

HOW WAS LAUNDRY DONE?

Laundry required skill in the 18th century. From removing stains to ironing properly, it took practice to be able to care for the different fabrics without ruining them or injuring oneself in the process.

The 1796 Mutual Assurance Map shows a separate laundry house in the back corner of the lot. Gadsby's 1802 inventory lists four tubs, a boiler, and a table in the building. His 14-bedroom hotel included around 80 sets of sheets and 30 tablecloths, all needing hand washing.

At the tavern, enslaved women handled most of the laundry, with additional laundresses hired as needed. In fact, laundress was the most common job listed for free African American women at this time. They spent hours to complete each load. The steps included:

- Drawing 20 to 40 gallons of water to fill the boiler heated over a fire.
- Hand-agitating with a wooden paddle in the boiling water.
- Removing individual items for spot treatment with soap. Difficult stains were scrubbed over a washing board.
- Replacing the water and rinsing linens in cold water to removed soap.
- Wringing water from each item by hand (larger items required two people) and laying them out to dry.

Wrinkles needed to be pressed out. Some were done by hand with a flat iron that had been heated in the fire. It took experience to know when the iron was hot enough to work without scorching the linens. To protect hands, the handle had to be wrapped with a thick rag. To keep irons clean, they were sand-papered and polished after use.

Gadsby's 1802 inventory shows the tavern also had a mangle, a piece of equipment that worked much like a washing machine wringer. The enslaved laundresses could feed the wet laundry through the press, cranking the handle. This both helped remove water and smooth the fabric.



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