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**Level: Grades 3-5**

**Subjects:** English Language Arts, Social Studies, Visual and Performing Arts

**Skills:** Comprehending, comparing, contrasting, describing, listening, creating, writing, thinking creatively

## Lesson 4: Weaving a Life in a New Land

*Mary Dickinson Bird, PhD, author - Created through the MAITC Ag Literacy Grant made possible by the Ag License Plate*



Businessmen and government leaders back home in Europe wanted to be sure their newly claimed lands in Maine were safe and protected. They also wanted to make sure that products of the rich Maine forest and coast would continue to be sent back home and sold, helping to make the employers wealthier. They did not want the trappers, traders, and soldiers in the new forts to quit their jobs and return to France or England.

The leaders of the settlements and their employers soon realized that the men would be more willing to stay and work in the new land if they felt more "at home." So wives, household goods, and livestock were sent along. More families arrived, and the colonial settlements began to flourish.

Sheep were among the animals brought to Maine. Farm families living along the Maine coast might let their sheep roam all year round on nearby islands, or might bring them by boat to the mainland to spend the winter and spring lambing season closer to home.

Each spring, the sheep would be sheared. Whenever there weren't other chores to do, children helped their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers prepare the fleece to be spun into yarn. They would tease the fibers to fluff them. Then they would use two wire brushes, called *carders*, to comb and straighten the fibers so they would spin more smoothly into yarn. By the time the children were six or seven years old, they would learn to use a drop spindle, too. Some families continued to use drop spindles as time went on, but others used spinning wheels, which were becoming more and more common and made the spinning process much faster. In most families, spinning on a wheel was work done only by women and girls.

Some of the settlers and traders from Europe brought flax seeds with them. Flax became one of Maine's most important crops for many years. The seeds were planted in small fields, where they grew into tall, thin plants with blue flowers. At harvest time, the flax plants were pulled from the ground. The flax stems were soaked in water to soften them, then dried and pounded with a large, heavy wooden hammer. Little by little, after many more steps in the process, the outer layer of the stems gradually dropped away. Then the stems were dragged through a comb made of long sharp nails, which stripped away any leftover bits of the outer layer. All that remained now were long silky strands. These were spun into fine thread called *linen* and woven into cloth. It



would take an entire field of flax and a lot of tedious, time-consuming work to make enough linen cloth for a single sheet for a bed!

Village leaders in Maine and other parts of New England knew that it was important to make sure everyone had good, warm clothes to wear and a safe, warm place to sleep and eat. This would keep everyone healthy and strong, so they could do their work. Villagers helped take care of each other by sharing their fiber, yarn, and cloth so that all would have clothing and blankets. Some New England villages even passed laws that required each family to spin a certain amount of wool into yarn, as a kind of tax that could be used to take care of sick or elderly people who could no longer make things for themselves. Anything left over could be sold or traded with nearby communities.

The English government wanted the people living in the colonies to be faithful customers for English goods. They also wanted to protect the jobs of workers in England. So they passed a law in 1699 forbidding the colonists from selling their wool or even transporting it to any place except England. In England, it would be made into yarn or cloth. Then English businessmen would sell it back to the colonists, who had produced it in the first place. The prices were high, and part of the money would go to the government, in the form of a wool tax. It wasn't fair, and it made the colonists very angry. Even though it would be a lot of work, they would rather make their own wool or linen yarn and cloth, than pay high prices to buy goods from England.

Some families built large wooden weaving looms that they kept in their barn lofts, attics, or sheds. When enough yarn had been spun, it would be woven into cloth. There was always a lot of work to do on a farm, however, and even families that had a loom might not have time to use it. Instead, they waited for a traveling weaver to come to town. When weaving was done by a family member, it was usually women's work. Traveling weavers, though, were almost always men.

The weaver would stay with a family and work on either the family's loom or one he brought with him in his wagon. Using yarn that the family had spun and perhaps dyed, the weaver would work for a few days to prepare the loom and weave the cloth the family wanted. Weavers often carried pattern books from which the family could choose checks, diamonds, or flower designs to be woven.

First, he decided how long and how wide the cloth must be, and figured out how many strands of yarn he would need for a project that size. To measure out the correct amount of yarn, he would wrap it around and around the pegs on a big wooden frame, until he had the right number of threads, all the right length. Depending on how big the project must be and how finely spun the yarn was, there might be hundreds or even thousands of threads, each one 6 or 10 yards long!

The next step was to take every single thread and tie one end to the front beam of the loom, until all were lined up, side by side. Then the weaver drew the other ends of the threads, one by one, side by side, through a wide comb called a *reed* which sat in a heavy wooden frame called a *beater*. Next, the threads were passed through little wire or string loops called *heddles*, that were hung together in frames called *harnesses*.



The weaver's last step in preparing the loom was to tie the ends of all the yarns to the back beam of the loom and to roll them tight. These lengthwise yarns were called the *warp*.

Then the weaver would sit down on his bench at the front of the loom. He held a wooden stick, called a *shuttle* in his hand. This he wound with more yarn. Back and forth across the loom he would move the stick, and the *weft* yarn on his shuttle would cross over and under, over and under the warp yarns.

The loom made it easy to pass the shuttle over and under all those hundreds of threads. This was because each time the weaver pressed his foot on one of the *treadles* at the bottom of the loom, the action would lift one harness of heddles while lowering another harness, so some warp threads would be pulled up, while others went down. The weaver could easily slide his shuttle through the gap between the high and low threads. He'd then pull the beater forward to straighten his weft thread and line it up neatly. Then he'd shift his foot to a different treadle to raise and lower the opposite harnesses. The threads that were up before would now be down, and the down threads would be up. The weaver would throw the shuttle through the new opening, and use the reed to beat the new weft thread into place. There was a click-clack rhythm as weaver shifted his feet, threw his shuttle, and swung the beater. The cloth would quickly grow longer.

Some cloth was made all of wool, with wool yarn for both the warp and the weft. Other cloth was made of linen and wool, with linen threads for the warp, and wool yarn for the crosswise weft. This kind of cloth was called "linsey-woolsey" and was often used for sturdy, comfortable clothes.

