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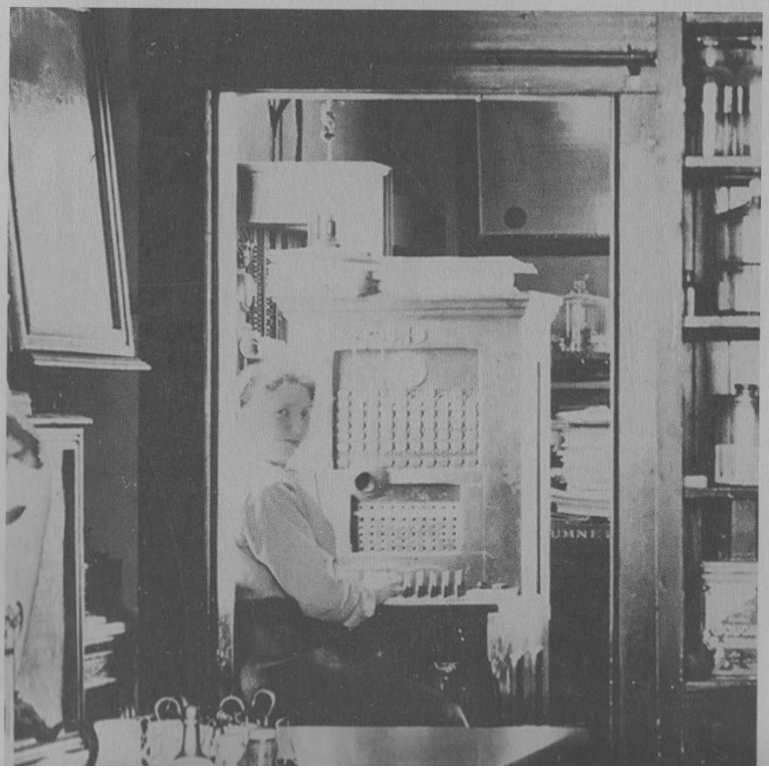

Washing Household Linens and Linen Clothing in 1627 Plymouth

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As a museum representing an English plantation settled by families in the early seventeenth century, Plimoth Plantation strives to re-create the lives and work of ordinary men and women. To reconstruct processes and technical practices of the seventeenth century and accurately reproduce the household artifacts for everyday life, the museum studies as many resources as possible. Since men were responsible for most of the writing about Plymouth Plantation, we find few references to women's lives, especially concerning the menial chores of keeping a household. While there are some details about washing clothes in primary sources, we supplement this material by drawing on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century documents, period texts, visual images, and original artifacts. Our goal has been to conduct the kind of practical experiments that enables the museum to improve and expand its interpretation of the daily lives of men and women in early Plymouth Colony.

Cloth and clothing were among the few specifically identified commodities brought to New Plymouth in the seventeenth century and mentioned by William Bradford in his history of Plymouth Colony. Bradford also mentions a gift of cloth from a visiting Dutch diplomat in 1627. A year later one of the few known shipping records to Plymouth Colony provides even stronger evidence of value: "paid for cloth, 40£, paid for stockings and cloth of all sorts, 40£." These are the most costly items on a list that also includes such goods as shoes, leather, tools, drugs and spices.[1]

Early-seventeenth-century probate inventories from Plymouth Colony indicate that clothing and linens were often more valuable household items than large furnishings. John Jenny's inventory, for instance, taken in Plymouth in 1644, contains "5 fine old sheets" valued at £1.5.0, compared to "Two bed steads" at only 12 shillings. Further comparison can be made to his third of a share in a boat, valued at £2.3.4. This high value for linen is in part due to the amount of labor needed to produce such goods, from harvesting the flax, processing fibers, spinning, weaving, and bleaching, to the seamstresses' and tailors' efforts as well.[2]

1. William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620–1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), pp. 92, 141, 192, 202. For the 1628 shipping list see James Sherley, "Plymouth Company Accounts," *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections*, ser. 3, 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: E. W. Metcalf, 1831), pp. 199–202.

Writing from Massachusetts Bay in 1633, William Wood suggested that clothing in the colony was "dearer than in England." Since the cost of labor in New England was greater than in England, New England-made goods often cost more than English imports. Therefore, it was not just the shipping fees that made the cost of linens higher than other items. Given the value of linens and clothing, we should expect that each family would do its best to take care of them.[3]

When the first ship arrived in Cape Cod harbor in November of 1620, one colonist noted, "Our people went on shore to refresh themselves, and our women to wash, as they had great need." It is unlikely that the passengers went on shore to wash themselves considering the coolness of November and their standards of personal hygiene. Women's going on shore to wash reflects the English expectation that doing the laundry was women's work. During the winter months that followed the *Mayflower*'s arrival when many people were sick and dying, Bradford wrote that there were

> but six or seven sound persons who…spared no pains night nor day…fetched them wood, made them fires, dressed their meat, made their beds, washed their loathsome clothes, clothed and unclothed them…showing herein their true love unto their friends and brethren.[4]

At this time, out of necessity, a few people did the wash, including two leading men of the community. Bradford called it a "rare example and worthy to be remembered," in part because this was usually women's work.

As agreed upon before arrival in New Plymouth, all the settlers worked in common under a seven-year contract. Working the "common course" included such tasks as farming, fishing, and hunting. It

2. Further evidence of the comparative value of linens is found in several early inventories from Plymouth: Mary Ring's 1633 inventory; "5 pr of sheets" at £2 versus "1 Chest & 1 trunck" at only 10 shillings and "3 payles 1 Cupboard & a box" at 12 shillings. Martha Harding's inventory, also dated 1633, lists "A pcell of smale linnen" which is appraised at £2-8 approaching the same value placed on "A sow" £2-10. For these and the John Jenny inventory, see C. H. Simmons Jr., ed., *Plymouth Colony Records Volume 1: Wills and Inventories, 1633–1669* (Camden, Maine: Picton Press, 1996), pp. 17–20, 24–25, 108–11.

3. William Wood, *New England's Prospect*, ed. Alden T. Vaughan (1634; reprint, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), p. 71; for an example of the price of New England labor driving up the cost of goods, see Paul J. Lindholt, ed., *John Josselyn, Colonial Traveler: A Critical Edition of Two Voyages to New-England* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1988), p. 16: "A Pair of Wheels for a Cart, if you buy them in the Countrey, they will cost 3 or 4 pound"; in England they were valued at fourteen shillings.

4. Dwight B. Heath, ed., *Mourt's Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth*, (Cambridge/Boston: Applewood Books, 1986), p. 19; Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, p. 77. For reference to period hygiene, see Keith Thomas, "Cleanliness and Godliness in Early Modern England" in *Religion, Culture and Society in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Anthony Fletcher and Peter Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 57–59.

also seemed to include work specifically relating to women. Bradford states, "And for men's wives to be commanded to do service for other men, as dressing their meat, washing their clothes, etc. they deemed it a slavery, neither could many husbands well brook it." After 1627, and the end of the contract, there are further indications that washing was something that men expected women to do for them. In a Plymouth Colony apprenticeship contract, for instance, "the said Thomas Lettice is to find unto his said apprentice...meat Drinke apparrell washing and lodging and all other necessaries fitt for one in his Degree and calling."[5]

A more explicit expression of what men expected from women in seventeenth-century Massachusetts appears in a 1640 letter from Nathaniel Ward to John Winthrop regarding the settlement of Haverhill, Massachusetts: "I heare there is no private roome there, litle provision and not a woman to dresse meate or wash linnen." If a woman in the household could not do the washing, another available woman would be hired, as illustrated in the following court record from Essex County, Massachusetts, dated 1684:

> Elizabeth Gachell, aged upward of twenty-six years, testified that fourteen years ago last March widow Bennitt nursed deponent's mother Elizabeth Boude in childbed, when she died, and she was "tizzicall" then and ill and not able to wash the clothes, but her father was obliged to hire another woman to do it.

In this case, the nurse was too ill, twelve-year-old Elizabeth was perhaps too small, or not strong enough to wash the clothing, and the father apparently was not going to do the laundry, so he had to hire a woman.[6]

Although linens were a valuable item in the early seventeenth century, at present there is no singular reference that outlines the exact process of the common, menial task of washing them. Fortunately, genre prints and paintings from this period support written information drawn from a variety of English texts and period records. By piecing together these sources, we can envision and construct the process that was likely used in Plymouth Colony.

The Compleat Servant-Maid is an anonymous late-seventeenth-century book that describes the laundresses' duties within a great household. While lacking step-by-step directions for laundering, it

5. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, pp. 120–21. For the Lettice apprenticeship contract, see "Extracts from the Deed Books of the Plymouth Colony" quoted in Benno M. Forman, *American Seating Furniture, 1630–1730* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), pp. 57–58.

6. For Ward's letter, see Allyn Bailey Forbes, ed., *Winthrop Papers: Volume 3, 1631–1637* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1943), pp. 299–300; Mary G. Thresher, ed., *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County, Massachusetts: September 25, 1683, to April 20, 1686*, vol. 9 (Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1975), pp. 239–41.

does suggest that household linens and linen clothing were washed together.

> If you would have the Esteem, Credit and Reputation of a Compleat Laundry-Maid, you must observe these following directions. First you must take care of all the Linen in the House (except Points and Laces) and whatever you wash do it quickly, and do not let it lie and stink, grow yellow, and to create to your self the trouble of Washing it again, before it be used.[7]

Another late-seventeenth-century author, Randle Holme, listed the "Laundresses Terms of Art." The first reference is to "Sorting, Soaping, Soap Sudds, Scalding, Washing" which could be the first steps in laundering linens. Other period texts indicate that there is a similar pre- or post-cleaning combined with the process of "bucking" linens. The term *buck* can mean a number of things: among them, "A quantity of clothes, cloth, or yarn, put through the process of bucking," and in buckwashing or bleaching; "the quantity of clothes washed at once, a 'wash.'" To "lay the buck" refers to the process of steeping the materials in lye. "To drive the buck" is to carry through the process of bucking. Period sources refer to linens being bucked, not woolens.[8]

In ordering his list of laundresses' terms, Holme seems to suggest that soaping or cleaning is done before bucking. Both are part of the laundering. The directions indicated in *A Profitable Book* (1588) for cleaning "against staines in linnen Cloth" suggested the reader should first take the cloth and "laie thereon the iuyce of sorrell and salte" and then "put them into the bucke." This book also gives directions for getting out spots of grease in linen clothes: "drive them as you do a buck of clothes, and ever as ye lay them betwixt every cloth: scrape of chalke thinne all over...then put your lye unto them." In this instance the chalk is used after a bucking as an extra step in cleaning the linens thoroughly. In *The Compleat Servant-Maid* are instructions to get out spots of ink, "Before that you suffer it to be washed," soak the linens in urine. Other directions suggest rubbing butter into a stain and letting the cloth lie in scalding hot milk before washing it.[9]

Part of the laundering is thus to get out any stains or filth that might not be removed in the bucking. This process requires materials such as chalk, or some form of clay, sorrel and salt, urine, or soap. There are no specific references to soap-making in Plymouth by 1627

7. *The Compleat Servant-Maid* (London: Printed for Eben Tracy, at the Three Bibles on London-Bridge, 1700), p. 141. This is from the sixth edition; an earlier edition is dated 1677.

8. Randle Holme, *Academie or Store house of Armory and Blazon* (London, 1688; reprint, Menston, England: Scolar Press, 1972), book 3, p. 98; for details about Holme's work, see Forman, *American Seating Furniture, 1630–1730*, pp. 383–84; *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "buck," def. 3.

9. *A Profitable Book* (London, 1588), fol. 9–10; *The Compleat Servant-Maid*, p. 70.

by a tradesman or housewife. Period recipes for making soap list lime as an ingredient, but there is no mention of lime in any of the early Plymouth writings. The earliest reference to soap in Plymouth Colony is William Palmer's 1637 inventory "I little box & 3L [pounds] of sope" valued at four shillings.

William Wood and John Winthrop both remind future settlers in New England in the early 1630s that they should remember to bring soap; and the Virginia Colony imported soap as early as 1620, the first year of settlement in Plymouth. It is quite possible that soap was being shipped to Plymouth Colony, but even if it was at times unavailable, there were other materials that were available that would function in the same way.[10]

Various period references indicate that a variety of clay substances were used to clean clothing and cloth "like sope." The earliest writing from New Plymouth in 1620 records this use of clay: "Here is sand, gravel, and excellent clay, no better in the world, excellent for pots, and will wash like soap." Chalk, a form of clay, was used to scour clothes as part of the laundering process, as mentioned previously. In addition to the clay mentioned in *Mourt's Relation,* materials listed in other earlier texts, such as sorrel and salt, urine, butter and milk, were available in Plymouth. Except for the urine and clay, some of these might not have been so plentiful.[11]

The next step in Randle Holme's "Laundresses Terms of Art" includes a reference to "bucking," and *A Profitable Book* (1588) also makes several references to the process, in this case in the section on spot cleaning linens: "lay them in a buck and wash them." At the end of the spot-cleaning directions, the author says to "drive them as you do a buck of clothes." To learn the details of "driving a buck" we can study Gervase Markham's directions for bucking new linen starting by laying ash in the bottom of a tub and layering linen and ash until the tub is full. Then he states:

> cover the uppermost [cloth] with a bucking cloth, and lay therein a peck or two (according to the bigness of the tub) of ashes more: then pour into all through the uppermost cloth so much warm water, till the tub can receive no more; and so let it stand all night: the next morning, you shall pull out the spigot of the bucking tub, and let the water therein run into another clean vessel, and as the bucking tub wasteth, so you shall fill it up again with the lye which cometh from the bucking tub, ever observing to make the lye hotter and hotter till it seethe; and then when it so seetheth, you shall as before apply it with boiling lye at least four hours together; which is called "the driving of a buck of [cloth].[12]

10. William Palmer's inventory is in Simmons, *Plymouth Colony Wills and Inventories,* pp. 64–67; Wood, *New England's Prospect,* p. 71; Joseph Hopkins Mitchell, ed., *Some Old Puritan Love Letters—John and Margaret Winthrop—1618–1638* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1894), pp. 163–67; "Cost of Furnishing the *Supply* sent from Bristol to Virginia in September, 1620." *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 3 (1899): 283–90.

11. *Mourt's Relation,* p. 39; *A Profitable Book,* fol. 10.

Figure 1. A Bleaching Field, Adriaen van de Venne. The Netherlands, 1626. Copyright The British Museum. Household linens and new linen are bleaching side by side. The cleaning processes of these items were similar.

Markham has clearly laid out the actions of "lay them in a buck and wash them" and "drive them as you do a buck of clothes." New linen cloth and household linens often appear in period images, drying side by side *(Figure 1).* This indicates that they may have been cleaned in a similar fashion before being put out to dry and whiten.

Lye, in the form of wood ashes, was often an important part of the washing process, bucking both new and dirty linens. Hugh Platt, in 1594, refers to "ashes…both for the whitening of linnen, as also for the making of buck lee." Other sources suggest the use of hog dung and hemlock for cleaning clothes. In *The Description of England* (1587), William Harrison comments on this practice, "but such is the savor of the clothes touched withal that I cannot abide to wear them on my body." Markham agrees, saying of hemlock, "the coarse and worst housewives…buck it [their cloth] with lye and green hemlocks: but…it is not good, neither would I have it put in practice."[13]

While the period sources tell us which methods and materials were preferred, modern studies indicate what the ashes do in the cleaning

12. Holme, *Academie...of Armory,* book 3, p. 98; *A Profitable Book,* fol. 9–10. Gervase Markham, *The English Housewife,* ed. Michael R. Best (1631; reprint, Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986), pp. 162–64. Markham states that new linen can be bucked the same way as new hemp yarn; here the word "cloth" has been inserted for "yarn."

process. Alkaline elements in the potash or lye break down oils and gums in the cloth upon contact with carbon dioxide in the air. Presumably, trial and error in period practice led to the preference of ashes over the other materials.[14]

Not only are ashes preferred for bucking linens, but some writers suggested that certain trees produce better ashes for this part of the laundry process. Markham says "very fine ashen ashes" are best. Platt considers the best ashes to

> be made for the most part, of that tree which carrieth a small leaf, like unto our Oke, and whereof the Dansicke Wainscot is made. And some others doo commend another tree, that somewhat resembleth our Witchen Elmes, of whose boughes and branches, beeing burned, they gather these ashes. But it is most certaine that they are not the ashes of any one tree, but of divers that are consumed together, as they grow in some great wood.[15]

Linens bucked with these ashes "become more white by this meanes by once bucking of it, then by sundry times with our common and ordinary ashes." Clearly, Platt is saying that generally you need to drive the buck more than once unless you use these ashes. The trees that make the best kinds of ashes mentioned by Markham and Platt may be quite similar to trees growing in New Plymouth in 1627. Listed in *Mourt's Relation* are "Great oaks…pines, walnuts, beech, ash, birch, hazel, holly, asp [aspen], sassafras in abundance, and vines everywhere, cherry trees, plum trees, and many others which we know not." Women in New Plymouth would probably only need to drive the buck once because trees to make the best ashes were available to them in the colony.[16]

After driving the buck, Holme's order of terms suggests that the next step is "Batting, or beating cloths to get the Bucking Stuff out." A German manuscript illustration *(Figure 2)* depicts this method of working out the excess lye and ash with bats. Bats for laundry work are an example of an item unlikely to have survived from the period.

13. Hugh Platt, *The Jewell House of Art and Nature* (London, 1594; reprint, Amsterdam: Walter J. Johnson, 1979), part 2, p. 57; William Harrison, *The Description of England: The Classic Contemporary Account of Tudor Social Life, 1577 and 1587*, Georges Edelen, ed. (Washington D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1994), p. 312; Markham, *The English Housewife*, p. 165.

14. For the reaction between the alkaline content of the potash and carbon dioxide, see Linda Stone-Ferrier, *Images of Textiles: The Weave of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Society* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1985), p. 126, particularly n. 10.

15. Markham, *The English Housewife*, p. 162; Platt, *The Jewell House of Art and Nature*, part 2, p. 53.

16. Platt, *The Jewell House of Art and Nature*, part 2, pp. 57–58; *Mourt's Relation*, pp. 38–39; William Wood mentions "The broad-spread elm" present in New England as well, see *New England's Prospect*, p. 39.

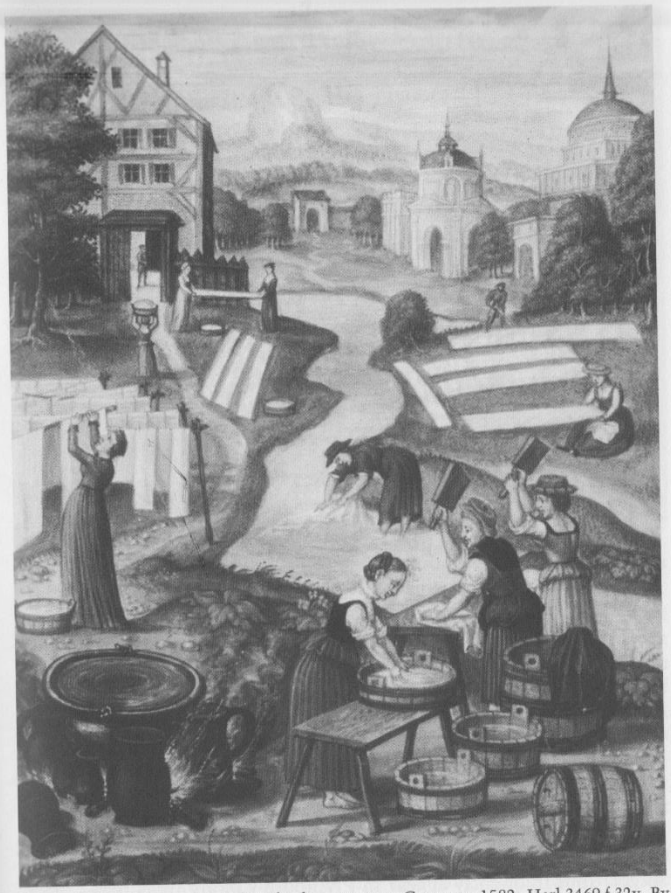

Figure 2. Women engaged in laundry by a stream. Germany, 1582. Harl.3469.f.32v. By Permission of the British Library. The women in the lower right-hand corner are "batting" linens to get the excess lye and ash out of the cloth.

There are none listed in Plymouth Colony inventories. Visual images are the best source for identifying this object.[17]

In a description of bucking new cloth, Markham refers to a process that Holme does not cover. Markham says, "with your hand…poss and labour" the cloth in a bowl or dish, to get more lye and ashes into

Figure 3. "Go to the woman washing sheets, do thou likewise." From *Atalanta fugiens,* by Michael Maier (Oppenheim, 1618). As published in *The Golden Game: Alchemical Engravings of the Seventeenth Century,* by Stanislas Klossouski De Rola, figure 32, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988). The tub in this engraving illustrates Gervase Markham's definition of a bucking tub having a spigot.

it. Then it is rinsed clean to remove the ashes. This may not always be a necessary step after bucking, but it may be needed if linens are particularly dirty. "Possing" means to beat or stamp. Another, more vulgar method of possing laundry is with the feet, described as being done by "nasty women."[18]

One of the main pieces of equipment for bucking is the bucking tub. Markham mentions a tub with a spigot, and a German engraving from 1618 *(Figure 3)* illustrates a stave-built, or coopered, vessel with a spigot. Tubs frequently appear in Plymouth Colony inventories, occa-

17. There are some later period examples seen in Edward Pinto, *Treen and Other Wooden Bygones* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1969), p. 149. He says that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bats he studied are made of hardwoods and could be "plain on both faces, sometimes with bevels on the back edges of the blade"; others were "cross-ribbed on one face."

18. Holme, *Academie...of Armory,* book 3, p. 98; Markham, *The English Housewife,* p. 163; *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "possing," def. 3, containing a 1677 quote: "Nasty women possing clothes with their feet."

Figure 4. Detail from "Tittle-Tattle; or, the Several Branches of Gossiping," Great Britain, 1603. Copyright The British Museum. This illustration shows two women carrying a tub with a pole drawn through the handholds.

sionally with specific references to "bucking tubs." Typically, there was no need for appraisers of an estate to provide much detail about the purpose of various tubs around a household. Often they are grouped with other ordinary goods, as seen in the 1639 inventory of William Gilson of Scituate "lumberment of old tubbs & stooles & such like" valued at three shillings four pence. If a woman did not have a bucking tub, perhaps she borrowed. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford in *Women in Early Modern England, 1550–1720,* suggest that it was fairly commonplace for women to borrow from one another such things as thread, bowls, basins, or coals for fire.[19]

Markham's text relating the measuring of the ashes for bucking says "according to the bigness of the tub," suggesting that tubs are various sizes. Holme provides specific names used for tubs of various sizes. He describes a "turnell" as half the size of a barrel. In the period, a barrel is generally thirty-one to thirty-six gallons, so a turnell would be about sixteen to eighteen gallons. The coopered vessel in *Figure 3*

19. Markham, *The English Housewife,* p. 163; Simmons, *Plymouth Colony Wills and Inventories,* pp. 77–79; Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford in *Women in Early Modern England, 1550–1720* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 206.

Figure 5. A German engraving, by Balthazar Schwan. From *Philosophia reformata,* by Johann Daniel Mylius (Frankfurt, 1622). As published in *The Golden Game: Alchemical Engravings of the Seventeenth Century,* Stanislas Klossouski De Rola, figure 312 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988). "Washing stools" and "bucking stools" were the stools used to lift the bucking tub off the ground so the lye could run down into a smaller tub, and the stool that was used when batting the cloth or clothing once they were bucked.

could be what Holme calls a buck "fate" or "vate" which is larger than a "turnell." A 1603 woodcut from the British Museum *(Figure 4)* illustrates a tub with "D" or "O" shaped handholds being "borne on a Way or pole" between two women. Other, less specific vessels were also included in the bucking process; smaller tubs would catch the lye below the bucking tub. There were also tubs and bowls for possing and some references to a "washing bowl."[20]

New England and Virginia archaeological sites offer very little information regarding coopered ware. English archaeology provides some

20. Markham, *The English Housewife,* p. 163; Holme, *The Academie...of Armory,* book 3, chapter 14, p. 18; *The Countrey Justice, Conteyning the practice of the Justices of the Peace out of their Sessions* (London, 1618) p. 119; for a washing bowl see the 1591 inventory for Robert Jower, turner, containing "one washing bowle" in Michael Reed, ed., *The Ipswich Probate Inventories, 1583–1631* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, England: Boydell Press for the Suffolk Records Society, 1981), p. 45.

earlier evidence, up through the sixteenth century. Tub staves were usually made of oak and sometimes made of elm, fir, and birch. Some measured between fourteen and twenty inches in height and had a variety of profiles.[21]

Period documents refer to "bucking stools" and "washing stools." Presumably, this is the stool under the bucking tub to lift it up so the lye can drain off into a tub below, or perhaps the stool was used for batting or beating the cloth *(Figure 5).* The London Carpenters' Company records indicate the shape of the stools and the type of wood allowed in their production: "washing Stooles bucking Stooles and all other Stooles whatsoever that are to be headed with Oake Elme Beeche or Deale and footed with square or round feete."[22]

While seventeenth-century writings and records from the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay Colonies clearly identify washing valuable household linens and linen clothing as women's work, these same records do not describe the common everyday process in performing this important labor. This study serves as the initial phase for developing an on-site implementation at Plimoth Plantation for the laundering work done by women. Our goal is to represent this aspect of colonial culture that until now our interpreters have only been able to talk about rather vaguely. In carrying out this work, we will learn by doing, and this hands-on work, together with further research, will supplement the steps outlined here. Ultimately this will help us provide a clearer view of a woman's life in seventeenth-century Plymouth Colony.

21. Carol Morris, *Craft, Industry and Everyday Life: Wood and Woodworking in Anglo-Scandinavian and Medieval York: vol. 17: The Small Finds* (Dorchester, Dorset: Dorset Press, 2000), pp. 2233, 2236; for the staves found on the *Mary Rose,* see the artifact database on the website for the Mary Rose Trust, *http://www.maryrose.org/mary_rose_archive.html.*

22. F. G. Emmison, *Elizabethan Life: Home, Work and Land* (Chelmsford, England: Essex County Council, 1976), pp. 18–19, 294 ; E. B. Jupp, *An Historical Account of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1887), pp. 295–302. The Carpenters' Company reference is from an Aldermen's decision, when they were "appointed to heare the differences between the Company of Carpenters and Company of Joyners London did deliver into this Court a Reporte in writeing." This decision is dated September 1632 and assigns the making of bucking stools and washing stools to the carpenters, not the joiners.