

On Paper, In Practice:

Traditional and Experimental Archaeology in Conversation

Skye Makaris | Ethan Allen Homestead Museum

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Good morning! My name is Skye Makaris, and I've driven three hours in 18th-century shoes to be here this morning, so please attribute any malapropisms to the lingering effects of time travel. I am not an archaeologist in the traditional sense, so I view my invitation with gratitude and a sincere commitment to represent the best of my discipline to those gathered today. As a living historian and interpreter of 18th-century New England, I serve as Lead Educator at the Ethan Allen Homestead Museum and Distaff Coordinator for Warner's Recreated Regiment, aka the Green Mountain Boys -- who made an excellent showing right here in Bennington just a few weeks ago. On the hobbyist side, I research high medieval and early modern England as a member of the Society for Creative Anachronism. All in all, my profession and my leisure time look a lot alike.

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I think of myself as a "method" reenactor: that is, I seek to embed myself, in as many dimensions as possible, in the times and places I interpret. My foremost historical interest is textiles, which will become apparent throughout my presentation. I hand-sew, and draft my own patterns for, historical clothing spanning several hundred years, including everything on my person today. At the Ethan Allen Homestead Museum, site of Colonel Ethan Allen's final home, built in 1785, I preside over the only homespun linen program at any museum in New England, growing flax and processing it into fiber. This, too, will feature more heavily later in my presentation. A specialization in textiles may seem niche or granular, but it has taken me to some extraordinary places, particularly in the military aspects of my work. My interest in the Continental Army's clothing led naturally to 18th-century laundry methods, which itself led to diseases of hygiene and to battlefield nursing in the Revolution. Studying flax's moisture-wicking properties engendered further study of early modern menstrual hygiene, which broadened into midwifery. I try to follow threads of knowledge wherever they take me, though I am always firmly rooted in day-to-day domestic life. When I'm running a program at the Ethan Allen Homestead Museum or encamped on the march with the Green Mountain Boys, I am eating, sleeping, bathing, dressing, working, and -- hopefully -- thinking as much like my 18th-century forebears as I can.

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It's a common assumption that women in military reenactment, especially the domestic side of it, have been coaxed into it by a more combat-minded husband or boyfriend. I can resoundingly say that my case is the exact opposite. I'm the one who wanted to do laundry for a dozen soldiers; getting to shoot a gun is just a bonus. In this year 2026, 250 years into the American experiment, it is both my privilege and my responsibility to interpret the lives of the "well-behaved women" who, as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich put it, "rarely [made] history". Few who splash her most famous quote on t-shirts and tote bags understand its full contextual meaning. Ulrich wasn't bemoaning women's subservience or entreating them to make a bigger mark on the world. She was honoring the fact that for every individual who makes history, there is a much larger contingent who *build* it.

It is so easy to forget, in our age of automation, just how much work this project of survival really is. The bottom rung of the hierarchy of needs is by far the vastest. All of humanity's most distinguished achievements, every book and every palace and every revolutionary idea, were made possible by clean linens and full bellies. By mothers and babies surviving childbirth. Humanity's dominance on earth was never guaranteed. It was written into being by our own human, and often female, ingenuity. I want to talk today about some of our best practices for understanding that ingenuity. About the branch of historical study variously called "reenactment" and "living history", which I will henceforth call "experimental archaeology", and how it can work in concert with traditional academic archaeology.

Experimental archaeology, as Shannon Boomgarden of the Natural History Museum of Utah puts it, is "learning about how people did things in the past by trying to replicate them ourselves." This may sound almost unworkably broad: what are "things", when is "the past", and what does it mean to "replicate"? Indeed, "replicate" and "recreate" are deeply fraught terms in a world where conditions can never be identical one day to the next, let alone one century or one millennium.

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This problem is illuminated neatly in a scene from Michael Crichton's novel *Timeline*, in which a historian of 14th-century France struggles to procure truly authentic jousting equipment. From page 74:

“Making the quintain had been simple enough; it was much more difficult to get a decent lance. This was the kind of problem Marek faced again and again in experimental history. Even the simplest and most common items from the past were impossible to reproduce in the modern world. ... In medieval times, tournament lances were turned on wood lathes more than eleven feet long, which was the standard length of a jousting lance. But wood lathes of that size hardly existed anymore. After much searching, Marek located a specialty woodworking plant in northern Italy, near the Austrian border. They were able to turn out lances of pine to the dimensions he specified, but were astonished to hear that he wanted an initial order of twenty. ‘Lances break,’ he told them. ‘I’ll need a lot of them.’ To deal with splinters, he fitted a piece of screening to the faceplate of a football helmet. When he wore this helmet riding, he drew considerable attention. He looked like a demented beekeeper.

Eventually, Marek succumbed to modern technology, and he had his lances turned in aluminum, by a company that made baseball bats. The aluminum lances had better balance and felt more authentic to him, even though they were wrong for the period.”

Crichton elegantly describes the inherent problem with claims to “replicate” and “recreate”: you can never really go home again. His protagonist’s prized eleven-foot lances, despite their dimensional accuracy, are still carved from modern trees grown in modern soil. Their makers are trained in modern methods on modern equipment. Even a factory dedicated to whole-cloth reconstruction of medieval methods would still, for legal purposes, no doubt require compliance with modern workplace safety regulations. For me, this pursuit of the mythical “authenticity” resembles the coastline paradox: the further one zooms in, the more complications appear. It’s a frustrating truth that the more deeply one commits to accuracy in historical interpretation, the further away that accuracy seems to slip. The pursuit is asymptotic: in perpetual approach of a target that it categorically cannot reach. Responsible living historians and experimental archaeologists acknowledge this and foreground it as a

caveat in our research. A little knowledge, it's said, is a dangerous thing. We must not risk equating the ocean of our forebears' knowledge with a drop of our own.

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On the other hand, neglecting the experimental approach can engender, and often has engendered, a blind spot in more traditional academic research. Some time ago, I watched a YouTube video in which a medieval historian described fashionable 14th-century sleeves as “restrictive”. I very much respect this historian’s work, so I will decline to name them here. Western European high fashion in the 14th century does appear nearly skintight to a modern eye, especially in contrast to the less tailored, more T-shaped garments that directly preceded it. However, in my experience making and wearing 14th-century-style gowns, the tightness is in fact deceptive. The sleeves are cut in an *assiette*, or “platter”, style, curving deep into the bodice to provide full range of motion while clinging to the body. Think Spandex, not sausage casing. I indicate here the armored bodice of Charles de Blois, made sometime before his death in 1364. Note the deeply set sleeve heads, cut to hug the pectorals and shoulder blades for effortless motion. Note, as well, yours truly in an early 15th-century gown of a similar style. I can certify that this is one of my more comfortable garments, well suited for a working woman. Once again, my intent is not to shame this particular historian. If anything, the esteem in which I hold them indicates that this bias is due not to lack of rigor but to lack of holistic experience. An embodied approach to historical study, one that utilizes the body itself as both a tool and a location of research, may have broadened their perspective.

I arrive, here, at one of the foremost strengths of experimental archaeology as a medium: simply, that we all have a body. Though we differ vastly in academic training and access to materials and grant money, every human being nonetheless has access to a sample size of one. More, if you happen to have friends and family willing to indulge your pursuits. Experimental archaeology is a far more accessible path to historical knowledge than many traditional modes.

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Ruth Goodman, star of the BBC's *Historical Farm* series and darling of pretty much every reenactor I've ever met, has only a bachelor's degree and has described herself as "a very poor student...simply going through the motions." Nonetheless, her commitment to immersing herself in the domestic life of various periods, often for up to a year at a time, earned her an honorary doctorate from Bishop Grosseteste University in 2012. She is as engaged in the pursuit of understanding history as any formally credentialed professor.

Crucially, her pursuits are those whose public understanding has often suffered from lack of written sources. It is those disciplines often called "women's history", or more currently "domestic history", that, in my opinion, benefit the most from an experimental approach. Often, those engaged in these practices do not necessarily understand them as "history". To them they are tradition carried forward seamlessly, not a static past to be examined as though through glass. In nearly every human culture, men have been more literate and left behind more written works than women. Women, therefore, are likelier to have marked the historical record in less explicitly legible ways: through word of mouth, through material objects, and through practices handed down from mother to daughter. For these cultural elements to be illuminated by the written word and enter the literary record, as they deserve to do, they must first be understood on the terms of their practitioners.

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The best words I have for describing this pre-literary mode of relationship come from Sarah Moss, in her novel *Ghost Wall*, so I shall defer to her thus. On page 33:

Doesn't it feel strange, I heard myself ask, putting your fingers exactly the way someone put hers only she's been dead for a few hundred years? Louise smiled, as if it was fine for me to join in. Not to me, she said, not any more, anyway, I'm always trying to do what dead people tell me. And specially when I'm making a replica, spending days looking at and feeling and listening to some prehistoric object, I'm kind of trying to think their thoughts too. I mean, it would make sense, wouldn't it, that when I really concentrate on the spaces between decorative dots or the exact tension of a twist, my mind's doing what their minds did while my hands do what their hands did. I sometimes think I can tell when two pieces from the same site were made by the same prehistoric person, because the way my hands move is the same.

What differentiates Ruth Goodman, and Sarah Moss's character Louise, from a practitioner of a craft handed down from her great-grandmother's great-grandmother is, of course, the placing of their work in historical context. What is history, after all, if not a meta-analytic framing? For this, experimental archaeology has much to learn from its more academic form.

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Elizabeth Wayland Barber, professor emerita of archaeology and linguistics at Occidental College, exemplifies this marriage better than perhaps anyone else. In her 1994 book, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years*, Barber contextualizes preindustrial textiles, and synthesizes many different cultures' versions of them, as only someone whose own hands have brushed them can. It is her access to both inherited folk knowledge and a wealth of academic databases that makes her work particularly unique.

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Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years opens with an anecdote of Barber's attempt to weave her own Hallstatt cloth: one of several preserved plaid swatches from roughly 800 B.C., found in a salt mine in modern-day Hallstatt, Austria. Frustrated by her laborious attempt, Barber quickly realized that she had confused the warp and the weft, saddling herself with a more complicated task. This taught her, she wrote, "several interesting details about how Hallstatt weavers worked. ... It was another lesson to me that the process of recreating ancient artifacts step by step can shed light on the lives and habits of the original craftworkers that no amount of armchair theorizing can give."

Later in the text, Barber describes the "string skirts" of prehistoric Europe, and infers their cultural significance from their modern-day counterparts. She writes:

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In Denmark and northern Germany, moreover ... we have the remains of string skirts on the bodies of young women buried in log coffins during the Bronze Age, late in the second millennium B.C. One of these skirts ... is complete; we can inspect its mode of

manufacture. The thick plied cords that form the skirt were anchored by being woven through a narrow belt band, from which they hung down to a length of about fifteen inches. At the bottom they have been caught together by a twined spacing cord, which serves to keep them in order. Below that, the ends have been looped into an ornamental row of knots, making the bottom edge so heavy that the skirt must have had quite a swing to it, like the long, beaded fringe on a flapper's dance dress. The belt band on which all depends is so long that the skirt was worn wrapped around twice, rather low on the hips, and tied in the center front with the generous ends of the band.

...

In no case do the string skirts ... provide for either warmth or modesty. In all cases they are worn by women. To solve the mystery of why they were maintained for so long, I think we must follow our eyes. Not only do the skirts hide nothing of importance, but if anything, they attract the eye precisely to the specifically female areas by framing them, presenting them, or playing peekaboo with them.

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The string skirt is still alive and well, preserved in many a folk costume What's more, the symbolic function that we deduced from the ancient examples is preserved right along with the form. ... In Macedonia, there remain many vestiges of the string skirt, all done in fiery reddish orange. A friend brought me a Macedonian outfit from her costume collection to try on The front part consisted of a short woven apron with a piece appliqued onto it that exactly framed the pubic bone underneath. Below this hung a weighty fringe nearly double the length of the solid part. We tied it on to me and began to wrestle with the other half, a girdle perhaps twelve feet long, woven with white and black threads in opposite directions and terminating in a great fiery cascade of red fringe at either end I couldn't help noticing that these fringes were divided and wrapped, redivided and wrapped again in an ever-widening pattern, much the way I knew some of the Bronze Age belt ends to have been worked. ... The fibers lay maximally close

together, creating a very dense, almost uncomfortably hard cord, which was so heavy that it swung with a life of its own.

That was the greatest surprise of all: the independent life of what now enveloped me. I danced around the room from one mirror to the next, fascinated by the way the heavy fringes moved, completely different from any other garment I had ever worn. I felt exhilarated, powerful; I wanted to make them swish and jump, see what they would do next. My friend laughed and admitted that it made her feel the same way when she wore the costume and that she was always as reluctant as I to take it off. For days afterward I pondered the unexpected strength of the experience.

A sense of powerfulness? Is that a part of the symbolism of the skirt? The ability to create new life must surely have been viewed as a form of ultimate power. Exhilaration in wearing it? Was that, too, part of the reason why this garment lasted for twenty thousand years?"

What Barber describes is close to the platonic form of a marriage between experimental and traditional archaeology. The one provides the raw experience; the other, the historical context to shape that experience and sharpen its meaning. The physical weight of the garment lends itself to the fertility rituals that, though previously theorized, lacked material immediacy. The abstract and the embodied worked in mutual reinforcement.

Barber's tale recalls some of my own. To work in living history is to see one's academic interests constantly inform my hands' urge to create, and vice versa. I take deeply to heart the exhortation to use my body as both a tool of and a site of research. For the past year, I have been researching and testing preindustrial menstrual management techniques. My academic knowledge of linen's moisture-wicking properties led me to question the primacy of cotton -- a notably hygroscopic fiber -- in modern tampons and so-called period underwear. Surely linen would keep one markedly fresher? I decided to experiment.

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Using medium-weight linen, I constructed two different absorbent garments mentioned in pre-modern sources. The first was "vallopes of Hollande cloth", listed in an invoice of personal

linens sent from one Roger Mountague to Queen Elizabeth I. Though the word “vallopes” appears nowhere else in Christendom that I can find, its use alongside a “buckled girdle of black jeane silk”, as well as its presence on an inventory of body linens, implies a construction similar to pre-1970s buckled sanitary belts.

The second was an apron referred to in the 1733 court documents of a Sarah Malcolm, accused of slashing an elderly woman’s throat in an attempted robbery. Malcolm, in her own defense, argued that the blood on her apron came not from the victim but from her own menstrual period. “[W]hat has been taken for the Blood of the murdered Person is nothing but the free Gift of Nature,” she claimed, going on to say that

“This was all that appeared on my Shift, and it was the same on my Apron, for I wore the Apron under me next to my Shift If it is supposed that I kill’d her with my Cloaths on, my Apron indeed might be bloody, but how should the Blood come upon my Shift.”

Elsewhere in her trial, Malcolm made reference to “linen ... that is not proper for men to see”, a phrase that illuminates much in few words. In Malcolm’s time, as in Elizabeth I’s before her, gynecological matters belonged to the largely non-literate domain of women, rarely consigned to the written word. Like much pertaining to women, it was embodied first and recorded second, if at all. Consider, also, the inherently perishable nature of menstrual management: unlikely to lend itself to traditional archaeological methods by dint of lacking substantial material remains. Indeed, the field, for many years, confused absence of evidence for evidence of absence. Medical historian Edward Shorter, in his 1982 *A History of Women’s Bodies*, advanced his theory of pre-industrial “free bleeding” -- that is, menstruating directly onto one’s clothing -- which held fast in the popular imagination. Early modern historian Sara Read repeated the claim as recently as 2013, in *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England*.

We arrive here at perhaps the quintessential example of subject matter suited to an experimental archaeological approach. Menstruation lives primarily in oral, not literate, history. The tools of its management are perishable, leaving few, if any, artefacts. It is experienced, at one time or another, by half the human population, providing a robust sample size for experimentation. If something goes wrong, you can simply try again next month. Finally, since women of all socioeconomic classes menstruate, historical menstrual supplies abound at widely varied price points, from foraged sphagnum moss to Her Majesty’s fine imported “Hollande

clothe". Experimental archaeologists and living historians are lucky if a proposed project meets one or two of these criteria; all four make a veritable jackpot.

Accordingly, my ventures have been quite successful. This spring and summer, I've had several opportunities to test-drive my wares at living history events. I won't paraphrase my entire ten-page paper on the subject (though I will provide a link to it at the end of my talk), but, in brief: I was particularly pleased with the menstrual apron, and I marveled, as I often do, at the cleverness of my pre-industrial forebears. 45 inches of cloth gathered between one's thighs seems formidably bulky from a modern perspective, but the accordion structure of the gathers allowed the linen to perform to the best of its ability: wicking moisture up and out. With the fluid spread throughout the folds of fabric, no one portion became oversaturated. Despite wearing the apron "under me, next to my shift" as Sarah Malcolm did, my shift and petticoats remained unstained.

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I was able to wear the apron all day and all night without requiring a change, far longer than any modern pad or tampon. When it did, at last, become saturated, I soaked it in my homemade ash lye, an invaluable part of any 18th-century laundress's kit. Lye's caustic, highly alkaline nature breaks down organic stains when left to soak overnight, lessening the scrubbing required come morning. The results, as you can see, certainly complicate the notion of pre-modern people as inattentive to personal hygiene. With such a practical method accessible to the pre-industrial woman, and infrequent changes compatible with a busy agrarian lifestyle, it seems quite unlikely that so-called freebleeding was ever commonplace. Consider, as well, that laundry practices in the 18th century and earlier required multiple days, including an overnight pre-wash soak and the better part of a day for drying. How often could a working-class woman realistically afford to forfeit one of precious few gowns or petticoats to the laundry cycle? It would surely be less burdensome to rely on a barrier method like an apron or vallope, easy to sew in bulk and relatively inexpensive to replace.

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I am one of several women in recent years to use my body as a site of historical knowledge production. Some, like Abby Cox, Vasi Birchwood, and Karolina Zebrowska, have turned their

experiences with different eras' menstrual hygiene practices into informative and entertaining videos. I'm happy to report that some of our conclusions have been corroborated by preliminary research out of Norway, where archaeologist Sunniva Wilberg Halvorsen published a study in February on textiles excavated from a latrine in Tønsberg.

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Halvorsen's team unearthed the fabric scraps from a 13th-century communal toilet. Chemical analysis indicated the presence both of human blood and of remains of insects that feed on it. Some scraps were pleated in ways reminiscent of my apron's gathers; others were twisted into shapes similar to the belted sanitary pads worn in the 19th and 20th centuries, both of which suggest specific menstrual usage rather than wound care. Alongside the scraps were found remains of sphagnum moss, which Halvorsen points out is unsuited for other excretory functions: its "crumbly texture", she says, makes it incompatible with wiping. "For a menstruating woman, however," she went on to say, "moss -- with its absorbency and antiseptic qualities -- would be useful for avoiding blood stains."

Halvorsen's technical excavatory skills are due congratulation for this discovery. Her biochemistry team, as well, provided the fine-grained expertise to contextualize it. However, to elaborate on my previous framing of history as a form of meta-analysis, I posit that experimental archaeologists contributed to the revelation by shaping the narrative that made it possible. Halvorsen herself agrees. She says:

"When you excavate, you do it with certain research questions in mind. If you're not looking for evidence of menstrual management, you might not see it. You might see a piece of textile, but not a pad -- or what it says about the people who used it."

In other words, we see what we expect to see. If we expect only what lives in the realm of the literate, in the province of the well-preserved, we miss broad swathes of the human experience. Experimental archaeologists, by filling in the official record's experiential gaps, can signpost certain things that might otherwise be missed. Our work, likewise, can provide scaffolding for more rigorous research, despite its small sample size.

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“It’s hard to reconcile the idea of free bleeding with the medieval stigma around menstruation and the high value of clothing,” Halvorsen says. Elaborating on her remarks, Sara Langvik Derrick writes for the Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research:

“Textiles were both costly and time-consuming to make. Considering the entire process -- shearing wool, washing, carding, spinning, weaving, fulling, dyeing, and sewing -- it could take up to 1,000 hours to make a simple wool dress.

Halvorsen finds it unlikely that women, who were mainly responsible for making these garments, would bleed directly into their clothing or onto the floor.”

Logic dictates that the fruit of an unsound premise will be, itself, unsound. In this, Halvorsen and Derrick both allude to the importance of accurate baseline assumptions in constructing a historical narrative. Recall the philosophy of living history with which I opened my talk: that the most complex of human achievements rests on the most basic. Sophistication is necessarily undergirt by simplicity. It is only because we first bent the elements into food, water, and shelter that we have been able to write novels or build empires. To understand human societies, we must first understand that on which they are built. Derrick makes the potent point that misunderstanding something as fundamental as menstrual management will necessarily scale up to more consequential misunderstandings. A belief in the prevalence of freebleeding leads inexorably to an inaccurate assessment of the economic and cultural value of textiles. Likewise, understanding the true popularity of barrier methods helps an archaeologist, anthropologist, or historian properly contextualize textiles’ role in a given society, which may have practical ramifications in, for example, the evaluation of grave goods. Improper scaffolding will set the whole structure on a lean. Through experimentation, we can establish the material priors that will frame, as Halvorsen put it, the right research questions.

On that note, I would like to round out my time by discussing a burgeoning Vermont subculture that is asking all the right research questions. I’m speaking, of course, of the great New England flax revival.

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Last weekend, I took the Ethan Allen Homestead Museum's homegrown flax on the road: to the Winooski Fiber Fair, where I have tabled for three years in a row. In my eight years of historical interpretation at EAHM, I've grown accustomed to the public's total unfamiliarity with the flax process. I can give my elevator pitch in my sleep: from removing the seed pods with a rippling comb, to dissolving the pectin in a retting pool, to scraping away the husks with a scutching knife, to eventually eking out a precious measure of linen thread. This year, though, a good thirty percent of my Fiber Fair audience came to my table with the basics already seeded and eager to learn more, something I hadn't seen even two years ago at the Fair's inception.

Though I'd like to hand the credit to EAHM -- specifically to my predecessor, Tom Sharpley, who planted our first flax seeds in 2015 -- my Fiber Fair visitors had learned from another crop of Vermonters.

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Andrea Myklebust, who grows flax and another bast fiber, hemp, on her Danby farm with a University of Vermont research grant. The Green Mountain Linen Company, manufacturing small-batch textiles in East Barnard since 2023. Eve Schaub, the Pawlet author whose adventures in "growing a dress" have achieved internet virality. Schaub, with 258 thousand Instagram followers, has done more for the ancient art's public profile than arguably anyone else. More than one Fiber Fair guest was visibly awed when I told them I know her personally.

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Schaub's chronicle is more than your average social media challenge: it is an ongoing, iterative exercise in experimental archaeology, performed on a massive scale. It couldn't come at a better time. As the United States celebrates the semiquincentennial of its War for Independence, and Vermont prepares to mark its own anniversary of the short-lived Vermont Republic, the homespun movement of the 1760s and '70s has reemerged into view. To fully understand this boycott of imported textiles as a symbol of British colonial rule, an experiential approach is necessary. One must grasp precisely the scale of the project that these proto-Americans were undertaking. When, in 1767, the first colonists began swearing off British textile imports, growing in number and influence until the Continental Congress officially banned such foreign materials in 1774, they were well aware of the task they had set themselves.

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We at the Ethan Allen Homestead Museum grow a 200-square-foot flax patch every year, each stalk about three feet high. After a three-month growing season and a manufacturing process that takes many hands, we end up with three good-size twists of linen thread, as seen on the screen. The Allen family records indicate a quarter acre of flax grown on the same property in the 1780s, fifty-four times our 200 square feet. Imagine our modest thread output multiplied by fifty-four. It's not nothing, but it's not a family of seven's worth of textiles. It often surprises museum visitors to learn how much more specialized the 18th-century economy was than popular imagination holds. Fanny Allen was many things, but she was not hand-sewing her entire family's wardrobe. Even 250 years ago, the garment trade was highly specialized work undertaken by trained artisans. People of almost all socioeconomic classes had their clothing made professionally. This labor was much cheaper than it is today -- rather, it was the fabric that commanded the highest price. Observing the linen process, and seeing just how large a flax footprint is required for even a humble yield, certainly hammers this notion home.

Eve Schaub was staggered by the fact when she planted her 600-square-foot patch in May 2025. As she told NPR's Ailsa Chang, she thought she'd finish her dress within a year. Instead, she's just finished her second harvest, with at least a handful more to go. Her experience, and mine, offer physical corroboration of what historians already know abstractly: in boycotting British textiles, American revolutionaries undertook a momentous task. Historian Neal T. Hurst of Colonial Williamsburg notes that "in 1770 that the city of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, maintained no less than 50 looms and 7,000 spinning wheels, producing more than 30,000 yards of linens and woolens a year."

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Rhode Island's Newport Historical Society holds several homespun linen items in its collection, including a bodice, a mattress covering, and the lining of a wool gown. Any one of these pieces requires several times more linen than the Ethan Allen Homestead produces in a year. It's one thing to understand this mathematically. It's quite another to apply your own hands to weeding the flax beds, your own shoulders to carrying the harvested stalks, your own feet to the spinning wheel's treadle. The experiential approach throws into obvious relief the ordeal that turned

colonists into American nationals. It fully contextualizes, and appropriately weights, George Washington's decision to wear a homespun woolen suit to his inauguration in 1789.

(Washington became the first President of the United States just ten weeks after Ethan Allen's death at age 51. I've no idea whether Allen's family textiles ever made their way to the Connecticut firm where Washington's suit was commissioned, though history has wrought stranger coincidences.)

Consider the word "homespun" itself: incomprehensible without the notion of "home", of a particularism often absent from the modern world. Just as a modern tree grown in modern soil cannot a genuine 14th-century lance make, neither can we fully understand our ancestors without dipping our toes in their soil. We are the things that grew us. Historians and archaeologists are blessed with minds that slip easily into other times and places. By dressing, eating, working, *living* like those we study, we can, even for just a while, bring our bodies along for the ride. We can observe how our own thoughts move, shaped by our new material reality, and consider how such motions might operate on a culture-wide scale. We can add the *how* and the *why* to the *who*, the *what*, and the *when*.

My branch of reenactors call ourselves "progressives": striving always to improve our impressions of the past, even while perfection remains out of reach. We'll never fully get there. Too many variables remain between then and now. It's still worth reaching for. The past, they say, is a different country -- and you'll never know another country without visiting at least once.

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I want to sincerely thank the Vermont Archaeological Society for inviting me here today among such illustrious company. I've added links to a few resources on the screen; feel free to take pictures. I will now open the floor to any questions.