Lighting the Way: A History on Candles

Although candles have been used for over 5000 years, their origin is still unknown. Candles were originally used as a source of light, and then later were used in early religious ceremonies. There is proof that Egyptians used wicked candles in 3000 B.C., but it is the ancient Romans who are credited with the idea of candles. They would dip rolled papyrus repeatedly in melted tallow (animal fat) or beeswax.

Other early civilizations made candles from available plants and insects from their area. Some of these civilizations were from China, Japan and India. Early Chinese candles were molded in paper tubes, with rolled rice paper that was used for the wick and wax from various plants mixed with some seeds which would also have been used.

In the Middle Ages, beeswax candles became very popular because they had a more pleasant scent. Unfortunately, beeswax was not cheap, so only the wealthy and churches could afford to use beeswax candles.

By the 19th century, mass candle production began making many advances to simplify the candle making process. By the 20th century, candles grew even more in popularity as it was discovered that scents could also be added to the candle before it set.

Making Candles

Before candle molds, the earliest settlers made candles known as a taper candle. These candles were made by the dipping method, where a wick of cotton would be repeatedly dipped into tallow.

To make your own homemade candle today you will need just a few ingredients:

- Braided wick rope
- Wick tabs
- 5 pounds of unscented soy candle wax (as soy burns the longest)
- a small container of fragrance oil if fragrance is desired
- a small container of colour if colouring the candle is desired
- a jar or vase to serve as the candle mold and container
- A thermometer to watch the temperature of the wax

There are many books and online resources that explain the step-by-step method to produce a candle from scratch.

To the left is a picture of a candle holder on display in the kitchen of the Fultz House Museum. It would have been used to light up a small area like a desk or bedside table.

All About Soap & Candle Making

The picture above is of a candle mold that would have been used around the 19th century. This mold can be found on display in the Fultz House Museum.

FULTZ HOUSE MUSEUM

What is Soap?

Soap is used as a cleaning agent for washing, disinfecting, and various other purposes. It is made from natural oils or fats mixed with ashes, sodium hydroxide or any other strong alkaline compounds.

A Short History on Soap and Bathing

It is difficult to determine when exactly soap was invented. It could trace back to 5000 years ago when Sumerians would boil ashes together with animal and vegetable fat to make what they referred to as "slurry". They used "slurry" for cleaning purposes.

Before the1700s, soap was considered a luxury that only the wealthy could afford.

New methods of soap production were discovered and new exotic imports such as coconut became a popular find within a bar of soap around the time of the Industrial revolution..

Soap sales began to soar in the 1800s when companies decided to brand and mass produce soap.

Above is an early Procter and Gamble ad for Tide laundry soap.

How to Make Soap

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The process of making soap traditionally took a year of collecting all the ingredients. Over the winter, all the ashes would be gathered and kept to get lye (a strong alkaline solution, commonly known as sodium hydroxide in soap). There was a designated soap pot for leftover fat, grease and lard to be gathered.

To make a simple soap you will need:

- 1 cup of melted beef fat
- 2 tablespoons of lye flakes
- ½ cup cold soft water (rain water)

Begin by lining a pan with either factory cotton or Vaseline. Then prepare the lye by mixing it together with ½ cup of the cold water, stirring continuously until the flakes have dissolved. Try to do this at an arm's length to avoid breathing in the fumes from the lye. Use a meat thermometer to monitor the temperature of the lye.

Put the melted fat into a pan and set another thermometer in it to monitor the temperature of the fat as well. Once the lye has reached between 90-98°F, and the fat reaches a temperature between 120-125°F, add the lye to the fat mixture. Stir this new mixture constantly. After a little while, the mixture will begin to thicken.

Once the mixture reaches a consistency that is similar to muffin batter, pour into molds and smooth the top of each one. Cover the molds with a towel and let them set for 2-3 hours. Next, cut the soap into bars and re-cover for 24 hours. After that, remove the bricks from the mold and stack them to air dry. You need to wait 3-4 weeks before using the soap, as this is the curing period.

Above is a soap holder that would have held a bar of soap. The holder allowed the soap to break without losing all the pieces. This soap holder is on display in the kitchen of the Fultz House Museum.