

THE FRANCESTOWN HERITAGE MUSEUM

Newsletter

Vol. 9, No. 1



January 2023

SURFEIT of SERPENTS

CONTINUED FROM AUGUST 2022

LET ME SPIN YOU A YARN (figuratively) . .

It was mentioned in a previous edition of the newsletter that we had amassed a sizeable collection of items related to fiber arts and the making of cloth goods. This is due in large part to one family here in town whose matriarch is a true fiber artisan. She has donated many of the exhibits and has agreed to help provide details as to the use, methods and materials used and created by these devices. So let's start out simply. Sheep raising was big in NH and the abundance of available wool led to its almost universal adoption by our ancestors along with the ability to make their own clothing, etc. from it.

We'll skip the fine art of sheep shearing for now (perhaps in a later issue). So the sheep is shorn and you have this pile of freshly shorn wool. The bucolic pictures of pristine sheep grazing peacefully in the lea are not entirely true. They and their coats can get pretty dirty.



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A SURFEIT of SERPENTS –

You may recall that last month's newsletter contained a WHAT'Z IT tool with a serpent carved on it. Your challenge was to provide an answer to the question of why would our ancestors take the time to carve a serpent on a wooden tool.



We did receive an answer from a former Francestown resident who moved to Arizona where he opened – The Franklin Museum.

At about the same time we ran across this item.



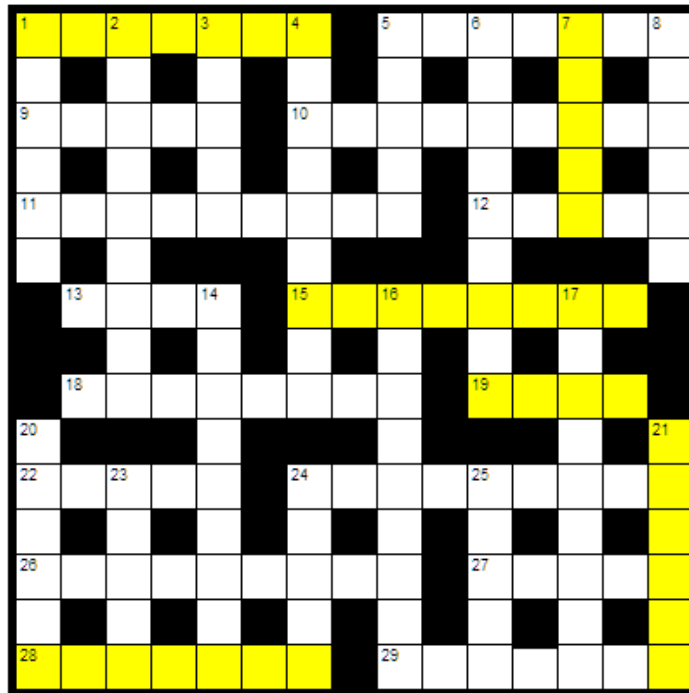
An old stick – let's look a little closer at the top of the stick.

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JANUARY THEME CROSSWORD

The **yellow** blocks contain the theme words and all come from the text of this newsletter.
Enjoy and Happy New Year!



Across

- 1 USED TO COMB FLAX FIBER
- 5 More rigid
- 9 Beat
- 10 young lad attending school
- 11 Fictional superhuman
- 12 Circumference
- 13 Detestible person
- 15 Step in processing fiber
- 18 Activity discharging molten rock
- 19 USED TO ALIGN FIBERS
- 22 Bad
- 24 Ancient Gymnasium
- 26 Insensitivity to pain
- 27 Broke off
- 28 CARVED ON SOME TOOLS
- 29 Consumer

Down

- 1 Raspy
- 2 Magnified image
- 3 Pay tribute
- 4 Eavesdrop
- 5 Stupid person
- 6 Not derived from living matter
- 7 USED TO MAKE TEXTILES
- 8 Beat
- 14 The Ten Commandments
- 16 Incriminate
- 17 Roundworms
- 20 Ride, so to speak
- 21 USED TO STRAIGHTEN WOOL
- 23 Pizazz
- 24 Place
- 25 Correct, as text

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SPIN A YARN

Think how easy it is for you to get your wool sweater dirty. Now picture what it would look like if you wore it while walking through field and woods, bumping against thickets, burdocks, lying on it in the meadow, etc. That is what your pile of freshly shorn wool looks like it has been through. So, let's get the worst of the burrs, etc. out and untangle this mess. So first off you'd best go and wash this wool and let it dry. Don't agitate it too vigorously as that will tangle the wool even more and make it suitable only for felting (more on that later). So while your nice clean wool is drying let's take a look at the coming steps and also look at the making of yet another fiber – linen. Which is made from flax. You recall flax – we discussed it in the May 2020 Newsletter. Remember the flailing sticks?

Linen is spun from the flax plant. It is the flax fiber taken from the stem of the flax plant just below the surface. We'll get into all that some other time.

Once harvested, the flax fiber is somewhat akin to the wool, as neither can be spun until these fibers (flax or wool) are straightened out. This is done by the process of combing or carding.

Also remember that in your ancestor's days there were not a lot of DIY (do it yourself) tools and equipment available for tasks like this. There were the simple CARDERS, COMBS and the HETCHEL.

CARDING:

So you've cleaned your wool but it isn't going to do you much good as this pile of tangled fluff. We need to get these fibers straightened out. To do so your ancestors relied on the carding comb which could be used on either wool or cotton.

The carding combs come in a pair and each is essentially a wooden paddle having a series of straight (pin like) metal teeth. The closer the teeth are spaced, the finer the wool will be.



A SINGLE CARDING COMB (PADDLE)

The above depicts a single paddle with wool laid over the metal teeth.

To card the wool and straighten the fibers a second paddle is drawn over the above and the metal teeth straighten and align the fibers.



CARDING WOOL FIBERS

Now, we at the Heritage Museum do not like to beg, but . . . we do not have a set of old colonial time carders. If while going through your attics and barns you happen across a set of Carders and would like to donate them to the museum, why give us a call. Remember, April 15th is approaching and donations such as this are tax deductible.

The following photos better show the teeth of the carders.

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TEETH ON THE CARDERS

COMBING:

And these lethal looking devices would be??



WOOL COMBS

Wool fibers could also be straightened by using combs as demonstrated in the next photos.

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THE DECEMBER WHAT'Z IT



It appears that this is no ordinary old stick. Carved into the top is a serpent's head. Indeed, discovered in an archeological dig in Finland, this was a 4,400-year-old walking stick that belonged to a Stone Age shaman. So apparently carving serpent heads on things did not originate with our ancestors.

So what is the fascination with serpents? Well the archaeologists who discovered the stick consider it to be in the religious sphere. Snakes have been identified with symbolic meaning not the least of which is they play an important role as "spirit-helper" animals. If true it would make perfect sense that our ancestors and others would carve into them important items (it could be said they needed all the help they could get).

One other point is that the ancients revered snakes and considered them protectors of earth and humanity. They were benevolent before they became malevolent.

So it looks like there may have been a reason for our ancestors carving snakes in tools.

One last item. A recent copy of the CRAFTS Tool Shed Newsletter had a photo of a collector's plane:



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COMBING WOOL FIBER



So what difference does it make which method you use?

CARDING removes tangles but does not fully align the fibers. Makes a fluffier yarn. Good for sweaters, etc.

COMBING straightens and aligns the fibers. These can be made into a combed sliver and a smooth thread. Good for fine worsted suits, etc.

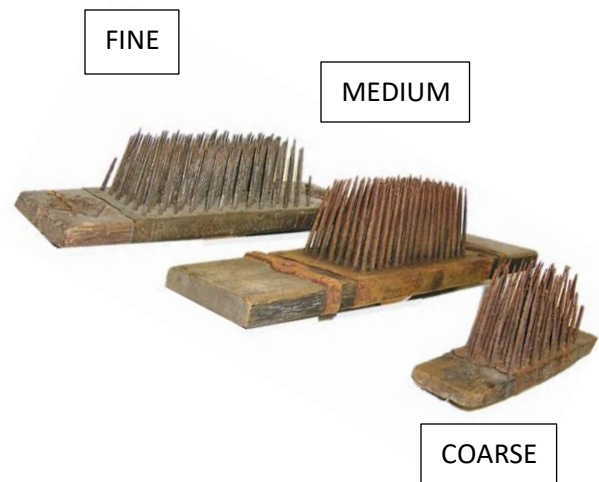
We did mention one other item, that being the Hetchel. Beside wool obtained from sheep, there was linen which was spun from flax. Flax is a plant from which is derived many goods ranging from oil to linen to nutritional food.

A characteristic of the flax plant is the toughness of the stem. The flax fiber is in this stem just below the surface.



THE HETCHEL

Noted for it'd toughness, the flax stem was not going to be processed for spinning into linen using hand held carders or combs. The hetchel (a/k/a hackle) is a board with a bed of nails used to comb the flax fibers after scutching*. The nails were fastened to the board in a series from coarse to fine. Often on the same board (as depicted above) but also common to have been on multiple boards with each having the nails spaced closer together.



This provides the person processing the flax better control over straightening and aligning of the fibers.

* [Scutching is essentially using a scutching knife to separate the impurities from the raw material, such as straw and woody stems from flax fibers].

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A bundle of flax fiber was flipped over the teeth and pulled through. Doing so separated the fibers from the flax plant in order to be spun into linen thread.



Now your carded, combed or hetchelled cotton, wool or flax fibers are neatly cleaned, straightened and aligned. You are ready to spin them into thread or yarn. Once spun you will be able to knit, sew and/or weave it to make your clothes and other necessities of life.

Now the Heritage Museum has a goodly number of various fiber arts exhibits including spinning wheels. The museum has a variety of spinning wheels and while they may often look the same they can be quite different. In next month's issue of the Heritage Museum Newsletter, we will show you some of the differences between these wheels and with the help of the fiber frau explaining some of the features. Well OK, the fiber frau will not be helping, she will be doing the explaining. Ω

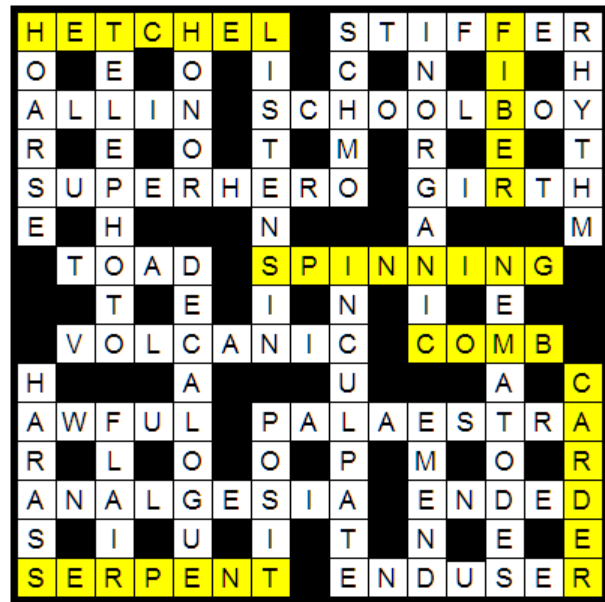


We just don't seem to be able to avoid these carved snake heads. We mentioned back in the beginning of this article that we did receive an answer to our query in the December Heritage Museum Newsletter about "what do you think is the reason for carving these heads"?

Now the person submitting this answer is no amateur collector. We had the opportunity to see what he had amassed in a lifetime of collecting old Yankee artifacts and he in fact donated several items to the museum. Here is his response:

"My opinion on the tongue & groove plane follows the Pennsylvania Dutch view of "just for pretty". Winters are long and a bit cold, sitting by the fireplace and adding a bit of fancy work may have been in the plan... "

Who knows, perhaps the reason for the snake carving is a bit of all the above. Ω



At the start of a new year we would like to thank all those who have supported the Heritage Museum through the last year. It is your interest and support that allows us to present new exhibits and continue to publish the monthly newsletter which we are happy to report now has over 300 suscribers.