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Hidden away for decades within the Department of Textiles, Division of Home & Community Life, National Museum of American History, was an extraordinary group of nearly 1000 textile samples collected by US consuls around the world between about 1898 and about 1920. The Commerce Department transferred them to the U.S. National Museum (now NMAH), in the 1920s. The samples range in size from just a few inches square to a few feet. The information that came into the collection with each sample, from lists or scraps of paper attached by the consuls, was typed onto onionskin typing paper or cardstock and attached to the samples. These amazing bits of information open many research avenues into the theme of the 2016 Textile Society of America symposium: *Land, Labor, and the Port*. By examining the questions that arise from just a few examples from the Consular Collections, this paper explores the tangled threads of the global textile trade in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and suggests some of the many research possibilities these textiles offer to scholars.

I discovered the collection within a few days of beginning work as a curator at NMAH. One portion of the consular samples is housed in a filing cabinet filled with manila envelopes containing textiles of varying sizes and 8” x 10” cards with textile samples and ancient photostats stapled to them. Tantalizing labels on the file separators: Made or found in Egypt; Made or Found in Germany; Made or found in China; Made or found in Africa.\(^1\) An envelope pulled at random from the Africa section, revealed a bolt end or wrapper of unbleached plain weave cotton, with the notation on the envelope, “From a market in Abyssinia, 1904.” The muslin was stamped in blue ink with the image of a camel. Another piece of information in blue ink – a company name: Pelzer Mfg. Co, Pelzer, S.C. And finally, a paper label also bearing the Pelzer name. [Figure 1] Now what, I wondered, was a South Carolina cotton mill doing with a camel trademark and a market in East Africa at the turn of the 20th century? My own research into Southern American cotton mills had been confined more or less to events and businesses before the Centennial and the end of Reconstruction in 1876.

A quick online search turned up some basic information on the firm, and images from the Library of Congress’s Prints and Photographs Division. Pelzer had been established in the early 1880s, by a small group of South Carolinians. The mill was a manifestation of the post-Reconstruction South’s

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\(^1\) The collection was accepted as a loan in 1922, and accessioned in 1933 (Accession No. 67246). The individual objects were not assigned catalog numbers at that time.
efforts to move the production of cotton cloth closer to the source of the raw material, and derive profit from the cotton industry, not just cotton agriculture. It was considered a show mill by many for its up to date equipment and technology. Its mill workers inhabited an extraordinarily paternalistic mill town.\(^2\) The photos were by Lewis Hine, dating to 1912, documenting child labor in the Pelzer Mill. South Carolina’s first child labor law went into effect in 1903, theoretically preventing children under the age of 12, unless they were orphans or supporting a single parent, from working in the mills, but in practice this restriction was often circumvented, in a number of ingenious ways.\(^3\) More detailed information, however, would require deeper digging.

My continuing task of familiarizing myself with the collections had also turned up several boxes labelled on the outside “Consular Materials.” The final count of these boxes – the large archival dress box size – was nine. Clearly, the task of identifying and organizing these materials required some additional help. Through the Smithsonian’s Office of Internships and Fellowships, I was joined by an intern, Amy J. Anderson, newly graduated from the University of South Florida, whom I lured to work on the consular collection with the Pelzer story. Future researchers in this collection will owe a great debt to the transcription and cataloging work that Ms. Anderson completed during her internship, as well as to the sleuthing skills of Melanie Blanchard, of NMAH’s Registrarial staff.

Ms. Anderson dug deeper into the world of the Pelzer Manufacturing Company and its connection to the textile trade in East Africa. She found that Pelzer’s president, Captain Ellison Smyth, testified in Congress in 1913 against the proposed imposition of a tariff on imports of elephant ivory into the US - because such a tariff would ruin the large and profitable trade of southern mills with Africa. He testified again in 1916 against legislation that would limit work hours for children under 16 to 8 per day – his mill hours were then 60 hours weekly: Monday through Saturday.\(^4\) She found that the connection between ivory and southern cotton sheeting had many international outposts: it ran through a firm of Greek merchants, the Livierato Brothers, doing business in Marseilles, France, and New York, and through Allidina Visram, born in Kutch but at the age of 12 an immigrant to Zanzibar, from which he became the “King of Ivory”, with trading connections in Uganda, the Congo, and southern Sudan.\(^5\) In fact, the 1922


History of American Textiles published by the Wool and Cotton Reporter stated that “American made cotton goods are sold in East Africa and the Red Sea region and are very popular, with the result that all grey goods sold in those districts, whether they come from this country or not, are known by the natives as “Americani.””

The result of this trade was the importation of tens of thousands of elephant tusks from Africa to the U.S. Amy’s research odyssey continued with the discovery that the NMAH Archives Center held documents relating to the end use of that ivory – The Ernst D. Moore papers, dating between 1888 and 1932. From 1907 to 1911 Moore was employed by New York ivory importer Arnold, Cheney & Co. as the firm’s agent in Aden, Mombasa, and Zanzibar. Elephant tusks bartered in East Africa for cotton cloth made in South Carolina became piano keys, hair combs, billiard balls, and the handles of hairbrushes, hand mirrors, and buttonhooks, made in Ivoryton, Connecticut for sale across the U.S.

But the story doesn’t end there. Amy uncovered one last twist. Pelzer’s blue camel trademark was apparently recognized as an indicator of quality in the Red Sea market: the US Consul in Abyssinia in 1910 noted that a Manchester mill was selling cotton sheeting with a similar camel mark, and an Austrian firm did the same in 1915. And Amy did indeed discover another bolt end, with a blue camel stamp, from Manchester, England, collected by a consul in China in 1898. Although we have yet to determine the full extent of Pelzer’s overseas trade in the 1890s, we do know that by 1912 the New York firm of Neuss, Hesslein & Company was sending what was described as a “raft” of Pelzer goods to the Far East. Pelzer's agent at the time was the New York-based cotton goods commission house Woodward, Baldwin & Co., which handled dozens of southern mills, and had branch offices in Baltimore, St Louis, St. Joseph, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Boston, and Chicago, and, from 1900-1914, Shanghai, China.

The Messulam mill, a Manchester firm, sold to India, Australasia, and China, so it may also have appeared in African markets. We are always being told we live in a global society today. And yet the textile trade is one that has had global ramifications for millennia, and the appropriation or transmission of design, technology, and resources have provoked many kinds of disagreements among nations, peoples, businesses, and individuals, from wars to tariffs. And we
are all aware of contemporary label counterfeiting. But it is not exactly common knowledge that this was an issue in 1898 with American and British goods being sold in Africa and China.

What other riches does the consular collection hold? The files and samples reveal the extent to which American and European textile manufacturers were competing for the even then vast Chinese market - not only for plain goods like the Messulam and Pelzer sheetings, but with an array of printed and woven textiles with Chinese-inspired designs. These range from English printed cottons, termed T-cloth by some of the manufacturers, to English and German made silk plishes, patterned with cut and uncut pile. One German sample used brown and yellow silk pile warps on a cotton ground; an English sample is black silk pile on a cotton ground. Both have similar patterns of bamboo stalks and leaves. The English sample was said by the reporting consul to have been “for Chinese Gentlemen’s winter vests.”

Tasked with providing a full range of commercial information to the American manufacturers, consuls’ sent their collected samples back to the Commerce Department in Washington. Commerce Department staff created the cards, then sent them to manufacturing centers for examination by manufacturers to consider whether they might compete in new markets, or to help determine why their products were not successful sellers. For example, the samples in the “Made or Found in China” category include swatches of foreign-made goods selling successfully in overseas markets. Among them are: a 1905 English bubblegum-pink cotton flannel, said by the Consul to be very popular among the Chinese for winter underclothing; a bolt end of Manchester-made jeans cloth – a twill weave cotton suitable for working clothing, which had been a staple fabric for the American working classes in the nineteenth century; and English shirting of a quality inferior to most of the American-made samples from Tientsin, labelled by the Consul as sold to charitable organizations who distributed clothing to the poor, or by the poor for lining the burial clothing of their dead. These textiles represent a quite extraordinary range of markets within the Chinese populace.

The consuls also collected examples of successful American textile exports including many samples of plain weave cotton sheetings and print cloth in the gray, or unfinished. Just for a sense of scale, here - Commerce department figures for 1906 American cotton cloth exports reported nearly 376 million yards of “colored and uncolored” cottons exported to China. British held Africa, by comparison, received only 5.1 million yards, and the rest of Africa just over 379,000 yards. Exports of American cotton cloth were only about 10 percent of the total American production.

There are also samples of unsuccessful exports. One interesting example is a small group of American made printed cottons noted by the consul in Tientsin as “Unsalable - lack of luster principal objection.” The designs are based on Chinese imagery: gourds and auspicious symbols. But the ground cloth was a dull plain weave cotton, dyed, and the patterning was either printed with a metallic pigment or printed with a discharge compound to leave a pattern in a light shade against a ground of darker shade of the same color. They may have been trying to imitate Chinese damasks, but the dull finish of the cottons could not compare to the luster of Chinese silks. [Figure 2] Although the trade in the plain or gray goods textiles seems to have dominated the American trade with China and resulted in the highest profits, looking at all of these Chinese inspired designs suggests questions about the sources for them. Were the designs copied from
popular Chinese consumer goods? Did western companies producing these designs also market them to their western customers or would they have been considered too Chinese to be sold in the west? And were the Chinese designs also sellable to Japan and Southeast Asian markets? This group raises any number of questions about the Asian textile trade, opening a fertile field for other researchers.

The final example from the consular collection is a cautionary tale - an object lesson, in fact. Many years ago I came across a reference that one of the effects of the British blockade of German ports during World War I was that German civilians took to wearing clothing made of paper yarns. It wasn’t relevant to anything I was working on at the time, but I stored that bit of information away for future reference, and at the Newark Museum, decades later, I came across two men’s suits, jackets, trousers, and braces, made entirely of twisted paper yarns woven into fabric, and cut and sewn into relatively unstructured garments. They were acquired in 1923, with provenance from wartime Germany.  

And in one of the storage boxes of consular samples at NMAH was a group of dozens of skeins of paper yarns, of all thicknesses and weights, and many colors, as well as samples of the products made from them: woven materials suitable for a range of end uses from rugs to wall coverings to table mats. All from Plauen, Germany, and apparently collected by the US Consul in Plauen, Carl Bailey Hurst, in 1907. Hurst’s report on this new type of yarn, named Xylolin, was reprinted by newspapers and textile trade journals across the US. [Figure 3] Clearly, the wartime paper yarn products were not completely new technology, but adapted and refined from existing technology to meet a new need.

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The NMAH Division of Work and Industry also holds samples from an American firm, The Textilose Company of Massachusetts, manufacturing paper yarns and mats in 1915. But the motherlode appeared in a collection of German-made, World War I military equipment, collected originally in 1923 by curator of textiles Frederick L. Lewton. From the war salvage plant at Fort Myer, Virginia, Lewton selected examples of all the different uses to which paper yarns had been put, ranging from braided horse trappings and knotted slings to woven, cut and sewn covers or carriers for trench shovels, axes, and ammunition, to woven wagon covers, packs for bicycles or motorbikes, and canvas-like nosebags for horses. Obviously, the German military had found countless uses for paper yarns - although it seems that only German civilians were offered paper clothing.

The collection had originally resided in the Division, but was transferred decades ago to the Division of Work & Industry, where it was recently rehoused. It was also the subject of a student paper by a collections management intern. The paper essentially questions whether such a ‘legacy collection’ deposited in the National Museum of History and Technology, remains relevant to the mission of the renamed National Museum of American History, or whether the materials should be deaccessioned and transferred to some other institution, thereby making room for new, more recognizably American, acquisitions. While the student’s research into paper yarns hit the high points of the 1907 newspaper stories on the new German Xylolin yarns, the student stopped with “WHAT.” But the unique importance of this collection lies in the “WHY” behind the wartime use of this material, and what it meant to Americans who had lived through the Great War.

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13 NMAH, Division of Work & Industry, Accession No. 59777; Catalog No. 16FP05.02-.15.
14 NMAH, Division of Work & Industry, Accession No. 70063; Catalog No. AG23FP03.01-.20.
15 See for example, patent applications by Emil Claviez, available on http://www.google.ch/patents; and Carl Bailey Hurst’s report “Cloth from Paper,” reprinted in *Bradstreet’s Weekly* 35 (May 18, 1907), 318-319.
The historical context for these objects, the WHY of this story, begins in 1916, with the British government’s wartime control of the entire wool clip of its empire - which included New Zealand, South Africa, and Australia. The rest of the world, not only Germany and its allies, but neutral nations such as the United States, were seriously affected by shortages of wool. Even the British, who controlled most of the world’s raw wool, felt the pinch - the wool, after all, had to be transported across oceans and were therefore subject to predation by enemy ships and U-boats.¹⁶ So they, too, explored paper yarn technology during the war – photos from the Textilite Engineering Company’s display at the British Scientific Products exhibition in August 1918 in London are in the Textile Department files.¹⁷ (Whether this company benefitted from British confiscation of German patents is a subject for further research.) The U.S. had always imported raw wool to meet industry demands, and the preparedness of the U.S. Military for the country’s entry into the war in April 1917 was seriously compromised by supply chain issues. This is a complicated story, but the upshot is that Frederick Lewton did not collect those paper textiles simply as curiosities of German war technology. Lewton, the American military, and the American textile industry were all interested in the subject of substitutes for the commonly used fibers essential to the successful prosecution of a war. And when in 1939, at the outbreak of the Second World War, the British government again negotiated control of the wool clips of South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia, the US again scrambled to source raw wool. And where possible, to find replacements – using mohair instead of wool for army neckties, or exploring casein protein fibers, for example. So, these samples of German paper technology from the First World War are not unrelated to American history. They are, in fact, essential to an understanding of why synthesized textile fibers eventually replaced most natural fibers in American military uniforms. Draw a line from paper to polyester.

But there is another aspect to these paper textiles that needs exploring. Did this technology allow Germany and its allies to fight on past the point where their lack of raw materials should have forced them to quit? Long enough for the US to enter the war? This research is yet to be done - and it may be impossible to find out. But without these objects to hand, I would not have thought to ask the question. In the face of pressures all museums face today in regard to prioritizing resources, it is important to remember that missions change, and names change, but curators are charged with preserving collections, studying them, and ensuring that fads and fashions in stewardship and scholarship do not compromise the collections we oversee.

These are just a tiny fraction of the stories waiting to be uncovered in the consular files. Studying global trade? Markets and consumer tastes? Transmission of technology or design? Advertising history? The products of a particular region or nation? There is probably something of interest in these files. Amy Anderson’s foray into the history of a blue camel printed on a piece of unbleached cotton from South Carolina may yet lead her to Ethiopia, Tanzania, France, England, and China - there’s no telling where the tangled trade threads of NMAH’s consular textiles might take you.