

Bed and Table Linens  
for the  
18th century Household

*BLANKETS*



## *Historical background*

*Period blankets served the same purpose as modern ones--keeping the occupants of a bed warm. During times that knew no central heat and when most buildings were quite drafty, warm bedding was especially important. Numerous blankets and quilts were required to keep people who lived in cold climates warm during the night.*

*A wool blanket forms a barrier between body warmth inside and the cold air outside. The thickness of a blanket is a primary determinate of how well it performs this function. Weight is far less important. Therefore, a light fluffy blanket is much more efficient than a heavy, thinner one. Today, blankets are woven in one piece on wide power looms. They are fulled and finished to a thickness unknown in times past. Period blankets tend to be on the thin side; hence the need for several on a bed.*

## *Materials Required*

*Some period blankets were woven in one piece on wide looms, but the majority were made up from narrower widths of cloth. For a narrow (30-36") bed a single width of 40" or more could be adequate, especially in a servant's or less than middle class setting. For beds of greater width several panels must be joined. Two panel period blankets range from about 60" wide to about 95" wide. The generousness (or lack thereof) is probably indicative of the size of the bed for which the blanket was intended and the prosperity of the owner. Period blankets vary in length as well, very likely depending on the same factors. Some are as short as 70", most ranging between 85-95", with a few measuring as long as 110".*

*To figure the yardage you will need, first determine whether you require one or two panels. Next, decide on the appropriate length based on your bed and personal or interpretive needs. Multiply the number of panels by the length in inches. Divide this figure by 36 to find the yards of blanket fabric you need.*

*Be certain to allow for shrinkage in your estimate or wash the blanket fabric prior to making up the blanket. The joining of two panels is almost always easier to do when the fabric has not been washed. Even for handwoven yardage an allowance of 10% shrinkage is quite generous.*

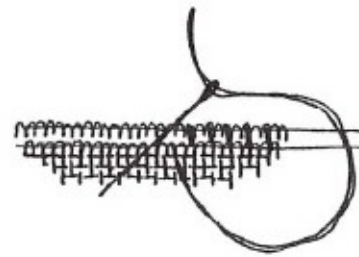
## Cutting out

*Cut the panel(s) to the length you have decided upon. If there is only one panel, skip down to the hemming instructions.*

## Joining blanket panels

*Blankets were one of the many household textiles that needed to be wider than a single width of handwoven cloth. They were constructed by a nearly invisible join of the two selvage edges of the panels. This technique involves using a closely spaced overcast stitch that passes through the loops at the edge of the cloth.*

*These loops were formed as each weft thread was thrown back across the warp as the fabric was being woven (see diagram above). This method is a centuries old way to create smooth, flat, and very durable seams. There is no excess thickness that would invite extra wear.*



*In order for the seam to lie flat the two panels must be attached to each other at an even tension. This means that the overcasting described above must advance through the selvage loops of each panel at the same rate. The most certain way to assure this result is to pin the two panels (with right sides facing in) together before beginning to join the panels. Pins placed at 6-7" intervals are enough to hold the material while you work. If the blanket has a woven pattern of checks or stripes be sure to align them as you pin. If you must choose between even tension and pattern matching we advise that you give function (meaning tension) priority over beauty (meaning pattern). Period textiles almost always follow this course.*

*Start overcasting the edges from one end. Remove the pins as you come to them. Try to work each stitch firmly, but not too tightly. You want the seam to be able to open up flat on the right side when it is finished. When you have joined the two panels together, open them and press the seam flat. Use a steam iron or your fingers to open the panels like the pages of a book and form a single flat piece of cloth.*

## Hemming

The cut ends must be hemmed to avoid deterioration through ravelling. Period blankets show a wide variety of treatments in this area. One method that I have never seen is satin ribbon-like binding of the edges as modern blankets are finished.

Heavy blankets are almost always finished with blanket stitching (see diagram). It must be worked closely enough to truly bind the cut edge. If the stitch is well worked no turn under of the edge is necessary. Use good worsted thread that matches the main color of the blanket.



blanket stitching



hemming



shaped blanket stitching

Lighter weight blankets are usually finished with a turned under hem. Sometimes this hem is sewn just as it would be on a linen towel or tablecloth (see diagram). In other cases, it is sewn in place with blanket stitching. Both of these methods use a fine, strong worsted thread that matches the main color of the blanket. Some delightful examples have blanket stitching worked in a shaped design that forms a decorative edge (see diagram). The shaped blanket stitching is worked in a contrasting color--we have seen red or blue used.

## Marking

If the blanket fabric you are using has threads that are distinct enough to count you can mark it with the initials of the owner, the year, etc. Refer to our booklet on marking for complete instructions & letter forms. Blankets are usually marked in silk thread at one end either to the right or the left of the center seam. As with many other household textiles the most common colors seem to have been blue, brown or red.

## *Washing & care instructions*

*Period blankets were probably not washed with the frequency that modern bedding is. Seasonal housecleaning involved airing of quilts and blankets on an outdoor clothesline. This does much to freshen and shake loose soil from them. We recommend this periodic airing of reproduction bedding as an excellent way to maintain it. Annual washing in soap or detergent suitable for the dyes and materials used can also be beneficial. If a wool blanket becomes dirty or stained it should be soaked promptly in warm water and an appropriate cleaner. Use a minimum of agitation to avoid causing felting and/or excessive shrinkage.*