

The Worst Chore in the World

FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO MODERN, DOING LAUNDRY HAS BEEN JUST PLAIN HARD WORK, BUT AMERICAN INGENUITY IN THE 1800S MADE IT A WHOLE LOT EASIER.

By Gregory LeFever



Very little in the history of humanity has been more dreaded than having to do laundry.

This is not an exaggeration. For thousands upon thousands of years, doing laundry was a miserable, demanding, and back-breaking chore – some would argue that it still is – which is why it was one of the very first domestic tasks people farmed out to slaves.

Our ancestors began washing clothes about the time they started wearing textile clothing. Although that date is hard to pin down, we know people in ancient India were wrapping themselves in swaths of cotton about 8,000 years ago, and ancient Egyptians were wearing linen clothing about 7,500 years ago. The Japanese wove hemp into clothing about 6,000 years ago, and ancient Chinese wore garments of silk about 4,700 years ago. Ancient Greeks 3,000 years ago favored tunics of wool or linen, and the traditional togas in ancient Rome 2,000 years ago were usually unsewn wool.

It didn't take long for any of these ancient people to realize that washing extended the life of their clothing by ridding fabrics of the dirt and oils that caused them to eventually rot. They also learned that beating the fabrics in water removed the dirt much faster.



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These two facts meant that for several thousand years, people lugged dirty laundry to rivers and streams where they pounded, scraped, and rubbed their clothing against rocks until it was reasonably clean. Then they twisted the heavy, soaked clothing to wring it out and spread it on grass so it could dry in the sun.

Then they lugged all of the laundry home again, until the next time.

Beetles and Bucking

Pounding clothing against river rocks may sound primitive, but this method of laundering remained common in rural parts of the world well into the 1800s, including plenty of our American ancestors. There were, however, some important developments along the way.

To help remove dirt, people used wooden bats or clubs – sometimes called “washing beetles” – to beat the clothing. At first shaped like broad paddles, by the 1700s they were smaller for use in laundry tubs. Popular across Europe, early colonists brought their indispensable washing beetles with them to the New World.



In another big improvement, people found over time that hot water removed dirt better than cold, giving rise to the laborious practice of building fires to heat water in large metal cauldrons or in pots and kettles to pour into wooden laundry tubs.

People eventually discovered cleaning agents. As far back as ancient Egypt, people realized that scrubbing linen with a mineral salt called natron made clothes cleaner. Another popular “detergent” in ancient Rome was urine. Mixed with hot water, urine gave a startling brightness to tunics, togas, and other clothing. Historians have long pondered why the Romans continued to wash their clothing in urine even after they knew about the laundry soap used in Gaul, but the fact is, the English also favored urine through the 1600s, using “chamber lye” – actually the urine collected from chamber pots – for removing stains.

American pioneers preferred other forms of lye, especially a potent mix of boiled hog fat and the ashes from burned apple wood. Soaking clothing in lye was called “bucking,” and was proven to loosen dirt and grease and to bleach dingy linen. People would soak clothes for several days or longer in a “bucking tub” and then use water – perhaps with the

help of cakes of soap, which evolved from lye – to finish the cleaning process. A list of possessions from a Massachusetts Bay Colony household in 1633 lists a “bucking tub” that had come over on the Mayflower.

Getting to “Wash Day”

In early America as well as in Europe, people went weeks, sometimes months, between doing their laundry. Winter’s icy cold with its frozen rivers certainly discouraged laundering clothes, and farming placed heavy demands on women during the planting and harvesting seasons. Even in the new cities, people let laundry pile up for months on end in anticipation of “wash day.”

Sometimes called the “great wash” or “grand wash,” these special days usually involved washerwomen traveling from home to home – or sometimes a group of neighbors gathering together – to do the washing for one or several families. Fires were fed through the day to keep a steady flow of hot water to tubs filled with suds, while gallons upon gallons of rinse water was hauled to other tubs. Eventually huge heaps of water-logged clothes were wrung out and then hung from poles or clothes lines, or spread out on the grass to dry.





The title “Wash Day Back Yard Reminiscence of Brooklyn 1886” tells much about this painting by the American artist William Merritt Chase (1849-1916).

October was the most popular month for these large laundering sessions, when grimy and blackened clothing from summer’s toil was scrubbed clean before winter made laundering even more difficult. Sometimes smaller washings called “slop washes” were needed in between, but the practice of the “great wash” continued in rural parts of America and Europe until the late 1800s.

During the Victorian era, the concept of the “great wash” changed to “wash day,” as a steady stream of new household appliances and gadgets related to laundering made this change possible for individual households. Monday was designated as the proper day for washing clothes because that allowed other days for drying and ironing clothes and linens so they were ready as “Sunday best.”

American Innovations

It’s remarkable to think how little the tedious chore of doing laundry changed from ancient times until the 1800s. But during that single century, American ingenuity changed the world with several innovations that cut the amount of time and labor required to keep clothes clean.

Take the simple washboard. The New York Times in 1868 called the fluted metal washboard “a great American invention.” While ridged pieces of wood had long been used in parts of Europe to rub dirt from clothing, the world’s first patent for a washboard was in 1833 to Steven Rust of Manlius, New York. Washboards rapidly gained popularity – they were used both in the home and in doing laundry at the riverside – and soon were in commercial production.

Also in the mid-1800s metal washtubs began replacing wooden ones, and plunger-like devices with long wooden handles – known in America as dollies and in England as possessors or peggy-legs – helped agitate clothing in the tubs. Soap was made at home or bought in blocks, but it was used sparingly throughout the 1800s, replacing lye.

Of course, the invention of the washing machine changed laundering forever. There had been attempts in Europe during the early 1700s to ease the laundry burden with some hand-powered contraptions, but nothing that really did the job. While the first patent for a washing machine was issued in 1797 to Nathaniel Briggs of New Hampshire, there are no surviving examples of his invention, and even the description on the patent was destroyed in 1836 by a fire in the U.S. Patent Office.



The American painter Charles Courtney Curran (1861-1942) captured the play of shadows on freshly dried sheets in his 1887 painting “Hanging Out Linen.”

Laundry Becomes Modern

Following the Civil War in the mid 1800s, several models of American washing machines became available, most of them consisting of a tub-like container for water and assorted methods of agitating the clothing with hand-powered levers or cranks. Within a couple of decades these machines were available in popular catalogs, such as Sears and Montgomery Ward, with prices from about \$2.50 to \$6, depending on the sophistication of the device.

The true inventor of the electric-powered washing machine remains unknown, though these sought-after machines were available as early as 1904. As electricity spread rapidly throughout American cities and countryside, the electric washer became a standard appliance in many homes. In 1921, more than 415,000 washing machines were manufactured in America, 70 percent of them electric, and within a decade, the number of new machines built in a year exceeded a million, with over 80 percent of them electric.

Along the way, devices for wringing wet clothes also became mechanized. The wringer or “mangle” – a name that reflected the dangerous nature of the machine – consisted of rollers that squeezed the water from wet clothing and linens. Early mangles used a hand crank, but in the early 1900s were electrically powered to work in conjunction with washing machines.

Finally, granulated laundry soaps became available in the early 1900s, driving still more washing machines sales. Names such as Ivory, Borax, Gold Dust, Rinso, and Lux, became familiar household terms along with these new labor-saving machines that were changing the operation of the American home.



Making Money from Laundry



Throughout recorded history, people have taken most any opportunity to unload the task of washing clothes onto somebody else. In both ancient Greece and Rome, slaves stomped tunics and togas clean in large vats of urine. Slaves and indentured servants in America and elsewhere have been the frequent recipients of mountains of laundry they handled as part of their servitude.

But for many others, laundry became a livelihood. Wealthy households have long hired other people – usually women who lived nearby – to clean their clothing and linens. By the early 1800s, laundresses were the most common domestic servants in America. In fact, doing laundry was among the earliest jobs available to women seeking respectable wages.

These laundresses worked either “out” – which meant they did the laundry in their clients’ homes – or did it “in” their own homes. For most women, “in” was preferred because they could take care of their children while they did other people’s laundry. They also could control the amount of laundry they took in so they could still manage their own household chores.

The American West was especially profitable for laundresses, who would take in the laundry of the many single men who worked the gold fields, ranches, and were building the new towns. In the mid to late 1800s, a laundress could charge two dollars a load, so an ambitious laundress could earn around 20 dollars a week – pay as good as most of her men customers were making.

Laundry Goes Commercial

Commercial laundries were an outgrowth of the work of laundresses, especially in America's growing cities. In places such as New York, laundries often were identified with Chinese immigrants who had little other job opportunities. By 1900 in America, one of every four Chinese male immigrants worked in a laundry, and by the outset of the Depression in the 1930s there were nearly 4,000 Chinese laundries in New York alone.

The laundry business also spurred innovation among manufacturers to create better washing machines, ironing machines, and driers. While the term "Laundromat" signifying coin-operated washing machines goes back to the 1880s, these businesses took hold during the 1930s.

From a domestic standpoint, perhaps the author Catharine E. Beecher – sort of a Martha Stewart of her day – best characterized the role of laundry in this country. Writing in her 1869 book *The American Woman's Home*, she suggested the formation of neighborhood cooperative laundries where a dozen families would pool the money they spent on laundry supplies and instead hire a couple of women to take on the chore.

"One or two good women could do in first-rate style what now is very indifferent done by the disturbance and disarrangement of all other domestic processes in these families," Beecher wrote. "Whoever sets neighborhood laundries on foot will do much to solve the American housekeeper's hardest problem."



A Maytag washing machine from the early 1900s.



This Depression-era photo of a North Carolina home shows how laundry consumed the porch area. The women stand by a metal tub that collects water from the washing machine, which is equipped with a wringer. The water likely came from the nearby hand pump. (Photo courtesy University of North Carolina)