

CANDLEMAKING

The following is excerpted from the book, *Traditional American Crafts* by Betsey B. Creekmore, Hearthside Press, Inc., 1968.

When we say that our ancestors worked from sunup to sundown, we are speaking the literal truth. After dark, with doors bolted and windows securely shuttered, colonial families gathered around the huge fireplace that was an invariable feature of the principal room. Flickering flames often provided the room's only light and this did not penetrate to the shadowy corners.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, candles were the best means of illumination in the Old World and the New. They were of two kinds, wax and tallow, but burning expensive wax tapers was the prerogative of royalty, nobility and the Church.

Tallow. In England, candle tallow was made from the fat of sheep. In the colonies, where sheep were few, any sort of suet or animal grease—beef, pork, goose, deer, opossum, or bear, to name but a few—was used in candlemaking. Fats were carefully hoarded all year round in a barrel. In the autumn, great masses of the rancid mixture were added to huge kettles of hot water and were boiled and skimmed over and over until a clear tallow resulted. This unpleasant process took several days.

Dipping method. At first, candles were made entirely by the dipping method. In preparation, two long parallel poles were set up in a cool place well away from the fire—often in a lean-to shed. The candle rods, slender sticks about eighteen inches long, would rest across these poles. Each candle rod was hung with six or eight wicks, depending upon the size of the tallow kettle; the middle of a cord was folded over the rod and the two ends were twisted together.

When the tallow had been melted in a large kettle, the housewife dipped the wicks, a rodful at a time, into the pot. After dipping, the rod was returned to the rack until the tallow had cooled and hardened. When the last set of wicks had been dipped, it was time to begin again with the first rod; the candles grew fatter as they were repeatedly dipped and cooled. It was no easy matter to keep the contents of the kettle at the correct, even temperature. If the tallow was too cool, the candle emerged from it lumpy, and if it was too hot, it would melt off the layers that had already been deposited on the wick. Once the candles were completely hardened, the wicks were slipped off the rod, leaving a characteristic loop at the top of each candle. In spite of the tedious clarification process, tallow candles smoked and gave off the unpleasant smell of burning grease.

An expert candlemaker could produce only about 200 "tallow dips" in a day of grueling labor. The dips were carefully stored away in a wooden chest where they were safe from mice. They were used sparingly, for they would have to last until a new supply of tallow accumulated.

Candleholders. Candleholders were rare. The average household might boast one or two of carved wood or cast iron, but usually the candle was affixed in a wooden saucer (or to a shelf or table) by settling its base in a splotch of its own dripped tallow.

Lanterns. In the colonial period, candle-lanterns lighted the belated traveler on his way, the watchman on his rounds, the farmer to the barn. The iron bull's eye lantern was square, and had only one glazed side; this glass, like the windowpanes of the time, was green in color and showed a characteristic round and watery imperfection responsible for the lantern's name. Tin lanterns were round with a hinged bottom centered by a candle-cup and a peaked top ending in a ring that could be slipped over the finger for carrying or used to hang the lantern inside the house. Like those still made in Mexico, they emitted light through holes punched in the thin metal with the point of a nail; the holes might be scattered or in vertical rows, but were more often arranged in a decorative pattern such as a sunburst.

Bayberry candles. All along the eastern seacoast, wild bayberry bushes grew in great profusion. It was a lucky day when some unknown New Englander first conceived the idea of gathering the waxy berries and

boiling them down into clear greenish tallow. Bayberry candles had many advantages. First of all, the raw material was in abundant supply and free for the taking, and the berries could be gathered by children. The sage-green candles hardened beautifully and kept straight even in hot summer weather; they burned slowly, with a clear and steady flame. Last but certainly not least, they gave off a spicy fragrance! Before long, the colonists were exporting as many bayberry candles as they could make.

Candle molds. Metal candle molds were an early American labor-saving device. They were made of sheet iron, tin or (occasionally) of pewter, in connected groups of slender, tapered tubes. Melted wax was poured into each tube, encasing a wick of twisted thread, and the mold was then set aside in a cool place. When the candles had hardened completely, the mold was dipped into hot water to release them; they were then lifted out of the tubes and polished with a soft cloth. Although tallow still had to be collected and clarified, molding candles seemed almost indecently easy to housewives accustomed to the laborious dipping process.

Women were much more liberal in the use of these new molded candles. Brass candlesticks (each with a short pointed spike on which the candle was impaled) and candleholders (ending in cups into which the base of a taper fitted) were placed on tables and tall candle-stands; in the homes of the wealthy, silver candelabra began to grace dining room tables and sideboards. Sconces were fixed to walls, and branched lighting fixtures were suspended from ceilings. Wall and ceiling fixtures of wrought iron were popular for kitchens that doubled as dining rooms. Even in primitive, rustic homes there were hanging candleholders: crossed wooden boards with candle-cups carved out along their length; wooden wheels, hung horizontally, with candleholders around their rims; wrought iron candle-cups with long handles ending in hooks that could be slipped over a nail on the wall.

An illumination. To welcome a royal governor, or to celebrate the king's birthday, town fathers often ordered an illumination. Every householder was expected to place a lighted candle in each window that faced the street, and any homeowner who did not comply was fined. Along the dark streets, rows of lighted houses made an impressive and festive sight, but housewives resented the custom for its wasteful use of their cherished candles. During the Revolutionary War, however, spontaneous illuminations heralded the news of each victory of the Continental Army.

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SUMMARY / CLASS OUTLINE

Can you imagine what it would have been like 200 years ago not to have electric lights? **For what things do you need light?**

Families made their own yearly supply of candles and soap in the fall with the tallow that they had been saving. **Do you know what tallow is made from?** (Animal fat) As you can imagine, it meant that candles didn't smell all that good and would bend in the hot weather even more than our candles sometimes do now in the summer. Nicer candles were made out of beeswax (*pass around sample*) and bayberries (*show berries*). **It takes 16 quarts of bayberries to make a pound of wax!** Most of our candles today are made with paraffin and stearic acid and often have fragrance added, as well as color. The paraffin we'll be using here is colored with old crayons.

Candles were made outdoors over an open fire, dipping them in a big kettle many at a time hung from a stick. Candle molds were also used. (Mrs. Chamberlain showed/will show you some candle molds in the hearth-cooking workshop.)

Candlewicks were made from low-grade linen and sometimes from spun and braided milkweed silk.

If you'd like to try dipping candles at home, remember that wax catches fire very easily. Never make candles without supervision from your parents or another adult, and always be sure to **melt the wax in a can in a pan of water** as you see us doing today.

Candlemaking “How To”

Materials

- Paraffin wax
- Four to six cans (coffee cans or stainless steel cans)
- One large metal pot for water bath.
- One rack to keep cans off the bottom of the pot.
- Assortment of colored crayons (to color the wax so we can easily see the amount of wax in the can)
- 10 – 15 looped wicks per group (one wick for each member of the group)
- Newspapers, newspapers, newspapers!
- One wooden dowel per class
- Slips of paper or labels or masking tape on which to write name of each student
- Samples of bayberry branch with bayberries, beeswax, paraffin
- Illustrations of candlemaking in the 18th century (to be posted on walls)

Homework (to be completed prior to your workshop)

Wicking will be distributed on Orientation Evening. These need to be cut to 7 ½ -inch lengths and a loop tied in the top. (Total number needed depends on class size.) The children will put a finger through this loop to hold the wick for dipping. This loop will be used to hang the candle on the dowel for drying. Bring these wicks with loops already tied with you when you come for your assigned workshop day.

Steps

1. Heat water to boiling at least 1/2 hour before first class begins so wax is melted.
2. Place pieces of paraffin wax in cans to fill approximately 3/4 full when it has melted. Add pieces of crayon to color the wax (at least two cans of the same color) so the level of wax in the cans is easily discernable. Vary the color for the groups to make it more interesting. (Coloring the wax is not “colonial” but it makes it more fun — and we’re recycling the small pieces of crayon.)
3. Remove cans from water bath when wax is hot and place on newspaper-covered surface of grill (to right of stove). (If wax is too hot, the candles will not “grow.”)
4. Place one can of melted wax (same color) at each end of the center island.
5. Make sure table is covered adequately with newspapers. These will need to be replaced at the end of the candlemaking sessions for the day. At the end of the day, replace the aluminum foil on the bases upon which the cans are placed.
6. When the children arrive
 - A. Refer to this handout on candlemaking in the 18th century to give a brief explanation of how things were done and why. Show the samples of beeswax, bayberries and paraffin. Show samples of candles in various stages during the dipping process.
 - B. Give each child a wick that has been looped.
 - C. Ask one of the chaperones or the teacher to write the names of the children in the group on labels/masking tape/paper. These will be put on the candles at the end of class.
 - D. Have the children walk around the table (vary clockwise and counter-clockwise), one dip each time they pass a can of wax. Allow to cool before the next dipping. DON’T let them touch it immediately to straighten out the curl that will result in the wick. After a few passes, have them stop and straighten out the wick.
 - E. Suggest the children sing songs to pass the time while they walk around the table.
 - F. Have children make last pass for candle dipping 5 minutes before the class period ends. Place nametags at the top of each candle’s wick. Slide the loops onto the dowel labeled with that group’s number. The candles will be distributed to the children at the end of the day.