



WASHBOARDS

Washing clothes in a river was the norm across the world for centuries. Women carried their soiled linens and garments to a river, soaked them, and then beat the items against a rock with a stick or a stone to loosen and remove the dirt. By the Middle Ages, women employed laundry bats or “beetles” (so-called because they were used to “beat” the clothing) to pound out the dirt. Bats and beetles came in many shapes and sizes. Some were simply tree branches; others were long and round like a baseball bat. Some were flattened square boards with a handle; others looked like small, wooden spades. Regardless, the washing process remained the same. Beating wet clothing with some hard object continued to be the standard method for cleaning clothes.

Washboards evolved from washing bats and beetles. Women in northern England used washing bats with ridged surfaces. Scandinavian women used decorated, textured washing bats. In the 17th and 18th centuries women employed smooth washboards in combination with washtubs to ease the burden of stooping over or standing long hours in the river. Gradually, these traditions came together and the grooved, wooden washboard emerged. Stephen Rust patented the first metal-covered grooved washboard in 1833.

The grooved, metal-covered washboard marked a significant improvement. The washboard was small enough to fit into a wooden or metal tub, so carrying the laundry to the river became less necessary. The washboard’s grooved surface was less brutal on the fabric than river rocks had been, so clothes lasted longer. The washboard’s scored, galvanized metal overlay increased the effective surface area, so dirt was removed faster and clothes came cleaner than before. Still, washing laundry remained difficult work. Hauling and heating water and then scrubbing, rinsing and drying each piece individually by hand consumed many long hours. Many 19th century women designated one day each week as “washday” in which their labor was solely devoted to cleaning, drying and ironing their family’s clothing. This practice extended far into the 20th century and continues today in many underdeveloped countries.

The heyday of washboards occurred between 1925 and 1955. Of the ten washboard manufacturers in business then, the largest were the Columbus Washboard Company (Logan, OH) and the National Washboard Company (Chicago, Memphis and Cleveland). Between 1925 and 1955 the Columbus Washboard Company alone sold 15,000,000 washboards, offering some twenty-two styles for purchase. The post-World War II boom in affordable electric appliances reduced the washboard market severely. By the early 1970s, only the Columbus Washboard Company remained in business. Today, the company produces washboards for sale in the United States principally for use as musical instruments. However, a significant market for washboards overseas exists, especially in underdeveloped countries where the centuries-long practice of taking the laundry to the river, soaking it, and beating the dirt out remains a standard of women’s lives.