

# Renfrew Institute for Cultural and Environmental Studies

Program Overview and Pre-trip Information  
*Cultural History School Programs — Grade 4 & up*

## GROWING CLOTHES: FLAX CULTURE OF THE PENNSYLVANIA GERMANS

***Growing Clothes*** will immerse the children in the processing of flax. The flax plant yields a fiber, which is made into linen cloth. Linen is one of the oldest fabrics known to mankind. Flax, along with wool, was a primary source of cloth on a Pennsylvania German farmstead in the early 1800s. As visiting students quickly learn, the processing of flax is labor-intensive.

As we actively involve the students in the processing of flax, the group will take the flax from the plant form to its finished woven product. Along the way the students will scutch, brake, spin and weave. We will conclude with a discussion of the technology that brought the “homespun era” to a close.

***Growing Clothes*** creates an awareness of the relationship between the local environment and its influence on the daily life of the Pennsylvania Germans of the late 1700s and early 1800s, especially as it relates to textile production. It introduces an important facet of farmstead life, the growing and processing of flax. The students will learn what their contribution to the flax process would have been had they lived two hundred years ago, and the program demonstrates that children played an important role in the operation of the farmstead.

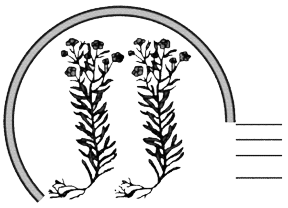
The flax program requires two hours. We recommend comfortable clothing suitable for both indoor and outdoor activity.

We will also supply a vocabulary list, and a link to a YouTube video, which you may find helpful as you prepare for your trip.

**Please bring at least 4 adult helpers in addition to the classroom teacher.**

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# Vocabulary

**Brake** - a wooden tool used to loosen the linen fiber from the woody stem

**Cloth** - a fabric made by knitting, crocheting, or weaving

**Fiber** - long, narrow plant material that can be spun into yarn (e.g. flax)

**Flax** - a grass-like plant which yields the fiber that is made into linen cloth

**Flaxen hair** - golden color or any light shade of auburn or pale yellowish brown: blond hair

**Harvest** - to gather in the flax crop

**Hatchel** - a tool used to comb out the flax fibers

**Kiln** - an oven-like structure used to dry the flax

**Line** - the long, fine part of the flax fiber which yields high-quality cloth

**Linen** - cloth made from the fibers of the flax plant

**Linseed** - the seed of the flax plant

**Linsey-woolsey** - a warm, durable cloth made from both linen and wool; used for winter clothing

**Loom** - a machine used for weaving thread into cloth

**Pennsylvania Germans** - people with at least one family member who emigrated to this country from the Rhineland area of Germany, France and Switzerland during the 1600s and 1700s

**Pennsylvania German Farmstead** - everything involved in making up a farm, including people, livestock, buildings and landscape

**Retting** - a process of rotting the outer stem of the flax plant to remove the fibers

**Ripple** - a tool used to remove seeds from the flax plant

**Self sufficient** - needing no outside help in satisfying one's basic needs, especially with regard to the production of food and clothing

**Textile** - a flexible material (cloth) consisting of a network of natural or artificial fibers (e.g. yarn or thread)

**Scutching paddle** - a tool used to help brake the woody stem from the flax fiber

**Scutch** - to scrape the flax with a paddle against a wooden board to remove the woody stem

**Scutching board** - the board that holds the flax while it is being scraped with a paddle

**Shuttle** - a tool that carries the yarn back and forth while weaving on a loom

**Spin** - to twist the fiber into thread

**Spinning wheel** - a compound machine used to twist fiber into thread

**Spinster** - one who spins; often refers to an unmarried woman

**Thread** - a continuous strand of fibers

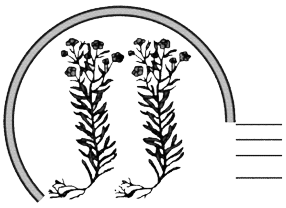
**Tow** - the short, coarse part of the flax fiber used to make coarse cloth

**Towhead** - a person having blond hair

**Weave** - to make cloth on a loom by interlacing thread (under and over)

**Processing flax:**

Plant, Weed, Harvest, Dry in field, Remove seeds, Ret, Retting in water (English), Dry in field again, Dry on kiln, Brake, Hatchel, Weave, Sew



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# Online Resources

## Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLAUqpEi3kA>

A three-minute-long video that shows how a traditional loom operates. The parts are listed and the overall operation of the loom is broken down into steps.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bII8ZLUcxzw>

The loom featured in this two-minute long video is similar to the one set-up in the Fahnestock house. The basic operation of the loom is demonstrated, but the foot-work involved is not so easily seen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnbUF0wglfw>

Nearly four minutes long. The video comes from Mount Vernon. A slightly different model of loom involved, but the basic function of a loom is fully displayed. Some extra information incorporated, perhaps too much for third graders.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNw6PkH9IzA>

Just over one minute long. Again, loom used is similar to the one we use. The weaver is creating an afghan, so the threads used are based on a pattern, a designed blanket begins to form. It may help the students visualize different creations enabled by the loom. It may be too short, lacking some details—a speed course in using a loom.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZeCXLiwWqKw&t=3s>

Making linen from flax

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Le9u7hTlVnQ>

Flax processing, a historical example

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjPmdVJskNZvx2q9xm-IZPA>

A relatively modern example from Britain, from The Hermitage. The Zinzendorf's videos on flax. There are a series of 10 videos, each about 10 minutes long.