

If you grew up in Van Cortlandt House

Before visiting Van Cortlandt House you will want to think about what a typical day at the house might be like. Imagine that you are a boy or girl living in Colonial times at a large plantation house like Van Cortlandt House.

First, you would not have had many things that you are used to having and taken for granted every day. There was no television, no VCR, no radio, no video games, or telephone. There were no electric lights; in fact there was no electricity at all. In winter, your house would be cold and drafty with no modern heating. In summer there was no air conditioning to keep you cool. Also, there was no running water in houses in Colonial times. That meant no sinks with hot or cold running water, no showers or baths, and no indoor toilets! Now let's look at what your day might be like.

Morning: At sunrise you would get out of the bed that you shared with your brothers and sisters, wash your face, have your morning beer, and then start your chores. Beer? Yes, beer. In many places the purity and cleanliness of the water was not trusted so it was not drunk as a refreshment as it is today. The beer of the 18th century did not contain as much alcohol as it does now and was considered to be much more reliably pure than water.

Fire, Wood & Water

Your first chore was probably in the kitchen helping the cook to start a fire in the fireplace. This is where all of your meals were made as well as being a source of heat. If you were lucky, the fire was well banked which would have left some hot coals from last night's fire. With the nearest house a good distance away from their own home, the Van Cortlandts would have been unable to rely upon the neighbors for hot coals. If there were no hot coals you might start a fire with flint and steel. Remember there were no matches or lighters in those days. Then there was firewood to bring into the house, enough for every fireplace. In addition to using the kitchen fireplace for cooking, the only heat you would have come from the fireplaces in the house. In winter there would be a fire going all the time so you would have to carry even more wood into the house. Next you would have to carry water, using wooden buckets, into the kitchen. Water was needed throughout the day for cooking, washing, drinking and to control sparks coming out of the fireplace.

Plantation Chores

After you finished the indoor chores, you would have been needed to lend a hand on the plantation. Although slaves and hired workers did the main work on the plantation, there would still have been many chores for the Van Cortlandt children. You would probably have had to help feed the animals. The barns would have held horses for riding on, for pulling small two-wheeled wagons called shays or for pulling your plow. There would also be oxen for pulling heavy loads such as large farm wagons or for pulling tree stumps and large rocks to clear farmland. There would be chickens for eggs, pigs for bacon, sheep for wool and meat, and cows for milk, meat and leather. After all of the animals were fed, then you would eat the breakfast that mother or cook was preparing while you did your chores. It was now about nine or ten o'clock. Throughout the rest of the day, boys might help the men in the fields with plantings and plowing or hoeing the weeds. They might herd the cattle and sheep from one field to another.

Household Chores

Girls were responsible for helping with household chores. Helping mother or the cook in the kitchen preparing foods, baking, washing clothes and especially keeping an eye on the

younger children. They would also help mother make wool yarn by cleaning all the raw fleece of the bits of dirt, burrs, pine tar and sticks that the sheep managed to pick-up. Then the fleece could be dyed different colors, this was called "dyed in the wool". After that, the wool had to be brushed to straighten out the fibers. This was done with two rectangular paddles, both set thickly with wire teeth curved slightly toward the handle. The raw wool was repeatedly brushed between these two paddles. This process is called carding. Then the wool was ready to be spun on a spinning wheel.

Afternoon: About three-thirty or four o'clock you would sit down to dinner, usually the main meal of the day. After dinner, it would be more of the same work as before, or some social visiting, or home schooling. You would learn your numbers and letters from a hornbook or a battledore. At the end of the day, as it was getting dark, you would come home and take care of the household chores needed to be ready for night. Of course you would be sure to have enough wood and water to last through the night. Depending on the season, windows and shutters would be opened or closed. Then the whole family would sit down to supper. After supper the family would gather around the light and warmth of the fireplace and do small chores, like mending or embroidery, or play games such as [nine men's morrice](#) or cards. Then about nine o'clock it would be time to go to bed.