

A flock of sheep, including several white and brown varieties, are grazing in a lush green field. In the background, a calm lake is visible, surrounded by a dense line of green trees. The scene is captured in a slightly desaturated, naturalistic style.

Making Wool

Shearing Sheep

It began each spring with the shearing of the sheep. Some washed the sheep three days before shearing to remove most of the dirt and grease that had accumulated in the fleece over the year that it had been protecting the sheep. Then the sheared wool would be washed again.



Washing Wool

Wool was washed in hot water and homemade soap after shearing. It was dried in the shade and was either stored in bags until winter when there was more time to work on it or the processing could begin immediately.

Young children 2 to 3 years of age were very qualified and often more than willing to pick or tease the clean wool. The fibers were easily pulled away from one another, allowing little bits of grass or other particulate matter to fall away from the wool. Burrs might have needed to be removed as well.



Carding Wool

Older children of the family often carded the wool. These often homemade tools consisted of a pair of rectangular paddles, both set thickly with wire teeth that curved back a little toward the handles. A small handful of clean wool is combed onto one of the cards. The other card is drawn across the wool. The wool is stroked between the cards until the fibers lay parallel to each other. Then it is ready to spin.



Spinning Wool

The craft of spinning is thousands of years old. During the spinning process the fibers are twisted into a long, continuous thread, or yarn.

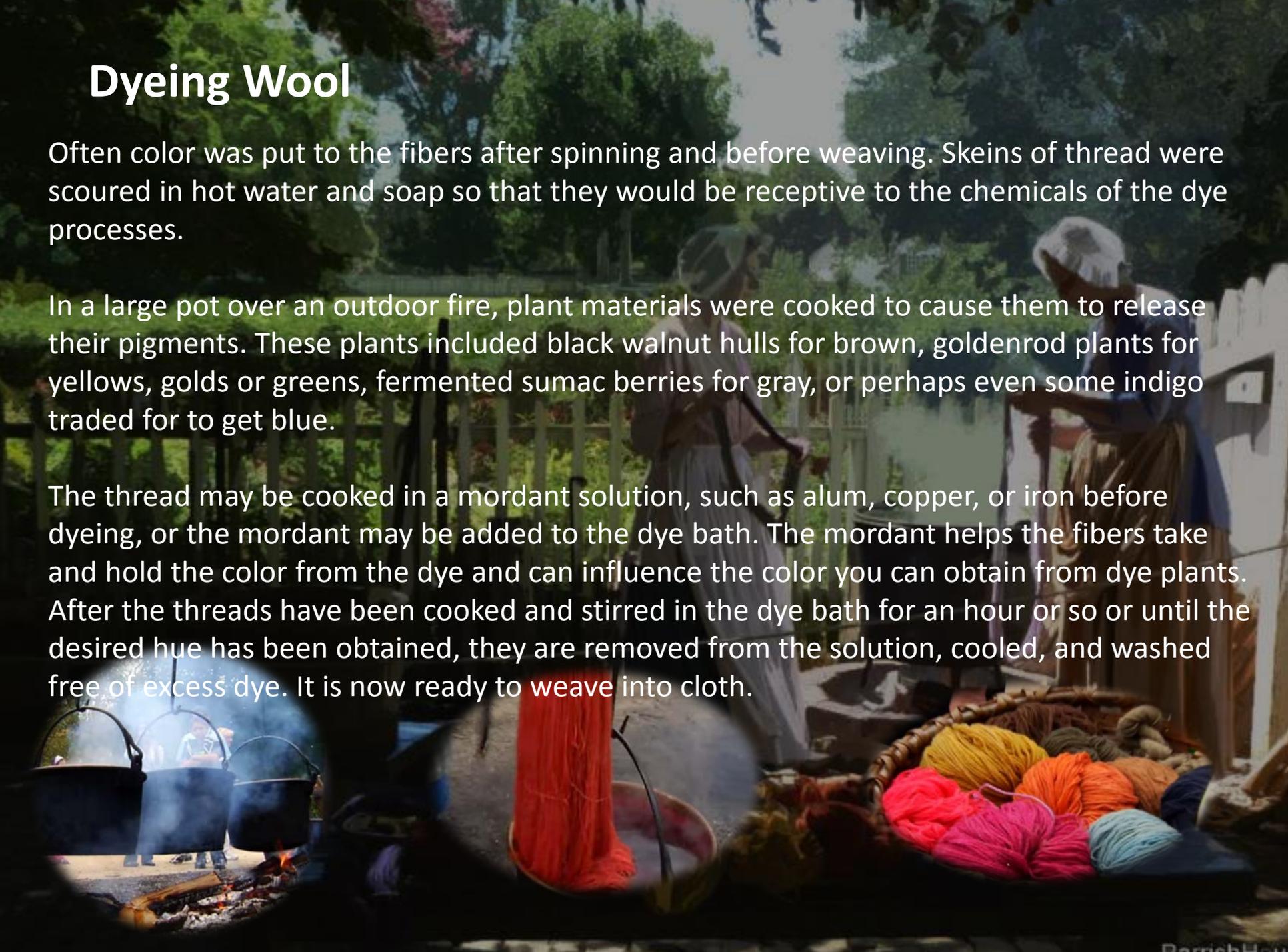


Dyeing Wool

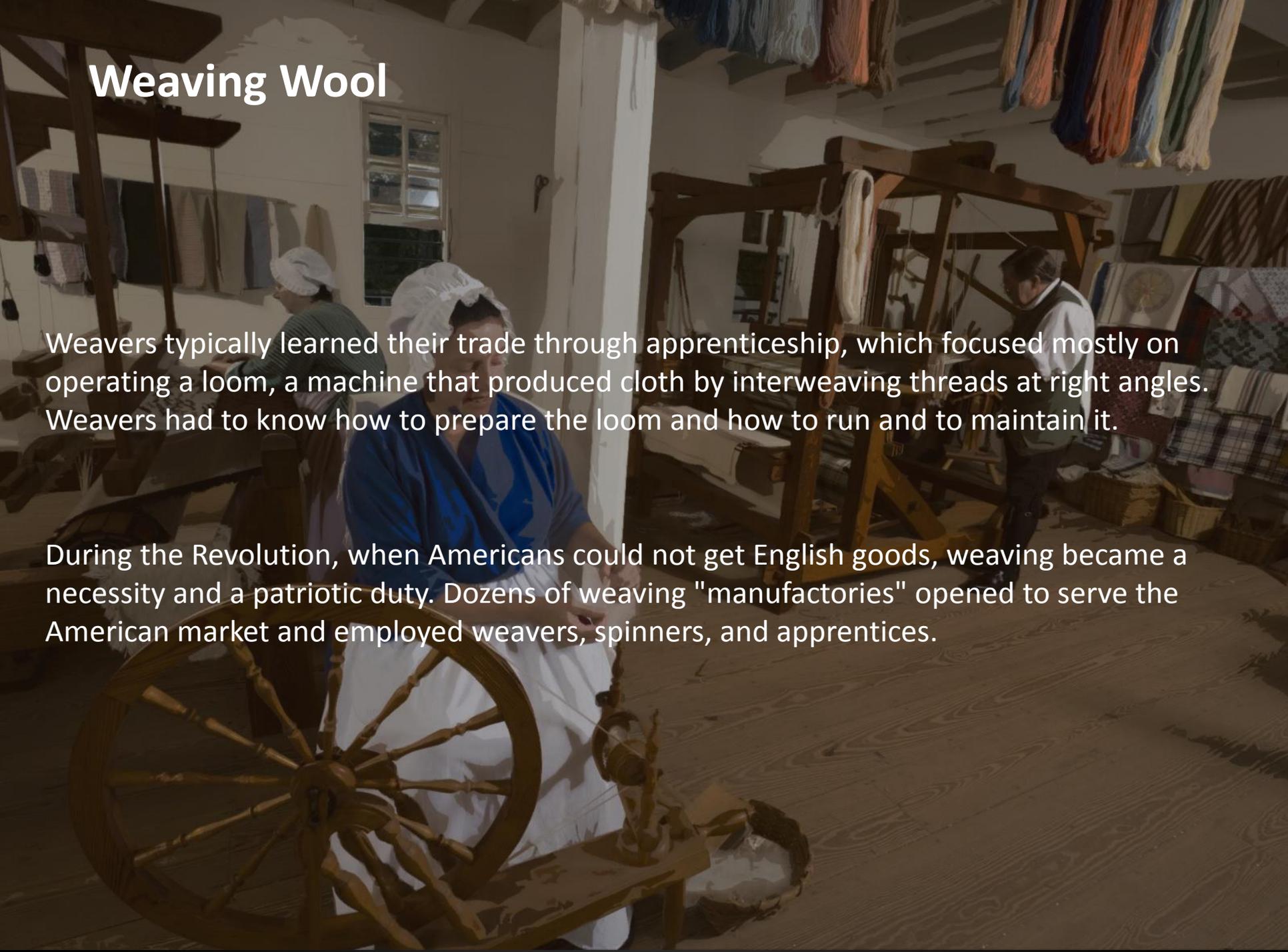
Often color was put to the fibers after spinning and before weaving. Skeins of thread were scoured in hot water and soap so that they would be receptive to the chemicals of the dye processes.

In a large pot over an outdoor fire, plant materials were cooked to cause them to release their pigments. These plants included black walnut hulls for brown, goldenrod plants for yellows, golds or greens, fermented sumac berries for gray, or perhaps even some indigo traded for to get blue.

The thread may be cooked in a mordant solution, such as alum, copper, or iron before dyeing, or the mordant may be added to the dye bath. The mordant helps the fibers take and hold the color from the dye and can influence the color you can obtain from dye plants. After the threads have been cooked and stirred in the dye bath for an hour or so or until the desired hue has been obtained, they are removed from the solution, cooled, and washed free of excess dye. It is now ready to weave into cloth.



Weaving Wool

A historical scene of a weaving workshop. In the foreground, a woman in a blue shawl and white apron is operating a large wooden spinning wheel. In the background, other people are working at looms. The room is filled with various textile materials, including skeins of wool hanging from the ceiling and finished fabrics draped over the looms. The setting appears to be a well-lit, spacious room with wooden floors and walls.

Weavers typically learned their trade through apprenticeship, which focused mostly on operating a loom, a machine that produced cloth by interweaving threads at right angles. Weavers had to know how to prepare the loom and how to run and to maintain it.

During the Revolution, when Americans could not get English goods, weaving became a necessity and a patriotic duty. Dozens of weaving "manufactories" opened to serve the American market and employed weavers, spinners, and apprentices.