE SNIFFLES  
SNEEZE SNOWFLAKE SUN SKATES  
WHEE!!! SKI

Puzzle By  
Gail Strock

A	S	L	U	S	H	F	R	G	X	S
C	L	D	E	U	J	E	P	R	I	K
G	E	S	W	N	C	M	Z	K	V	A
S	D	E	G	U	D	W	S	T	Z	T
N	B	L	A	K	X	C	L	E	D	E
O	K	S	L	I	P	P	E	R	Y	S
W	X	H	M	Q	L	O	E	N	Q	I
F	I	C	E	S	K	A	T	I	N	G
L	T	B	K	N	T	J	P	C	J	L
A	I	S	G	I	B	S	N	O	W	X
K	U	D	M	F	U	N	H	B	H	J
E	S	A	F	F	O	E	V	D	E	S
S	W	F	Z	L	Q	E	D	H	E	M
Y	O	C	F	E	U	Z	L	Z	!!!	I
M	N	I	G	S	N	E	K	W	P	L
E	S	N	O	W	M	O	B	I	L	E