

A person wearing a white turban and a white robe is leaning over a large, cylindrical wooden vat. They are using a long, thin wooden stick to stir the contents of the vat. The scene is dimly lit, with a warm, yellowish light source. In the foreground, there is a small, round, shallow dish on a wooden stand. The background is dark and indistinct.

Making Soap

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A photograph showing several bars of light-colored, rectangular soap bars scattered on a wooden cutting board. A large, sharp knife with a black handle is positioned in the foreground, partially overlapping the soap bars. The background is dark and out of focus.

While bathing remained unpopular up until the 18th Century, keeping one's surroundings clean was quite important. The first American settlers brought a large supply of soap with them. After a few years, the colonists realized they could save much money and time by using the plentiful resources at hand by making their own soap.

Rendering the Animal Fat

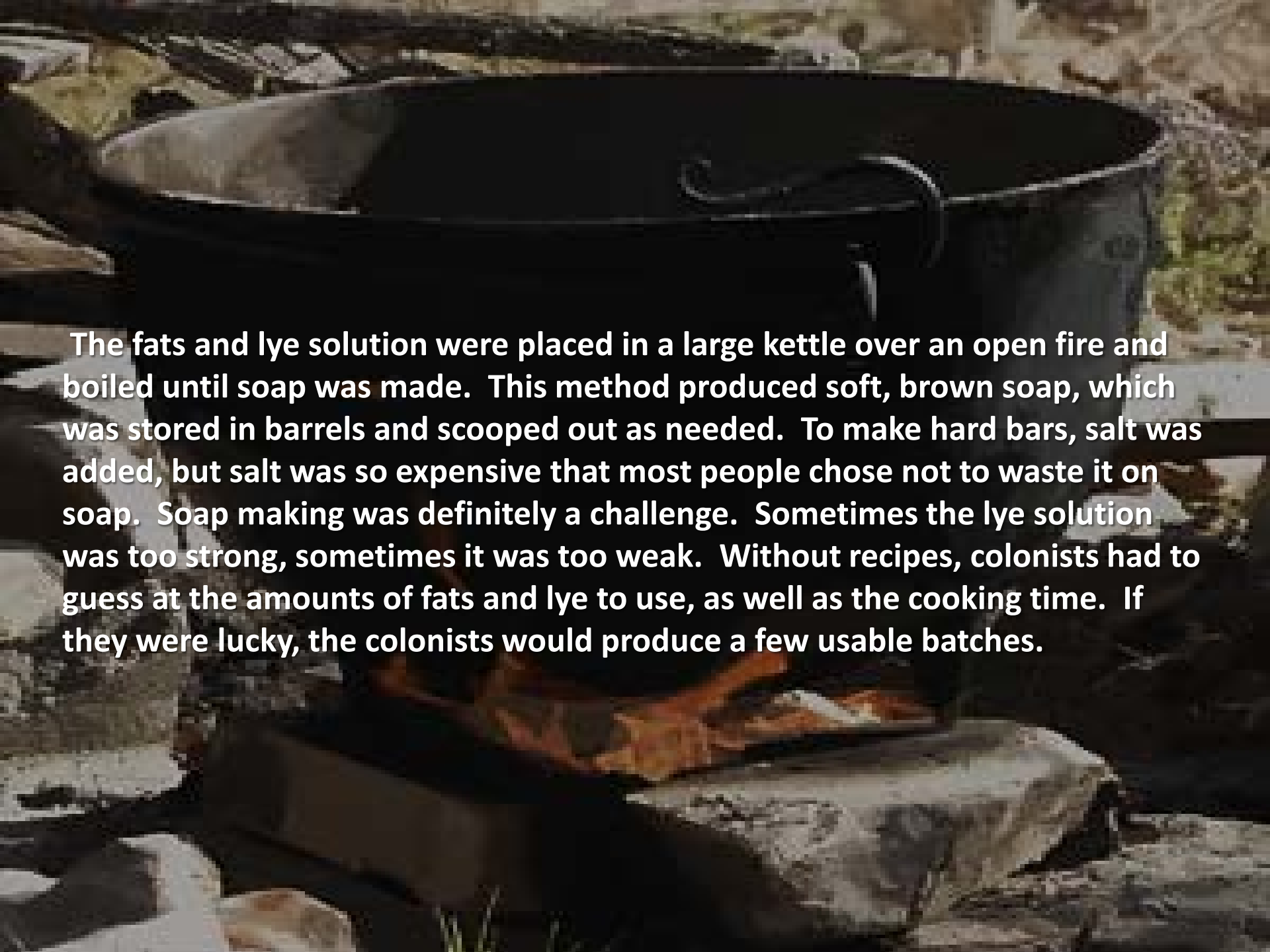
A person is shown from the side, stirring a large, dark, round pot with a long wooden spoon. The pot is placed over a fire, which is visible at the bottom of the frame. The person is wearing a light-colored shirt and dark pants. The background is a simple, outdoor setting with a concrete or stone floor.

The difficult task of soap making took place once or twice a year. People saved up their animal fats, cooking grease and wood ashes for months. The fats were rendered--cleaned--by boiling them with water, then adding more water and letting the mixture cool. The next day the clean fat was skimmed off the top.

Making Lye

To make lye, the colonists built bottomless barrels or hoppers and lined them with gravel and straw. They added the wood ashes and poured rain water over them. The lye solution would drip out of the bottom of the barrel or hopper and was collected in a small bucket.



A large, dark, cylindrical metal kettle with a lid and a handle is positioned over a fire. The fire is contained within a stone fire pit, with several logs burning brightly. The kettle is the central focus of the image, and the text is overlaid on it.

The fats and lye solution were placed in a large kettle over an open fire and boiled until soap was made. This method produced soft, brown soap, which was stored in barrels and scooped out as needed. To make hard bars, salt was added, but salt was so expensive that most people chose not to waste it on soap. Soap making was definitely a challenge. Sometimes the lye solution was too strong, sometimes it was too weak. Without recipes, colonists had to guess at the amounts of fats and lye to use, as well as the cooking time. If they were lucky, the colonists would produce a few usable batches.