

American Knitting History - Knitting In The New Land

Puritans who left to colonize New England took along knitting because it discouraged wicked idleness, not because they preferred fashionable knitted stockings. Woven ones "are much more serviceable than knit ones..." Still, an enormous amount of idle time was made profitable by knitting, a skill that all the girls in the new land mastered before marriage and used perpetually thereafter. Orphan girls or daughters of indigent parents were taught to knit and sew so that they could support themselves when there were older. Women with large households or purses took on maids to help with sewing and knitting. Young girls were customarily "bound out," much as boys were apprenticed, to households where they were taught the skills of housewifery, knitting first of all.

Widows made a living by running "dame schools," where very young children were taught the alphabet and girls were taught knitting. This was often the only formal education girls received. Women in truly dire financial straits mended and washed stockings. Knitting was, then as now, much more pleasurable than laundry.

At first yarn was imported by the new colonies because getting enough food took too much time to make spinning economically feasible. As land was broken and food became more plentiful, spinning wheels were imported and the production of wool yarn and linen thread were transferred to colonial soil. This did not become a matter of dispute until England, wishing to refill its war-depleted coffers, began to demand that the colonies buy only English-made yarn and thread, rather than producing their own. This led to hard feelings, the Revolutionary War, and American Independence.

Time passed and America became more wealthy. Education became an increasingly available luxury. Reading, writing, needlework, and knitting were taught to girls in day or boarding schools. The population, growing in literacy and wealth, was a perfect market for publishing businesses, which brought out books of morality, household hints, and needlework patterns. These early books are a wonderful view into which skills were basic education and which ones weren't. The earliest books have patterns for knitted items, some decorative stitches, but not instructions on how to knit, so we know that in the 1840's knitting was not learned from books. The items in the earliest books were stockings or accessories or baby clothes, not outer garments, which was nothing new. Garments were made of woven cloth, and why shouldn't they be? Women and men wore corsets to set their figures into the acceptable shape. When inner clothing admits no real movement there is no reason to wear stretchy outer garments. Miss Lambert was sufficiently radical in 1857 when she included a pattern for a knitted spencer, which was a short jacket, sometimes worn under the dress for warmth. They are still popular underwear in Australia and New Zealand, where central heat is not the norm.

America was not the only land colonized by knitters. From the 17th century on, colonization was one of Europe's leading industries. The earliest emigrants couldn't get along at home for economic differences (poverty), or moral differences (criminal behavior). Such people were exported to distant lands that needed the civilizing touch.

Canada, New Zealand, and Australia all became knitting societies because colonists soon discovered that there were no handy peasants or factories to do the knitting. New Zealand emigrant lists of the 1840s recommended to working class male emigrants that they take knitted guernseys (pullovers), while "neither shoes nor stockings are at all necessary." Work shirts of woven fabric sufficed when the guernseys wore out, and knitting skills were abandoned by women who no longer needed stockings for their families, a blessing when you are trying to make your living in a new land. At the same time, gentlemen emigrants were advised to take with them 60 pairs of stockings. When those stockings were gone, where would new stockings come from? Sometimes working class immigrants refused to knit in the new land because knitting was still, to them, the work of peasants. Gentlemen's imported stockings were slow to arrive and expensive, so the wives of gentlemen had to learn to knit.

All immigrants to Canada still needed warm knitted stockings to keep from freezing. Ladies traded essentials or money for these when they could, but sometimes there was no other choice but to learn to knit.

Knitting might be learned from a former peasant (often an emigrant from the chaos of industrialization) who had knitted back home, or it could be learned from a book. The degradation of taking up knitting wore off with the first pair of warm socks, if not sooner, and new knitters wrote home of their daring exploits with yarn and needles. The upper class families that had spawned wild colonials learned that knitting could be enjoyable.

About the Author

Chaka is a knitting enthusiast who loves to knit baby clothes. In fact, she has a great [baby knitting pattern](#) to recommend for anyone else who likes to knit baby clothes. She also has great recommendations for [knitting patterns hats](#) for those who like a different sort of challenge.