

The Story of Soap



Making soap in colonial days was a hard job. Soap was made from grease and lye. All kinds of fats were saved for soap-making. The ends of tallow candles, deer and bear oil, and other fats went into the grease barrel. Salt was taken out of the grease by washing it in hot water and letting it stand until the clean grease came to the top, leaving the salt in the water at the bottom.

Lye for the soap was also made at home. Ashes from hardwoods such as oak and hickory were saved in a barrel that had clean straw on the bottom. When water was poured in at the top of the barrel and allowed to trickle through the ashes, an alkaline solution called lye was formed. The lye dripped through a small hole at the bottom of the barrel and was collected in a bucket or barrel placed beneath the ash barrel. The lye was tested by putting an egg into it. If the egg floated, the lye was just strong enough to use. This way of making lye was called leaching.

Soap was made in the spring with the grease and ashes saved during the winter. It took about 24 pounds of grease and the lye from six barrels of wood ashes to make a barrel of soft soap. Lye was put in the soap kettle on an open fire out of doors. The grease was slowly added until no more would mix with the lye. The soap was cooked until it was jellylike. The mixture had to be stirred for a long time. The children helped with this. Colonial women were very good at soap-making and could tell just how much grease to use and how long to cook the mixture. When the cooking was finished, the soap was cooled and stored in barrels. Sometimes hard soap was also made. To make hard soap, a brine or salt solution was added to the grease and lye. The soap rose to the top of the kettle. When it had cooled, it could be made into bars. A year's supply of soap was usually made at one time.