Cottons Consumption In The Seventeenth- And Eighteenth-Century North Atlantic

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COTTONS CONSUMPTION IN THE
SEVENTEENTH- AND EIGHTEENTH-
CENTURY NORTH ATLANTIC

ROBERT S. DUPELESSIS

The long debate over the relative contributions of foreign and domestic demand to European industrialization remains unresolved. In recent years, however, scholars have emphasized the dynamism and growing prominence of Atlantic markets in the eighteenth century. Ralph Davis’s seminal articles reveal that total English exports (including re-exports) rose some two and a half times in value between 1699—1701 and 1772–4, but those to Africa and the Americas jumped sixfold, with exports of English manufactures multiplying by a factor of nearly 8.4.¹ In the case of France, foreign trade grew fivefold. French trade with Europe quadrupled, but that with the Atlantic world increased tenfold. The Atlantic’s share of French exports rose from 4 per cent to 17 per cent in the eighteenth century.² Fuelled by the slave trade, exports to Africa grew impressively. By the late eighteenth century, more than 10 per cent of French exports, and nearly 5 per cent of British, went to West African markets. But European trade achieved its greatest gains in the New World. France’s exports to the West Indies and North America increased by eight times in the eighteenth century; the Caribbean alone took thirteen times more manufactures in 1787–9 than in 1716–20.³ The expansion of Britain’s American trade was even more dramatic, with a twentyfold increase in exports to the West Indies and North America in the eighteenth century, again with domestic manufactures in the lead. By 1707–8, the Americas took nearly 60 per cent of English exports, as opposed to just 10 per cent in 1700–1.⁴

The textile industries of Europe benefited handsomely from the growing Atlantic trade. English textile exports and re-exports to the Americas and West Africa rose more than 500 per cent from 1699–1701 to 1772–4. Apart from woollens, the non–European Atlantic became far and away the leading market abroad for domestic fabrics: exports of British textiles jumped ninefold, more than three times the gain registered by re-exports. Even after nearly a century of expansion, manufactures comprised a lower proportion of French exports (34 per cent in 1787) than of English (54 per cent in 1772–4). Nevertheless, exports of both French and foreign textiles—notably cottons, linens, and silks—to West Africa and most of all to the Antilles grew smartly.

The claim that Atlantic demand was important for the emergence of modern European cotton textile industries, which Wadsworth and Mann argued long ago, has lately been revived. Atlantic markets took eleven times as many English cottons in 1772–4 as in 1699–1701, an expansion rate second only to linens (an astounding 31 times starting from 1722–4), and well ahead of woollens (6.2 times) and silks (3.7 times). Yet in contrast to the attention that has been given to the contours of cotton consumption in Europe, remarkably little is known about the reception and appropriation of cottons in the other parts of the Atlantic. Who bought cottons? When, where, and how? For what reasons? With what other fabrics did they compete? What were the similarities and differences in cotton cloth consumption between Europe and other regions?

This essay seeks to answer these questions in six British and French North American and Caribbean colonies from the late seventeenth century to the 1760s, which was the eve of imperial transformations and the industrialization of cotton manufacturing. In this period the Atlantic system linked formerly separate markets and created new ones, challenging existing producers and products while encouraging new entrants and new goods. Cottons’ advance took place within a dynamic and unsettled environment that affected all consumers and all textiles.


COTTON CLOTH CONSUMPTION

As may be seen in Table 11.1, in the late seventeenth century cottons accounted for a small fraction of merchant stocks of textiles, lagging far behind woollens and linens (and silks as well in Jamaica). In this period, cotton textiles found their way into the homes and onto the bodies of European settlers, but rarely those of indigenous peoples. In the Montreal area, cotton was the primary material of some 4 per cent of colonists’ garments in 1680–99, and also formed a modest share of their curtains, bedspreads, and table linens (Table 11.4).

Table 11.1. Textiles in Merchant Stocks, 1680s and 1690s (percentages of total textile values)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Textile</th>
<th>New France</th>
<th>Pennsylvania</th>
<th>Jamaica</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cottons</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>8.71</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linens</td>
<td>19.29</td>
<td>38.43</td>
<td>44.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed fibers</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silks</td>
<td>6.83</td>
<td>6.04</td>
<td>22.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woolens</td>
<td>66.11</td>
<td>41.17</td>
<td>21.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>99.99</td>
<td>100.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Lists of individual items of clothing in British colonial inventories are too incomplete to permit quantitative analysis, but they make clear that Pennsylvanians acquired only limited quantities of calico, cotton, and fustian carpets, coverlets, and curtains. If several Philadelphia merchants strutted about in calico and fustian waistcoats, amidst their fellows’ mainly linen and woollen attire, they stood out mainly for their eccentricity. In Jamaica, households often had some cotton furnishings on their beds, floors, or windows and a minority of testators had a calico or fustian or muslin garment in their wardrobes. But as elsewhere, these items were anomalies, so it is not surprising that in the late seventeenth century four of five Jamaican tailors whose shops were inventoried upon their deaths possessed no cotton textiles. At this time, in all three colonies cotton

9 The low percentages of cottons in merchant stocks in all three late seventeenth-century colonies are consistent with evidence from two Charleston merchant inventories from 1692 and 1694 (the only ones extant from late seventeenth-century South Carolina): cottons (7% by value) trailed woollens (52%), linens (26%), and even silks (10%). Charleston Public Library, Charleston County, South Carolina (henceforth CPL), Wills and Miscellaneous Records, WPA Transcriptions, liii. 117–32, 199–204.
Table 11.2. Textiles in Merchant Stocks, 1730–39 (percentages of total textile values)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Textile</th>
<th>New France</th>
<th>Pennsylvania</th>
<th>South Carolina</th>
<th>Louisiana</th>
<th>Saint-Domingue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cottons</td>
<td>10.77</td>
<td>14.68</td>
<td>9.45</td>
<td>21.03</td>
<td>30.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linens</td>
<td>30.18</td>
<td>32.16</td>
<td>26.11</td>
<td>59.16</td>
<td>39.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed fibers</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>7.95</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silks</td>
<td>6.52</td>
<td>13.97</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>10.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woolens</td>
<td>51.42</td>
<td>28.17</td>
<td>57.82</td>
<td>14.15</td>
<td>17.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


items provided accessories and accents in a textile culture dominated by linens and woollens.

By the 1730s this situation had changed dramatically. Cotton cloth was found in greater abundance in North America and the Caribbean, particularly in the French colonies of Louisiana and Saint-Domingue where they ranked second only to linen stuff (Table 11.2). There is very little usable information about textile preferences in early South Carolina, but the expenditures of Sarah Lindley’s guardians in the two years up to and including her wedding in 1720 indicate that cottons—at 24 per cent of outlays—were second only to silks (54 per cent) and had become one of the standard materials for the gowns, petticoats, and undergarments of well-to-do urban women.10 Inventories show that cotton fabrics had achieved even greater acceptance among free colonists in Louisiana and Saint-Domingue, and in Montreal cotton’s share in garments had quadrupled (Table 11.4). In these places, such quotidian apparel as culottes, vests, gowns, petticoats, mantelets, and underclothing were now frequently fashioned from cotton cloth, along with the neckwear, kerchiefs, and other accessories that had been the main cotton items in earlier Montreal. Judging by planters’ textile holdings, cheap cottons helped clothe slaves in Saint-Domingue, though there, as in Louisiana, linens were preferred for that purpose.

By the 1760s, cottons were readily accessible throughout the British and French New World colonies. They comprised one-fifth of merchant textile

10 South Carolina Historical Society (henceforth SCHS), Lindley Papers, 34–355.
Cottons Consumption in the North Atlantic

Table 11.3. Textiles in Merchant Stocks, 1760-69 (percentages of total textile values)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Textile</th>
<th>New France</th>
<th>Pennsylvania</th>
<th>South Carolina</th>
<th>Louisiana</th>
<th>Jamaica</th>
<th>Saint-Domingue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cottons</td>
<td>20.20</td>
<td>19.78</td>
<td>20.43</td>
<td>30.36</td>
<td>22.63</td>
<td>37.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linens</td>
<td>36.46</td>
<td>28.15</td>
<td>36.28</td>
<td>59.57</td>
<td>61.67</td>
<td>50.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misc.</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silks</td>
<td>8.95</td>
<td>9.14</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>4.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woolens</td>
<td>32.66</td>
<td>32.87</td>
<td>32.82</td>
<td>6.77</td>
<td>6.13</td>
<td>5.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>99.99</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


holdings in New France, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Jamaica, one-third in Louisiana, and two-fifths in Saint-Domingue (Table 11.3). Cotton had not become the leading textile in any colony. Linens held that position, except in Pennsylvania where it is likely that only part of an extensive domestic linen production entered merchant distribution networks. Nevertheless, in Saint-Domingue, Jamaica, and Louisiana, cottons were second only to linens, and the two fibres together accounted for 85–90 per cent of all merchant cloth. In New France, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, by contrast, woollens retained a stronger position; yet even there linens and cottons were about half of merchant stocks.

Inventories from the three French colonies reveal that cottons were the fabric of choice for about a third of decedent garments in the 1760s. In New France cotton’s share doubled between the 1730s and the 1760s, but had risen only modestly above the 1730s’ levels in Louisiana and had fallen in Saint-Domingue.

Table 11.4. Cotton Garments in Three French New World Colonies (percentage of garments with known fabrics)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1680–99</th>
<th>1730–39</th>
<th>1760–69</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New France</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>15.98</td>
<td>31.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td></td>
<td>29.16</td>
<td>30.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint-Domingue</td>
<td></td>
<td>45.27</td>
<td>31.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


(Table 11.4). Taken together, the 1730s data from Louisiana and Saint-Domingue (where cottons had comprised a higher proportion of individual free decedents’ garments than of merchants’ textile stocks), and the 1760s data, demonstrate that garments drove cottons’ advance. A comparison of clothing lists from the three colonies indicates that accessories had opened the door to cottons, but basic garments such as gowns, skirts, petticoats, trousers, vests, waistcoats, and the like had secured for cottons a substantial presence in the textile cultures of North America and the Caribbean. The growth in cottons’ market share continued beyond the 1730s with continuing inroads into garments and accessories and helped by the appearance of cotton outerwear—even overcoats in Montreal.

In this final period, a few pieces of ‘homespun’ cotton cloth were found in rural Pennsylvania and New France. Despite important new research, it is still not possible to determine what fraction of the cloth available in North America was locally produced (none is known to have been made in the Caribbean). Scholars agree, however, that the fabrics manufactured in the colonies consisted overwhelmingly of linens and woollens. Cottons, therefore, remained quintessentially imported fabrics.

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PATTERNS OF COLONIAL COTTONS CONSUMPTION: PERSONS, LOCATIONS, OCCASIONS

In late seventeenth-century Montreal and its environs, cottons were most likely to be found in bazin, calico, or mousseline undergarments and accessories. Their Canadian owners were usually urban male officials, merchants, and professionals whose homes also boasted the odd cotton curtain, table linens, and bedspread. Very rarely did men and women from other social and occupational groups, not to mention country folk, own cotton fabrics of any type. More fragmentary data from Philadelphia and Jamaica in the last quarter of the seventeenth century reflect a similar preponderance of male accessories as well as a few fustian and calico waistcoats, cotton petticoats, and muslin aprons. Jamaican inventories also show that cottons were unequally distributed by legal status: not only were they rare, they were for free settlers, while rough linens clothed slaves.*

The rapid and broad adoption of cottons as material for basic clothing during the early eighteenth century complicated cottons’ identity. Account books and inventories from 1730s New France, South Carolina, and Louisiana confirm cottons’ marked association with free urban dwellers. Cottons comprised 16 per cent by value of the textile stocks of merchants operating in the immediate Charleston, South Carolina, area, but just 3.5 per cent of the textiles on rural traders’ shelves. In the same period, while about a quarter of the textile stocks of New Orleans merchants were cottons, they constituted just 6 per cent of the holdings of traders operating on the Louisiana frontiers. Nevertheless, cotton fabrics had broadened their social range. Rather exclusively for the well-to-do in the later seventeenth century, by the 1730s they were owned by colonists of middling wealth and perhaps even by the less affluent.

In the early eighteenth century cottons were consumed increasingly by women, and the gender identity of the fibre came to be reversed, as reflected in family expenditure records. In Louisiana, between a third and a half of a small

13 See Hans Sloane, A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica (London, 1707, 1725), i, xlvi and lv.
14 Louisiana Historical Center, New Orleans, French Superior Council Records, docs. 1737081405, 1737081501, 1739031002 (two invoices), 1739070701.
number of distinctively male garments (notably culottes and vests) were tailored from cottons; in contrast, half to three-quarters of nearly every type of women's basic garments were cotton. In Montreal, women owned nearly two-thirds of cotton garments, while for men it was just over a third.

By the 1760s, cottons extended their reach into outerwear and their social ambit expanded in the populace, though they were always more common on the bodies of the affluent than of those with modest incomes. For this reason, mousseline/muslin, a more expensive cotton, consistently remained a top seller. From the 1760s it was rivalled by calico/indienne, which appealed to a broad spectrum of consumers because of the variety of qualities, finishes, and prices. At the same time, cottons became more firmly female. On average, a Montreal woman of any class would have three or four times as many cotton garments as a man of the same social order. Her Louisiana sisters owned about twice as many cottons as men, who for their part held half again as many linens and at least five times as many woollens, while woollens had all but disappeared from women's wardrobes. Very incomplete data from the Illinois country (Upper Louisiana) suggest that the cottons that made their way inland in the packs of voyageurs and pedlars were likewise largely destined for women's wear. Analysis of free colonists' garments in Saint-Domingue inventories paint much the same picture: about a quarter of men's wardrobes was fabricated from cottons, as against a half of women's, and woollens in particular were heavily male. In both Louisiana and Saint-Domingue, finally, both male and female slaves were issued increasing if unquantifiable amounts of cottons, particularly cheap siamoise, check, and blue and white stripes; in addition, in both colonies female slaves—participating in the prevailing gendered consumption pattern—used their own resources to purchase calico and muslin headscarves and skirts.

The legal status correlates of cottons probably began to blur in Jamaica, too, where the proportion of cotton textiles in planters' holdings jumped ninefold between the late seventeenth century and the 1760s. To be sure, cottons continued to lag far behind linens and were only half as common as among Saint-Domingue planters. Still, some of the check, Bengal stripe, and other inexpensive cottons found in slaveowners' storehouses must have been destined for slave garments, even if linens remained the mainstay for that purpose.  

16 In advertisements for runaway servants and (a minority) slaves in the Pennsylvania Gazette, 4% of garments were specified as cottons in 1731–3, 13% in 1762.
19 Médéric Louis Elie Moreau de Saint Méri, Description topographique, physique civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'île de Saint-Domingue (Philadelphia, 1797–8), i. 59–60; DuPlessis, 'Cloth and the Emergence of the Atlantic Economy', 76 (tab. 10, col. 3), and 82–3.
Slaves' own funds also may have been spent on cottons, as in Saint-Domingue and Louisiana. And of course cottons' presence on plantations in all three colonies qualified their close association with urbanity.

The surviving sources do not allow us to determine whether in Jamaica race also shaped the consumption of cottons as it did in Saint-Domingue or whether the different proportions of free people of colour on the two islands were reflected in their respective textile cultures. In Saint-Domingue all classes of whites favoured woollens and silks to a much greater extent than all classes of free people of colour, who wore considerably more clothing made of cottons and linens. These racial differences in material identities among the free population intersected with differences derived from gender, profession, and legal status. On plantations nearly all woollen and silk garments belonged to male planters, irrespective of race, while their wives, daughters, and female slaves held disproportionate amounts of cottons. In fact, as cottons took on pronounced gendered and racialized identities in Saint-Domingue, their consumption began to decline (Table 11.4), a development accentuated by the high proportion of men among colonists. The cottons that formed a growing share of merchant stocks were increasingly directed toward bondswomen rather than to their free sisters.

These developments indicate the emergence of a distinctive West Indian–Gulf of Mexico cottons consumption model. Though all evidence points to greater use of cottons in Louisiana and Saint-Domingue than in Jamaica, in all three colonies cottons were consumed by women and by groups lower in the socio-economic hierarchy. While this was true of the other North American colonies examined in this essay, the West Indian–Gulf of Mexico centres followed divergent territorial, legal-status, and, at least in Saint-Domingue, racial vectors. On the Atlantic coast of North America, marked urban–rural and free–unfree differences in the adoption of cottons lessened only slightly. Thus rural South Carolina traders doubled the proportion of cottons in their inventories between 1730–9 and 1760–9, while those in Charleston rose by only a half; yet the latter's holdings (24 per cent) still exceeded the former's by a factor of three and a half. Inventory data from New France similarly reveal that the average city resident owned nearly four times as many cotton garments as country folk, a pattern confirmed by purchases recorded in retailers' accounts. A clear and substantial if unquantifiable distinction between the cottons consumption habits of townspeople and of their rural compatriots is also manifest in account books.

21 See Moreau de Saint Méry, Description, i. 93.

22 James E. McClellan, Colonialism and Science: Saint-Domingue in the Old Regime (Baltimore, 1992), 48–9, 56–67.

23 Archives Nationales du Québec, Montréal (henceforth ANQM), Fonds Château de Ramezay P 345; Université de Montréal, Collection Baby, G2/34, Registre 3, Étienne Augé et Pierre Guy, Grand livre de comptes 1740–56; Archives Canada, Mf. 852, Étienne Augé, Journal E.
from the British colonies. In the booming settlement of Lancaster, a transport and commercial hub 100 km west of Philadelphia, merchant stocks suggest a textile consumption profile midway between those of rural farming country and the thriving port city of Philadelphia. In all likelihood, Lancaster’s merchants sold the bulk of their cottons to townspeople. By the late eighteenth century there had emerged a specifically urban apparel regime, in which city folk dressed in lighter and more colourful clothing, more often made of cotton fabrics, than their free country cousins, whose garments remained more rooted in linens and woollens.

Limited purchases of cotton textiles by the Amerindian population indicate that the fibre was most strongly associated with Euro-American urban residents in colonial North America. Amerindians obtained cotton cloth from both commercial and gift exchanges. Presents may have expressed official norms more than Native wishes, but traders probably hewed closely to Amerindian preferences, since competitors were usually near at hand. Heavy and durable woollens and linens always remained clearly dominant in traders’ assortments through the 1760s, although cottons did make some inroads.

Late seventeenth-century cargoes from Montreal to the fur-trading posts in the Great Lakes region did not contain much cotton cloth or garments. Those sent in 1715–39 contained only 2 per cent cottons by value and those in 1740–8 barely 3 per cent. Flows of cottons to British-allied Native Americans from Philadelphia were also minimal. In 1722–8, for example, cottons formed just 2 per cent of the fabric that the leading wholesaler James Bonsall sold to Indian traders. Calico petticoats and pieces of ‘course flowered Calicoe’ were mentioned when South Carolina’s Commissioners of the Indian Trade established prices of trade goods in 1716, and both were also offered as gifts, but their quantities paled in comparison with those of linens and woollens.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, cottons were more available to

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Amerindians. Indeed, many Native Americans had evidently come to expect them in assortments of goods that they received. During the 1750s, for example, when war disrupted supplies from France, voyageurs reportedly stopped at the British Oswego post to obtain printed cottons among other ‘prohibited goods’. In the late 1730s, private traders in Louisiana bartered cottons, though French officials disdained them—perhaps because they could not obtain the cloth—so they were very rarely found in gift distributions. South Carolina’s Governor Glen was bolder and cottons totalled 6 per cent by value of his ‘Invoice for goods given to South Carolina and Georgia Indians’ in 1748.

The increasing sale of cottons to Amerindians did not take place at the same pace across North America, however. In the mid-1750s, the value of cloth and clothing held by western Pennsylvania Indian traders included 73 per cent woollens, 25 per cent linens, just 1 per cent cottons. In the 1760s, cottons accounted for only a few per cent of the cloth distributed by George Croghan, both in his private trade and as gifts on behalf of the Crown. Croghan was based at Fort Pitt, which lay on the western edge of Pennsylvania. Nevertheless, Native American cotton consumption grew in the eighteenth century. The goods stocked at a Susquehanna Valley, Pennsylvania, frontier store in 1763 contained 12 per cent cottons and calicoes by value; the Indian traders supplied by Macartan and Campbell at Augusta in 1762-4 and in the late 1760s by George Galphin at Silver Bluff (both trading posts were on the Savannah River between South Carolina and Georgia) regularly bought lengths of calico, striped cotton, and cotton romals, as well as cotton handkerchiefs and cotton check shirts, that together amounted to 10 per cent of their total outlays; and cotton fabrics and garments composed from less than 5 to perhaps 15 per cent of total eillage in cargoes sent from Montreal to the Great Lakes in the early 1770s.

30 Dunbar Rowland, Albert G. Sanders, and Patricia Galloway (eds.), Mississippi Provincial Archives, French Dominion (Jackson, Miss., 1927-84), passim; Archives Nationales de France, Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence (henceforth CAOM), C13a, vol. 43, fos. 406-407.
34 HSP, Gratz Collection, box 10, case 14, ‘Invoice . . . from the Trading House at Fort Augusta’, 22 August 1763; South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, Microfilm of original at Clemson University Library, Clemson, SC, Macartan and Campbell, Augusta Account Book; Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, File 269, Mf. GHS010, George Galphin Account Books from the Silver Bluff Trading Post 1767–72; ANQM, not. Panet 2737, Jacques Gagnier; ANQM, not. Mezières 2413 #1962.
short, throughout most of the mainland colonies of both France and Britain, the
flow of cottons to Indians was coming to resemble that prevailing among settlers
on the frontier (Illustration 11.1).

According to the evidence of official South Carolina clothing distributions,
which are the best documented, among Amerindians as well, cottons were
female fabrics from at least the early eighteenth century. When Indian Peggy
delivered a captive Frenchman to colonial officials in November 1716, she was
voted a reward of ‘a Suit of Calicoe Cloaths, for herself’ (together with a suit of
woollen stuff for her son), and a few years later Governor-select Nicholson was
informed that ‘course calico gowns and petticoats’ were appropriate gifts for
women, while only woollens and linens were specified for men.35 Similarly,
when the Savanna Indians received allotments on 6 September 1749, Itchcoe’s
doughter got (together with woollens) two yards of calico for herself and her two
children, whereas her brother was given woollens and a check linen shirt.36

These gifts may reflect settler stereotypes rather than Amerindian usages,
however. In the 1740s, Montreal manifests for Great Lakes trading posts
suggest that the consumption of cottons was less linked to sex. Because many
chemises had no gender stipulation, women’s blouses as well as men’s shirts may
have been among the cotton chemises that were displacing the linen version.
Strikingly, the only cotton chemises that did carry a gender label were for men
and the only chemises defined as women’s were made of linen. And while the
lengths of cotton and muslin cloth listed in the cargoes may have been destined
for Amerindian women to form their characteristic short wrap-around skirt
called the machicote, men’s breeches were the only other cotton garments explic­
itly cited.37 If the few ‘cotton shirts’ that Hudson’s Bay Company representa­
tives began to trade for beaver in these same years were intended solely for
men,38 then Amerindians and their French and British suppliers were probably
the first challenge to the gendered consumption of cottons in North America.
Among Europeans, cottons began to recover their earlier role as a male signifier
as they began to form the material for shirts, displacing linen in the process.

With this shift, male garments repeated a process of ‘cottonification’ that

35 McDowell (ed.), Journals of the Commissioners, 127–8; TNA, CO 5/358, fo. 3 [1720].
36 TNA, CO 5/389, fos. 177–90; ‘An Account of the distribution of His Majesty’s Presents’. For other examples W. L. McDowell (ed.), Documents Relating to Indian Affairs May 21, 1750–
August 7, 1754 (Columbia, SC, 1958), 376; id. (ed.), Documents Relating to Indian Affairs 1754–
1765, 282 and 475. French officials, who distributed virtually no cottons, gave out linens and
woollens to both genders.
37 Anderson data from MMR.
38 Manitoba Archives, Hudson’s Bay Company, Winnipeg, B.3/d/69–78, Fort Albany
Account Books 1760–9. The great majority of cotton shirts sent to Fort Albany were acquired by
(male) English employees rather than Indians, who remained loyal to linen for all but 8% of their
shirts. Moreover, no cotton shirts at all were on offer at the larger York Factory. I would like to
thank Beverly Lemire for suggesting I look at the HBC records.
Cottons Consumption in the North Atlantic


Caldwell was an officer in the British 8th Foot Regiment assigned to Niagara and Detroit between 1774 and 1780. His position demanded frequent official visits to Indian villages, and he took part in several Indian councils. It was during these trips that he amassed a superb collection of Native objects, which he took back with him to Ireland in 1780. His ruffled shirt is made of light cotton printed with rows of two sizes of small figures.
women’s clothing had already experienced, but with one significant difference. The rise of cotton in the dress of women had come at the expense of silks and woollens. In the case of men, it was linens that started to lose out.

**WHY COTTONS?**

The cotton napkins, tablecloths, curtains, towels, sheets and pillowcases, even blankets that began to supplement (but not seriously to challenge) household linens enlivened the domestic environment of free settlers of both genders. But consumers of cotton garments—the foundation of cottons’ advance—were most likely to be settler women. On the Atlantic coast of the mainland they were also likely to be Euro-American, urban, and free, whereas in the Caribbean and Gulf they were increasingly likely to be mulattas or of African ancestry and might be enslaved as well as free. All women were likely to own cotton kerchiefs, but what most distinguished female dress were the cotton gowns, skirts, petticoats, and other basic garments that proliferated over the course of the eighteenth century. In fact, it was women’s sweeping adoption of cottons for these items of clothing from the early eighteenth century that transformed cotton fabrics from curiosities found mainly in male accessories into the ordinary quotidian material from which a third of the garments of all free settlers—and half or more of the typical free woman’s wardrobe—were fashioned. Men also wore cotton garments. But only among Amerindians did men’s ownership of cotton clothing rival that of women, thanks to their early acquisition of cotton shirts. Even then Native Americans were more committed to woollens and linens than the settler population.

Did marketing play a role in the adoption of cotton cloth? Certainly, evidence attests to a multiplication in the numbers of shops, markets, and auctions in town and village alike, becoming especially numerous in cities; in rural areas they were complemented by pedlars, who served both settlers and native people.39 Some specialization accompanied the expansion of urban retail

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Cotton Consumption in the North Atlantic

outlets. Francis Jeyes, for example, opened a ‘London ware-house for printed calicoes, cottons, and linen’ in Philadelphia in late 1761. Very occasionally, an inventory suggests that a deceased merchant concentrated on cottons, but, judging from inventories, specialists in woollens and especially in linens were more common. And pedlars as well as the overwhelming majority of shops in North America and the Caribbean sold all the major types of fabrics. Jeyes himself found it prudent to add woollens and silks to his offerings after a few months. Similarly, cottons were advertised in the growing numbers of newspapers that appeared in the British colonies, as were woollens and linens and silks. Most advertisements, indeed, were unsystematic, heterogeneous listings.

Women shopkeepers contributed to the growth of textile retailing, but their numbers seem to have become substantial only from the 1740s, which was after the big increase in cottons consumption and cotton’s repositioning as a female fabric. Some historians argue that women retailers made ‘gendered appeals’ through advertisements as arbiters of taste and fashion to women shoppers. Whatever the truth of this contention—evidence for it is very hard to find in either Philadelphia or Charleston newspapers—it appears to have had no particular influence on cottons consumption. All the advertisements from the 1750s that trumpeted fashionability named fabrics of all sorts, and when they did associate fashion with a particular material it was usually with silk. In Philadelphia, where a large number of female merchant inventories have survived, male and female retailers stocked the same proportion of cottons. If they were serving as fashion guides, female shopkeeper recommendation must have benefited silks, which were three times more numerous on their shelves than on those of their male counterparts.

The spread of retailing and advertising does not seem to have benefited cottons disproportionately. But what about the proliferation of new varieties of cloth, which is evident from manifests as well as advertisements? Between the late seventeenth century and the 1760s, the number of cotton fabrics at least doubled in every colony except Louisiana where war and the chaotic end of French administration disrupted commercial networks and cut in half the types of cloth that were available. The growth in cloth varieties was not unique to cottons, however. The assortment of linens on display in the colonies—already

40 Pennsylvania Gazette, 17 December 1761 and 4 March 1762.
42 Cleary, ‘“She Will Be in the Shop”’, 188.
43 See White, ‘“Baser Commerce”’, for similar findings.
considerably larger than the array of cottons—expanded by about 75 per cent and the number of silks rose by about 50 per cent everywhere but Jamaica.

Nevertheless, despite the across-the-board increase in varieties of cloth, cotton textiles steadily increased their share of merchant cloth stocks. Merchant cotton stocks increased between 8 and 68 per cent per decade; in contrast, linens’ share grew just 1 to 13 per cent and even dropped 4 per cent per decade in Pennsylvania. Silks did even worse, falling 17 per cent per decade in Saint-Domingue and 10 per cent in Jamaica, remaining stable in Louisiana, and progressing just 4 to 7 per cent elsewhere. Woollens did worst of all: even though the selection of woollens doubled or more in Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Saint-Domingue, their proportion of total textile stocks fell sharply in these as in every other colony. In fact, Saint-Domingue merchants, who almost tripled their array of woollens, experienced the sharpest decline (22 per cent per decade). Widening selection signalled both gain and loss of market share, though in terms of merchants’ shelves the proliferation of choice aided cottons far more than any other fabric type.

With respect to garments, too, greater choice of fabrics bore no clear relationship to changes in consumer preferences. The availability of additional varieties may have helped cottons in New France, but did not in Louisiana or Saint-Domingue. Linens, too, received little benefit from more options: their share of garments declined in both New France and Louisiana and barely inched ahead in Saint-Domingue. In fact, it was silks and woollens that improved the most. The former held their own in New France while doubling their presence in Louisiana and Saint-Domingue; woollens maintained their place in New France and Louisiana and doubled it in Saint-Domingue.

Though scholars continue to debate the reasons, there is consensus that the price of most European and Asian textiles in the Atlantic world, including cottons, fell between the late seventeenth century and the eve of factory industrialization. It is not clear whether the relative price of cotton fell, however. Cottons prices declined relative to silks everywhere, and cottons’ share of merchant stocks soared, while those of silks stagnated or, in Jamaica and Saint-Domingue, decreased. Nevertheless, though the proportion of silk garments in individuals’ wardrobes declined in New France, it rose in Saint-Domingue, where, as in Jamaica, the lower proportion of silks in merchant stocks stemmed from lower re-exports to Spanish America rather than declining demand by local consumers. Cotton cloth prices rose on average compared to linens,

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44 For an excellent introduction to this vast topic, see Carole Shammas, 'The Decline of Textile Prices in England and British America Prior to Industrialization', *Economic History Review*, 47/3 (1994), 483–507.

which probably explains the nearly universal increase in linens in merchant stocks. In Saint-Domingue, rising relative cottons prices may also account for declining demand among planters. Yet in New France, decedents’ holdings of linen garments decreased, but domestic linens, reflecting higher levels of domestic comfort, were more abundant. By the 1760s, checks (especially pure cottons and mixed cotton-linens) started to find favour in both South Carolina and Jamaica, despite costing a third, a half, or even more than the ozenbrig linens with which they competed. The situation with respect to woollens was even more complicated. No clear pattern of relative price movements obtained between cottons and woollens. Woollens became less expensive in New France, South Carolina, and Jamaica, more expensive in Louisiana and Saint-Domingue, and remained the same in Pennsylvania. Yet without exception, merchant holdings of woollens plunged. Even more perversely, while woollen garments became less popular among settlers in New France, they were more in vogue in Saint-Domingue—just the reverse of what the relative price movements would suggest. Data on particular cotton textiles also indicate that prices played a minor role in the spread of cottons. In Pennsylvania, calicoes became on average 50 per cent more expensive in current pounds between 1680–99 and 1760–9 but their share of merchant stocks more than doubled. By contrast, the average price of calimanco (French calamande), brightly dyed glazed worsteds that competed with calicoes, dropped by more than 50 per cent, but demand for them fell dramatically relative to that of their rivals. The fears of the light worsted producers, who had bitterly fought imported calicoes in the late seventeenth century, appear to have been justified.\footnote{See Patrick O’Brien, Trevor Griffiths, and Philip Hunt, ‘Political Components of the Industrial Revolution: Parliament and the English Cotton Textile Industry, 1660–1774’, Economic History Review, 44/3 (1991), 395–423.} Data on ready-made garments are scanty because nearly all cloth was fashioned into clothing by the purchaser or by professional tailors. What does exist indicates that cottons’ gains cannot be attributed to more favourable prices. In 1770, the price of a cotton check shirt in the Kingston, Jamaica, shop of Esther Mella was three times that of a linen equivalent. Three years later in Sintia Mendels’s Kingston shop the price of striped cotton men’s trousers was 13 per cent more than a counterpart made from checked linen.\footnote{Jamaica Archives, Spanish Town, Inventory Books, 1B/11/3/51; 1B/11/3/53.} Similarly, calico shirts were always more expensive than those made of dowlas, and fustian waistcoats more costly than those tailored from ozenbrig. Consumers surely did not ignore price, but it appears to have been a major consideration mainly when planters in British colonies clothed slaves. If cottons did not become less expensive, did rising incomes account for their burgeoning popularity? According to Marc Egnal, per capita income in
British North America grew some 0.6 per cent per year between 1713 and 1775. The Lower South, which included South Carolina, grew at twice the overall rate. All parts of New France prospered from the mid-1720s until the mid-1750s. In the eighteenth century Jamaica and Saint-Domingue became by far the richest colonies in their respective empires. These rising incomes could have benefited cottons. Growing inequalities of wealth, which historians have identified in the plantation colonies and in urban areas along the Atlantic coast, may also have boosted cottons consumption. Cotton garments were always more prevalent among affluent professionals and merchants than among artisans. In addition, settlers in frontier areas, where inequality was much lower, also bought many fewer cottons. Still, Saint-Domingue data indicate that burgeoning incomes and concentrated wealth did not necessarily turn consumers’ fancies to cottons. Free settlers’ holdings of cotton apparel dropped from 45 to 31 per cent of the total between the 1730s and the 1760s, while silk and woollen attire doubled (from 3.5 to 7 per cent and 6.5 to 13 per cent respectively).

**CONCLUSION**

A variety of shipping, commercial, and communications improvements facilitated greater access to Indian and European cottons for consumers in the Atlantic basin. More frequent personal and epistolary contacts, as well as the exchange of samples, pattern cards and books, and fully dressed dolls, transmitted taste and fashion as well as price and market information and constructed a more intense transatlantic commercial conversation. As a result, many of the consumption trends visible in the French and British New World mirrored broad Atlantic developments. The diffusion of the fancy for cottons throughout the eighteenth century was shaped by both local and global factors, and the rise of cottons as a popular fabric was part of a broader trend towards consumerism and luxury goods in the Atlantic world.

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society echoed the experience of Europe and West Africa. In Europe, too, those changes occurred first in cities, though in Britain the urban–rural gap narrowed considerably after the mid-eighteenth century. And if cottons may not have had a gendered identity in England, on the continent they were especially associated with women.

From the late seventeenth century to the third quarter of the eighteenth, across a variety of climates and societies from the Caribbean to the St Lawrence, cottons became the fabrics of choice for one-third of the clothes which free Euro-American settlers wore and half or more of women’s dress. The critical shift to cottons took place in the early eighteenth century, long before the purported colonial consumer revolution of the 1740s and 1750s, when women en masse discarded woollen and silk basic garments in favour of cottons. In a word, fashions changed. As in Europe, in the Americas as well, cottons were well suited to meet the demand for lighter, brighter, more gaily patterned materials. The proliferation of new varieties of cottons with new finishes proved to be critical. The popularity of cottons for women flowed from the appearance on shopkeepers’ shelves of checked, flowered, multi-hued, and striped calicoes, chintzes, copper plates, and other figured cottons. The evidence on the sources of these cottons is limited, but it suggests that many of these new fabrics were manufactured or finished in Europe: in Provence and Lancashire, Manchester and Rouen, but also in the Netherlands and Switzerland. Yet a large proportion—perhaps even the majority and certainly those noted as ‘fine’—always came from the Indian subcontinent.

Despite the force of fashion, however, the North American and Caribbean adoption of cottons did not follow a uniform path. The taking up of cottons was

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54 Lemire, *Fashion’s Favourite*, 113–14; Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 128, 144 n. 61, 146 nn. 63 and 65; Kamermans, *Materieel cultuur*, 228.


shaped by residence, legal status, race, as well as gender. At least three broad models can be discerned: in the West Indies—Gulf of Mexico, on the Atlantic coast of the Euro-American mainland (with a further rural–urban distinction), and in Native America (which over time came to resemble rural settler Atlantic North America). The fact that lighter fabrics—cottons and linens—always were more abundant in the Caribbean and Gulf region than in colonies further north indicates that climate influenced consumption. But the striking contrast in cottons’ appeal on the neighbouring islands of Jamaica and Saint-Domingue demonstrates that climate was hardly determining. Consumers in similar places made different choices.

Differences between Euro-Americans in town and country remained salient in Atlantic North America across the colonial era, perhaps because urbanites had easier access to new imported goods, but mainly because farmers favoured durable linens and woollens. Local linens and woollens production in New France and Pennsylvania probably reflected and reinforced this preference. In all the plantation colonies, however, the most important factor leading to divergent patterns of cottons consumption was masters’ choices of fabrics to clothe slaves. Though slaveowners everywhere most often opted for linens, in Louisiana and Saint-Domingue cottons were a close second, but in South Carolina second place went to woollen plains or ‘Negro cloth’.

So cottons hardly constituted a fixed signifier. By the 1760s, they had reversed gender valences and were in the process of shedding their racial and status personalities. And the outlines of future changes were already beginning to take shape. Cottons’ appeal across multiple social groups had enriched textile cultures around the Atlantic. At the same time, adorning one’s body with cotton had come to denote an orientation to a cosmopolitan but particularly female Atlantic style. Throughout the North Atlantic world, and before the industrial revolution, cottons became a regular, substantial, and expected part of the everyday world of goods.