

FRIEZE, KERSEY, AND INGLE

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No it's not a law firm.

I try, but I still seem to cling to an overly simplistic image of my ancestors' lives. This time it was an index that pointed out my deficiency to me.

Probate inventories are an excellent tool for learning about our ancestors. If we are wise, we examine not only the inventories for members of our own families, but also those for their neighbors. Inventories can be tough to work with. The handwriting is a style with which we are not comfortable. Spelling is varied, to say the least. And since we are seeing just nouns with an occasional adjective thrown in, it is not possible to fill in the blanks for difficult words as we can with deeds and wills.

Furthermore, we don't know what they are talking about. The words may be words we know, but they don't make sense in the context of an inventory. Or we may be able to read every letter clearly, without a clue as to what the resulting word means.

Sometimes we are lucky enough to be working in a time and locality in which some dedicated historian or genealogist has patiently deciphered those words for us. I think people who publish good abstracts and transcripts are the angels of the genealogical world. They spend hours becoming familiar with the handwriting of a period, the handwriting of a particular scribe, and the standard terminologies. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

The probate records for Essex County, Massachusetts, one of the early areas of American settlement, were published nine decades ago. They are a great help to those of us with Puritan ancestors who came during the Great Migration. But they are also a great help to anyone with seventeenth-century ancestry because this series, like a number of New England probate publications, does not quit with names and dates and wills and administrations. It lists every item in the inventories. Taken together, these give us a glimpse into the likely possessions of our own ancestors, even if we do not have their inventories.

This particular publication is even more special (if you'll excuse the grammatical impropriety), because the index didn't quit with the names of people either. It also lists subjects. Thus, while checking the index for something related to an upcoming *Ancestry Daily News* article, I noticed the heading "Cloth." Under that category were over two columns of listings! The listings included terms used in describing articles of clothing or furnishings and those referring to unfinished cloth.

This is the list: baize, barber's stuff, broadcloth, calico, cambric, canvas, cap/cape cloth, challis, cheesecloth, cheney, coifing stuff, cotton and wool, damask, darnacle, darnex, diaper, dimity, dowlas, English goods, felt, filleting, flannel, frieze, fustian, genting, grosgrane, hair cloth, hempen cloth, holland, tufted holland, inkle, inkle manchester, kersey, lawn, linen, broad linen, linsey woolsey, lockrum, manchester, mohair, ossembrike, packing cloth,

paragon, penistone, perpetuana, plush, ribbon, ribbon binding, sackcloth, sail cloth, satin, satinesco, say, sempiternum, serge, French serge, shag silk, stammell, stuff, taffety, tamme, tape, tape binding, tapestry, ticking, tow, trucking cloth, velvet, water paragon, woolen, worsted.

What variety! There were familiar terms, but they were far outnumbered by the unfamiliar. And, quite frankly, I didn't really know what the familiar terms meant. How about you? Clearly, it was time for me to learn more.

You can see some of the spelling problems easily: grosgrane for grosgrain, taffety for taffeta. But some are a bit more difficult. For example, ossembrike is surely intended to be osnaburg.

And what are these various fabrics? OK, I've heard of *linsey woolsey*. I've even seen a length of it. But that doesn't mean I know what it is. Normally I begin my search for the meaning of words with a dictionary. Sure enough, my basic dictionary told me that linsey-woolsey was just what it sounds like, a sturdy fabric of wool and linen or cotton.

But what about some of those more obscure terms? In this case, I'd just come across a specialized dictionary that was especially helpful. *A Dictionary of English Costume 900-1900* by C. Willitt Cunnington and Phillis Cunnington is actually three dictionaries in one. The first concerns clothing, the second concerns cloth, and the third concerns lace. In the early decades of American settlement, all fabric was imported from Europe, primarily England, so English resources are appropriate. Over time, some cloth came to be manufactured here, but much of it continued to be imported, thus the variety in these Massachusetts inventories.

Cloth was often named after the place that was first known for making it or that specialized in especially fine products of a particular type. We have several examples in the list. *Worsted*, which was a common fabric in early America, is a cloth made of long-stapled wool combed straight and smooth before spinning, first known as cloth of Worthstede. *Kersey*, another common fabric often used for stockings, is a course woolen cloth with a woven pattern that may have originated in Kersey, Suffolk.

Osnaburg is a linen named for Osnabrueck in Hanover, Germany. I first learned about it when an ancestor of mine bought a length of it in a country store in Virginia in the late 1700s. The word eventually came to be a generic for a certain type of linen. It is still used. I walked into Target shortly after learning of my ancestor's purchase and saw a sign announcing that osnaburg placemats and napkins were on sale.

Manchester is woolen cloth from Manchester, England. *Holland* is a fine linen originally imported to England from Holland; later the name applied to any fine linen.

There were so many other words to investigate, some of which I'd never seen. *Stamell* is a good quality worsted or linsey woolsey, generally red. The word derives from the red stamin dye. *Frieze* refers to a napped or piled woolen cloth, originally Irish.

Then there were words I knew, but whose meaning had changed slightly. *Shag* was a thick-piled cloth with a nap, generally of worsted, often used for linings. Its opposite might be *stuff*, which is also a worsted, but distinguished from other woolen clothes by the absence of any nap or pile.

Diaper has nothing to do with babies. I remembered the term from reading Martha Ballard's diary, but didn't know what it was. It is a linen cloth patterned by opposite reflections from its surface.

Then we come to the great mystery. What is *inkle*? The Cunnington's dictionary came to the rescue. It is a kind of linen tape, sometimes white but usually colored, used as a cheap binding by the lower classes.

Did our ancestors live a simple lifestyle? Maybe. But not one without great variety, even in something as basic as the cloth they used.

RESOURCES

Essex County, Massachusetts, Probate Records, Volume 1: 1635–1664 (Salem: Essex Institute, 1916).

C. Willitt and Phillis Cunnington. *A Dictionary of English Costume 900–1900* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1960). The contents is based in part on the material collected by the late Charles Beard.