

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WASHING MACHINES



Read the article and do the multiple choice questions following the text.

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Early washing machines were invented back in the 1850s, but people have been doing laundry since they graduated from wearing fig leaves. Over the course of centuries, the technology for washing clothes has evolved from crude manual labor to high tech.

Laundry Before Machines

In many ancient cultures, peoples cleaned their clothes by pounding them on rocks or rubbing them with abrasive sands and washing the dirt away in streams or rivers. The Romans invented a crude soap, similar to lye, that contained ash and fat from sacrificed animals. In colonial times, the most common way of washing clothes was to boil them in a large pot or cauldron, then lay them on a flat board, and beat them with a paddle called a dolly.

The metal washboard, which many people associate with pioneer life, wasn't invented until about 1833. Before that, washboards were made entirely of wood, including the carved, ridged washing surface. As late as the Civil War, laundry was often a communal ritual, especially in places near rivers, springs, and other bodies of water, where the washing was done.

The First Washing Machines

By the mid-1800s, the United States was in the midst of an industrial revolution. As the nation expanded westward and industry grew, urban populations mushroomed and the middle class emerged with money to spare and boundless enthusiasm for labor-saving devices. A number of people can lay claim to inventing some kind of manual washing machine that combined a wooden drum with a metal agitator.

Two Americans, James King in 1851 and Hamilton Smith in 1858, filed and received patents for similar devices that historians sometimes cite as the first true "modern" washers. However, others would improve on the basic technology, including members of the Shaker communities in Pennsylvania. Expanding on ideas begun in the 1850s, the Shakers built and marketed large wooden washing machines designed to work on a small commercial scale. One of their most popular models was displayed at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876.

Fast Facts: Washing Machine Trivia

A washing machine invented in France in the early 1800s was called the ventilator. The device consisted of a barrel-shaped metal drum with holes that was turned by hand over a fire.

One of the first African-American inventors of note in the 19th century, George T. Sampson, received a patent for a clothes dryer in 1892. His invention used the heat from a stove to dry clothes.

The first electrical clothes dryers appeared in the United States in the years prior to World War I.

In 1994, Staber Industries released the System 2000 washing machine, which is the only top-loading, horizontal-axis washer to be manufactured in the United States.

The first computer-controlled consumer washer appeared in 1998. Fisher & Paykel's SmartDrive washing machines used a computer-controlled system to determine load size and to adjust the wash cycle to match.

Electric Machines

Thomas Edison's pioneering work in electricity accelerated America's industrial progress. Until the late 1800s, home washing machines were hand-powered, while commercial machines were driven by steam and belts. That all changed in 1908 with the introduction of the Thor, the first commercial electric washer.

The Thor, the invention of Alva J. Fisher, was marketed by the Hurley Machine Company of Chicago. It was a drum-type washing machine with a galvanized tub. Throughout the 20th century, Thor continued to make innovations in washing machine technology. In 2008, the trademark was bought out by Los Angeles-based Appliances International and soon introduced a new line under the Thor name.

Even as Thor was changing the commercial laundry business, other companies had their eye on the consumer market, perhaps most notably the Maytag Corporation that got its start in 1893 when F.L. Maytag began manufacturing farm implements in Newton, Iowa. Business was slow in winter, so to add to his line of products, Maytag introduced a wooden-tub washing machine in 1907. Not long after, Maytag decided to devote himself full-time to the washing machine business. The Whirlpool Corporation, another well-known brand, debuted in 1911 as the Upton Machine Co., in St. Joseph, Mich., producing electric motor-driven wringer washers.

1 What is the purpose of this article?

- A to talk about women's rights
- B to explain how inventive the Romans were
- C to portray the development of an important household appliance
- D to point out cultural differences in former times

2 The first washing machines appeared...

- A in Roman times
- B in 1833
- C around 1851
- D after World War I

5 Which would be a good title for this article?

A THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN
IMPORTANT HOME APPLIANCE

C WASHING MACHINE TRIVIA

3 In the fourth section "drum" means ...

- A a musical instrument
- B a washing machine
- C a device
- D a cylindrical container

4 The first washing machines ...

- A were worked manually
- B had no commercial use
- C ran on electricity
- D were only used in the US

B THOMAS EDISON AND THE
WASHING MACHINE

D LIFE LONG AGO

