

Silk

The silk industry, usually associated with the Orient where much of it is produced, was one of Georgia's earliest industries.

Of all the exotic productions included in early Georgia, growing silk appeared to offer the greatest potential. England hoped that Georgia would be able to produce enough silk to relieve her dependence on others. The Trustees were so convinced that the colony could become a major silk producer that they included a silkworm and a mulberry tree on their original state seal.

The Trustees knew that mulberry trees, the essential food for silkworms, thrived in the state. However, they did not realize that they were the wrong variety; silkworms preferred white mulberry leaves rather than the native variety.

In order to possess land, early colonists were required to plant white mulberry trees on a specified portion of their property. Later, in order to qualify for land, colonists had to show a production of 15 pounds of silk each year for every 50 acres of land in their possession. In addition, land owners were required to have at least one female family member instructed in the art of reeling or winding silk.

Colonists could get mulberry trees from the Trustees' public garden. The Trustees also hired Italian silk experts to come to Georgia to instruct colonists in the art of silk culture.

Silk production was an intricate process. Although not a year-round family enterprise, it required the attention of two people for two

months before and during the spinning season.

An ounce of silkworms could potentially produce five to ten pounds of silk but they needed several hundred pounds of leaves to reach maturity. Silkworms were kept on racks so that they could be tended and protected from the elements and animals. This meant that mulberry leaves had to be picked and provided for the worms. Since one worm could eat its own weight in leaves daily, gathering them was a constant task.

The total feeding time lasted approximately six weeks. At that time the worms began spinning their cocoons. When spinning was completed, the silk balls or cods were removed and the tedious job of unwinding and reeling began.

Cods had to be placed in warm water, and slowly heated until individual silk threads became visible before unwinding could begin. The end of the thread was located and the first few yards were discarded because of poor quality. The remaining thread was unwound and reeled by hand.

Reeling silk was a difficult process and required individuals who were employed for this task. But utilizing a simple machine and a child to direct the thread, a pound of silk could be reeled each day.

Over 300 cods were required to produce a pound of raw silk. Not all of the cods were unwound for silk.