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## Provenance: The Story of a Textile and its Journey to the Slave Quarters

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**Provenance: The Story of a Textile and its Journey to the Slave Quarters**

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Pre-civil war coverlets represent a distinctly American legacy of folk textiles. Most national coverlet collections contain pieces from mid-Atlantic states that were made by yeoman women on 4 harness looms or by itinerant male weavers on Jacquard looms. There is limited representation from southern states in these collections, and of these, very few are sourced from the lower regions of the Old South. But, although there is a great deal of ambiguity about the design, production and use of Southern coverlets between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, there are plenty around: in Georgia and South Carolina, woven coverlets appear in museum collections or in period reconstructions, at times with attributions to slave production, use and design. Both provenance and representational practices regarding slave coverlets reflect a palimpsest of beliefs about slave production, the yeoman versus the plantation lady, the value of women's labor, and pre-civil war material culture; they refract an even larger history of shifting notions about class, aesthetics, Jeffersonian democracy rooted in a self-sufficient ideology, and the kind of new nation the United States was to become.

There is a curious set of coverlets attributed to African American slave production from the Acacia Collection: A Treasure of African Americana currently on exhibit at the Telfair Museum's Owens Thomas House Slave Quarters in Savannah, Georgia. We were familiar with national collections and itinerant male weavers, but became curious when we saw these coverlets alongside other material culture associated with slave production and use (pottery, baskets and two chairs). The implication is that slaves typically made or used coverlets as they did with the baskets and ceramic goods. This insinuation is clarified by a tourist: "The carriage house stood as a stark comparison to the main house, but was every bit as fascinating to me, for it held furniture, stoneware jugs and woven coverlets used by the household slaves" (Ogden, 2010).



*Figure 1. Coverlet from the Acacia Collection, 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Telfair Museum. Image by Authors.*

We had to wonder: if slaves made and used them, what relationship did these coverlets have to local cotton, indigo and rice economies? Could they represent the same republican ideologies that we find up north?<sup>1</sup> To begin answering these questions, we took a three pronged approach: we examined primary and secondary sources on southern coverlets; we spoke with curators, collectors and registrars; and, perhaps most importantly, visited museums and plantations in and around the piedmont and low country of South Carolina and Georgia to see how these coverlets were being presented.

It is not our intention to prove or disprove the claim that slaves made coverlets, nor to solve the many other riddles posed by the Acacia collection; in this paper, we examine historical contexts and contemporary exhibition trends to map out how the Acacia coverlets are positioned within broader narratives of antebellum textile history, but more importantly, we suggest that more spirited attention to these under-researched objects will reveal a richer understanding of historic and contemporary notions of class, southern history, and the significant role of textile use and production therein. In short, these coverlets can tell us a lot about ourselves if we will listen more closely.

### **Said to have been made by slaves**

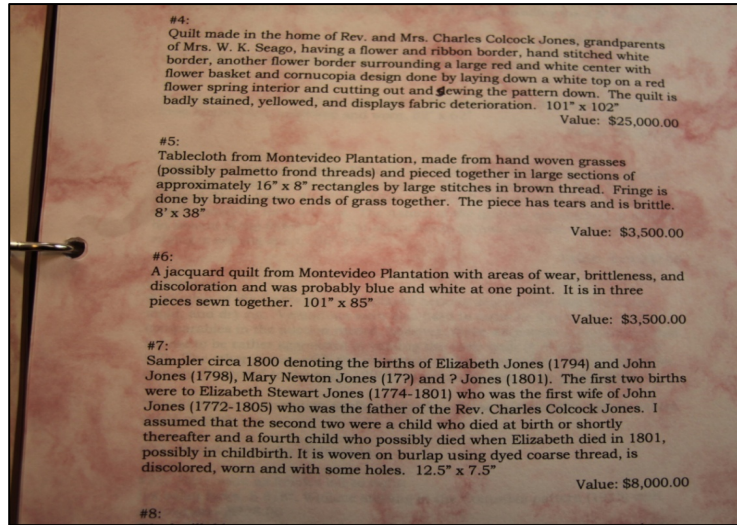
Although they are less well-known and less visible than quilts, southern hand woven coverlets are not hard to find, and many, besides those in the Acacia collection, are attributed to slave production, design or use.<sup>2</sup> Attribution is either explicit in museum accession records (as reported by a donor), or implicit by inclusion in exhibits on African American craft contributions or on display in slave quarters.

The Charleston Museum, for example, has a sizeable and well-tended collection: of 16 accession cards we examined, 4 coverlets have been attributed to slave production (25%). At least two appeared in an African-American Contributions exhibit at the museum in 1994 (Museum of Charleston, 2012). The Magnolia Plantation, founded in 1676, contains 5 slave dwellings: Cabin D, the only furnished cabin, represents African American life in 1870 and features a blue and white summer/winter woven coverlet along with other material culture that defined freedslave lives. The Midway Museum's Jones Family collection includes one coverlet that both the appraiser and curator report as having been woven by slaves on the Montevideo plantation (Jones Collection, Midway Museum 2009). The Charleston Slave Mart Museum has two coverlets apparently woven by slaves in Georgia, and a few more from other southern regions (Slave Mart). The Museum of the Confederacy has southern coverlets (whole and fragment), some with attributions of slave production, but all of those were made during the civil war (a time when imported goods were unavailable). Fry's highly influential "Stitched from the Soul" has a chapter on 'Quilts from the Quarters' that contains ten plates of slave-made coverlets (one from Georgia) which she reports "served as bed coverings" (Fry, 1990); notable among these is one woven on a jacquard loom. Hall's early 20th century book states that plantation slaves were taught to weave coverlets and features a photo of a colorful, apparently slave-made specimen (Hall, 1914); she also notes that the meaning and practice of coverlet weaving had shifted dramatically and that even by 1912, "time the destroyer" had made finding facts about coverlets a most serious challenge (ibid, 32).

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<sup>1</sup> The *patriotic* spirit of American coverlets was theme in conversations with the Zongers.

<sup>2</sup> Many coverlets are "made from cotton/wool grown, harvested, spun and woven on the farm." This narrative is related to stories of slave production since the discursive picture of history also encourages the imagination in this direction.



**Figure 2. Coverlet and value assessment from the Jones Collection, 19<sup>th</sup> century, Midway Museum. Image by Authors.**

Notable collections, on the other hand, that do not contain woven coverlets with attribution (weak or solid) to Georgian or South Carolinian slave production include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Winterthur, Colonial Williamsburg, and the Smithsonian as well as, more regionally, MESDA, the High Museum, The Columbus Museum, and the South Carolina State Museum. What these collections do have are woven coverlets associated with yeoman or plantation families. The decorative art collection at the UGA Museum of Art, for example, contains woven coverlets (none by slaves) from mountain and piedmont regions where production by yeoman, who owned very few or no slaves, was intense and long-standing (Couch, 2012).



**Figure 3. Calloway House built after the Plain Style home, 1868, reported to be inspiration for Margaret Mitchell's Tara in Gone With the Wind. Image by Authors.**

According to genealogical records, plantation class families of South Carolina and Georgia were connected from the beginning. The legend presented to tourists at popular sites like Wormsloe or the

Hofwyl-Broadfield Plantation has South Carolina, a colony of wealthy Englishman with roots in Caribbean plantation holdings, as the envied sibling to the younger Georgia, a philanthropic experiment of small farms and villages with strict laws that prohibited slaves. Influenced by watching and having to compete against South Carolinians who were increasing their wealth due to profitable cash crops (mainly rice and indigo) reliant on slave labor, Georgian settlers soon began to demand the right to own larger tracts of land and slaves. By 1751, the official ban on slavery was lifted and the story of Tara finds its beginnings. But in the hundred plus years it took to create the Hollywood legend that persists even today, the yeomanry, often viewed as a threat to elite privilege was demoted to “bumpkin” status across multiple discursive forums (Escott, 1985; Tassel, 2002). Meanwhile, the real yeomanry was developing a distinct proclivity toward “plain style people, living in plain style houses, with plain style furniture” (Levison, 2006) to better show their cultural, economic and political practices.

## The Plain Life

Today, house museums of the Piedmont Plain Style often feature, among other textiles, overshot geometric coverlets woven in the first half of the 19th century. As indicated above, there is a well-documented history of coverlets woven by yeoman women throughout the south from 1810-1860 (Locklair, 1997; Sheumaker & Wajda, 2007; Upson County, 1835-1865; Upson-County-Georgias, 1835-1865; Zonger, 2012). The flood of cheap, industrially produced cloth from Northern and European manufacturers along with the rise of regional spinning mills decreased the need for labor-intensive hand production and allowed woman with weaving skills to work on more decorative objects, like coverlets (Joseph, Hamby, & Long, 2004). Woven on expensive looms (Fox-Genovese, 1988), these coverlets were highly valued, often listed in estate records (such as at Boone farm), sequestered among boxes of goods hidden from Yankee forces, and preserved in family archives (Jewell, 1809-1900). We even found a southern divorce settlement in which Joseph Pryor’s wife received “one negro named Lucinda one young Sorrel mare nice one saddle and bridle two cows & calves one Ewe of Sheep one bed & Stead all the quilts She has made whilst she has been living with me one half the coverlids also one half the counterpains” and in case the quantity was misinterpreted, Pryor reiterates, “it is understood that she only is to have one half of the coverlids & counterpains she has made whilst living with me” (Lindsey, 2008).<sup>3</sup>

But why would yeoman chose to weave if they had access to manufactured goods? The complete answer exceeds the scope of this paper, but we will point out that domestic weaving was at the core of acting out a colonial ‘homespun’ mythology (Shaw, 2102; Ulrich, 2001). Women wove ‘homespun’ as a symbol of republican self-sufficiency, indexing an affinity with a Jeffersonian worldview. Advocates promoted traditional women’s craft in agricultural journals (an 1843 edition of *Southern Cultivator* called upon farmers to support womenfolk in ‘industry and patriotism’), in Farmer’s Societies (where in reaction to Federally imposed tariffs on imported goods, such groups in South Carolina awarded prizes for locally woven coverlets and counter-panes), and in cottage industries (the short lived S.C. Homespun Company offered locally produced cloth to patriotic Charlestonians from 1808–1815)(Griffin, 1961). The larger context has to do with the burgeoning cotton industry: as the profitable, slave labor driven cotton industry was expanding and the planter class was accumulating capital—in the form of land, slaves, and imported material goods—the yeoman class was pushed further and further inland, farming for subsistence and cash. We propose that making textiles (and other “plain style” goods) instead of

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<sup>3</sup> “Coverlet” is sometimes written/spelled in older texts as “coverlit” or “coverlid.”



importing them was not only a badge of economic autonomy and cultural belonging, but also reflected a political position. Southern yeoman demonstrated little interest in competing with planters in the fineries of bourgeois consumption, and instead set out to define a style for a new nation.



*Figure 4. Calloway Plain Style House, 1830's. Image by Authors.*

So, given the cultural and economic, and even political meanings associated with them, the regularity with which we found coverlets in the yeoman rich piedmont region was not surprising, but they also appeared—frequently—in our survey of low country plantation collections. There is a long standing misconception, perpetuated early on by Olmstead<sup>4</sup> and other foreign visitors to the coastal south as well as by historians, that the white south was dominated by two classes, planters with their slaves and poor peasants (Kemble, 1961 (1984); Phillips, 1918). And while the economic dominance of a planter class is evident in financial reports of the time, census records indicate that there was a complex, pluralistic class system. The role of yeoman farmers within antebellum political economy is still under debate (Owsley, 1982; Winters, 1987).

This debate impinges upon contemporary understandings of coverlet production and use since the yeoman class is partly defined by the size of their slave holdings. Farms with fewer household members (including slaves) would have been less likely to have the type of workshop-like loomhouse environment described in most plantation slave stories where slaves most certainly produced plain cloth. And there is plenty of evidence, including WPA former slave interviews, showing that enslaved weavers made both slave and master cloth (no WPA interviews that we found claimed personal experience with weaving coverlets, although several state that others did it). But most documentation of slave weaving in the low country and piedmont regions depict only the very early or very late antebellum era—this is significant because it is precisely during the years in between that it became more economical to buy rather than to weave slave cloth (Rawick, 1972; Spruill, 1972; WPA, 1941, 2004). By 1820 the production of homemade textiles on GA and SC plantations with a high slave to household ratio had visibly decreased (Tyron, 1917: 184-186). Along with the dramatic increase in capital by the planter

<sup>4</sup> See Olmstead 1853, cited in McCurry 1995.

class came the construction of the ideal plantation lady who could claim ‘accomplishments’ in the arts of embroidery and quilting, but for whom the craft of weaving was viewed as labor (Clayton & Salamond, 2003; Fox-Genovese, 1988; Gordon & McArthur, 1984; Hagler, 1980). In opposing the advancement of a refined, yet unproductive wife, southern agricultural journals denounced writers promoting these accomplishments as a proxy to traditional functional craft forms (Hagler, 1980); this critique aligned with moves by yeoman’s wives to establish an identity different from that of the model plantation lady.



*Figure 5. Drayton Hall, 18<sup>th</sup> century. Image by Authors.*

Plantation archives from these interim years often contain shopping lists for slave grade cloth and finer textiles purchased or ordered from manufacturing houses around the world; so what, if anything, were slaves, or masters, then weaving on the plantation? Why would slaves be tasked with weaving coverlets for the elite in locations where more socially desirable textiles were readily available? And while there seems to be evidence that during the exceptional war time period, some plantations dusted off looms, possibly even resorting to weaving coverlets or having slaves weave coverlets, in the larger scheme of things, this brief period would not have produced a substantial stock of slave made, or even plantation (wife and slave collaboration) made coverlets, which had by that time become strongly déclassé.

An enticing narrative linking African American (slave) material culture to African life became popular in the 1970’s, was reinforced in the 1980’s, and critically debated in the 1990’s until today. The idea that Africans brought weaving knowledge across the Atlantic was frequently reiterated on tours through slave quarters. To be fair, we cannot blame guides, or even in some cases staff, for this claim since it is well-documented lore in academic publications (Joyner, 1999; Vlach, 1991). But scholars have examined whether archaeological records support this connection. Samford, for instance, supports some of the religious/ritual artifact links, but shows that that this linkage is supported by comparisons to contemporary West African culture or to subjective European observations published at the time that are unchecked against archeological research, of which there has been a dearth (Samford, 1996). More

recently, Stahl and Cruz analyzed archeological evidence about the Banda of Ghana and European travel dairies, finding that prior to the early 19th century, weaving was a highly specialized craft, production was limited and for the very elite. Only after increased contact with European traders in the 19th century did home production of cotton cloth become commonplace (Stahl, 2002). And if domestic weaving became widespread only after the 1808 Congressional ban on slave imports, it is improbable that many slaves came in with weaving experience.



*Figure 6. Boone Hall (19<sup>th</sup> century) Slave quarters and Slave Quilt display. Image by Authors.*

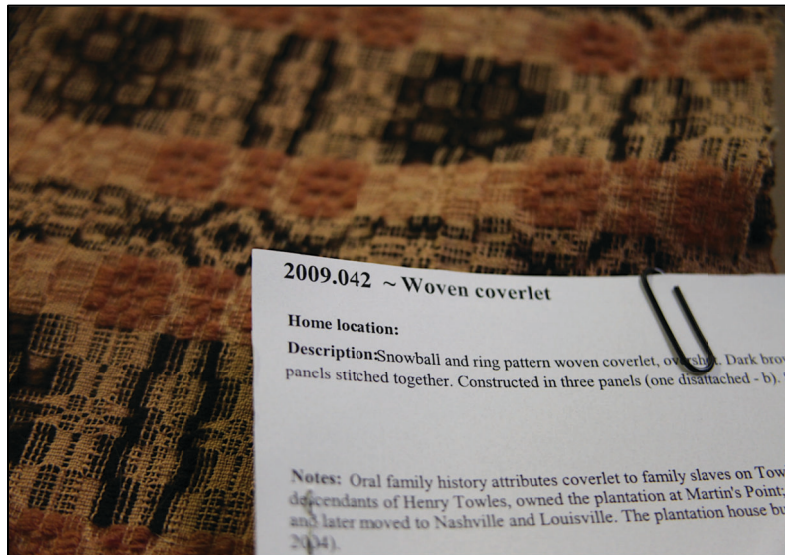
## Seeing Coverlets

The Telfair slave quarter coverlets shown as “examples of African-American craft” have a weak provenance (donor family lore), and we doubt that urban slaves in a port city townhouse would be weaving anything, much less coverlets. But, that these are items of considerable historical significance – regarding slave, master and yeoman life alike—is without question, so how might coverlets like these be productively exhibited?

It is, of course, possible that some coverlets with slave attributions, including the Acacia ones, were made or owned by slaves. On the other hand, a more answerable line of inquiry is: who usually made and used them and why? What might coverlets reveal not only about the pre-civil war world, but about contemporary ideas and practices?

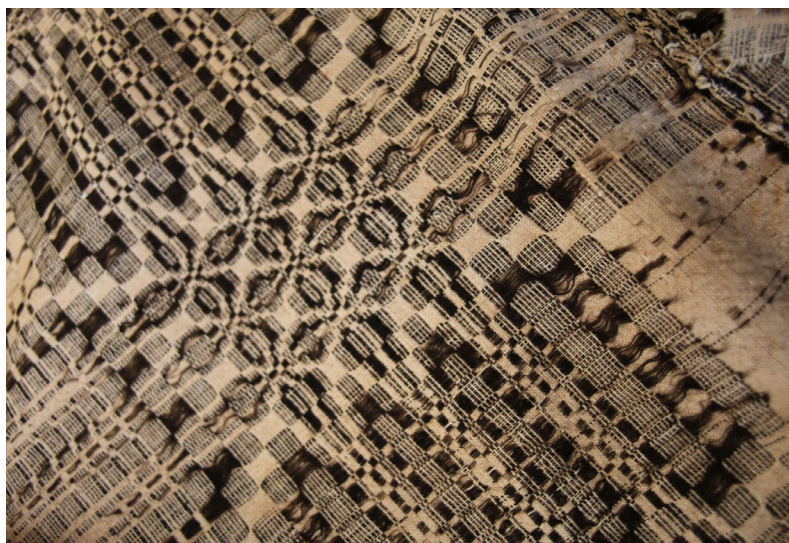
Obviously, slave labor was fundamental to the southern economy, but our research suggests that slave participation in coverlet culture was minimal. Yeoman production was, however, widespread, intense, and ongoing between the turn of the century and the rise of the cotton economy up through the civil war, and represents a significant material, economic and political contribution to antebellum Southern life. This contribution needs to be unpacked to shed light on ALL of the antebellum peoples.





*Figure 7. Coverlet Accession Card attributed to slave production, Charleston Museum. Image by Authors.*

In a more reflexive vein, we contend that the practice of positioning these items as slave goods or in children's rooms rather than in master bedrooms of yeoman or even, perhaps more creatively as examples of proto Op Art, reflects a modernist take on the past shaped by complementary dichotomies—planter versus slave, art versus craft, urban versus rural, skilled versus unskilled work—and refracts a contemporary class bias. The construction of history is still derived from a vision of an antebellum south dominated by plantation life with a concomitant undervaluing of yeoman contributions, even though most whites were farmers. We have an exciting opportunity here: these coverlets can be contextualized within the cultural and political economy of the South to reveal the role of the everyday yeoman, a figure who has remained largely in the shadow of the spotlight on plantation families and slaves, but whose existence was fundamental not only to the economic and political dynamics of Georgian and South Carolinian society, but whose activities, such as weaving coverlets, was integrated into the framework of national practices, the legacies of which we are living out today.



*Figure 8. Op Art Coverlet, Calloway Plain style house, 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Image by Authors.*

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