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Eliza Calvert Hall, *A Book of Hand-Woven Coverlets*, and Collecting Coverlet Patterns in Early Twentieth Century Appalachia

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Eliza Calvert Hall was the pen name of Eliza Calvert Obenchain, known to her friends as Lida. In 1856, Lida was born in Bowling Green, Kentucky and spent most of her life there. Eliza Calvert taught school and wrote poetry for magazines before her marriage at age 29 to William Alexander Obenchain. He fought in the Civil War on the Confederate side. After the war, he chose “public service” in the form of teaching rather than a field that would make “make his fortune.” They had four children, with Lida assuming most of the domestic duties herself.

Obenchain became the head of Ogden College, which occupied a mansion that Lida’s father had built. The elder Calvert lost the property through bankruptcy after fleeing town. He left when it was discovered that he had been embezzling money from the bank he managed.\textsuperscript{2}

In between the chores of a homemaker, Lida wrote stories for national magazines, most of which carried suffrage themes. As a passionate member of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association (KERA), Lida assumed the role of press superintendent under the direction of the founder, Laura Clay of Lexington. In 1898 Cosmopolitan published “Sally Ann's Experience,” possibly Lida’s most famous story. Written in dialect, it can be mistaken for a charming domestic tale, but the story emphasized the KERA’s focus on securing property rights for women. In 1907 Little, Brown, and Company published Aunt Jane of Kentucky, with “Sally Ann’s Experience” as the first of nine collected short stories. President Theodore Roosevelt helped the already successful book gain even more popularity by recommending it in a speech to the graduating class of State Agricultural College in Lansing, Michigan. Aunt Jane appeared in at least 33 editions, with “Aunt Sally’s Experience” also being reprinted in several other publications and as a pamphlet. Lida referred to the house she purchased in Bowling Green as “the house Aunt Jane bought.”\textsuperscript{3}

Lida always counted on money from her writing to supplement the family income. She definitely had a large following from the success of Aunt Jane and her many magazine articles. She expected her book about coverlets to sell well, too. Reviews of the book appeared in many publications, such as American Homes and Gardens, Country Life, and The American Monthly Magazine, the publication of the Daughters of the American Revolution. In The Craftsman, the journal of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, the reviewer observed, “It is not often that you find, in a book more or less technical and historical character, such qualities of imagination and poetic insight, such understanding of humanity or such charm of literary expression as this unusual volume shows.” The review covered three pages, with eight large illustrations of coverlets from the book.\textsuperscript{4} Often reviewed in the same magazines was a book on colonial homes published in the same year, by the same publisher.\textsuperscript{5} A nostalgia for days gone by was manifesting itself in the form of a Colonial Revival, contributing to the interest in coverlets.

So, how does a suffragette become interested in coverlets? Lida answers that question herself in the foreword to A Book of Hand-Woven Coverlets. She starts her book with acknowledging that a friend sent her 30 photographs of coverlets, which captivated her and started her on the quest to find more information about these handwoven creations. The dedication of the book was revised when that friend died in April of 1913, “To the memory of William Wade. ‘The gentle minde by the gentle deeds is knowne.’”\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{2} Lynn E. Niedermeier, Eliza Calvert Hall: Kentucky Author and Suffragist (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007).

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 120-4.


\textsuperscript{5} Mary Harrod Northend, Colonial Homes and Their Furnishings. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1912).

\textsuperscript{6} Hall, Hand-Woven Coverlets, dedication.
William Wade had a career in deaf-blind education and ran a finishing school for them in his home in Oakmont, Pennsylvania. Helen Keller studied at his facility, remained a friend, and wrote a tribute to him after his death. Wade published an annotated list of people with dual disabilities, which had more information added in later editions and in a later supplement. In the first publication, the 11-year-old Helen Keller is pictured with three other children in a photograph facing the title page.

Wade amassed a large collection of coverlets, 32 of them were displayed in the museum at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh in 1915. A report of the exhibition referred to his collection as, “one of the most important in the country, and has figured frequently in volumes published on the art of weaving in America.”

“E Pluribus Unum” – Hall indicated that William Wade considered this was the finest piece of weaving he had ever seen.

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The illustrations in the coverlet book contain 34 coverlets in the overshot weave structure and 17 in more elaborate designs done on a Jacquard loom. Twelve pieces were woven in other weave structures. The remaining illustration depicted four drafts of weaving instructions. Frances Goodrich describes what these drafts would have looked like and how they were used in a magazine article. “In the mountains and in other parts of the country as well, were found stores of old drafts, by which the weaver draws in the threads of the chain through the four sets of harness and by which she tramps to open the shed for the warp threads. These drafts are long strips of paper filled with figures and lines; usually rolled and tied with black thread when not in use and when wanted fastened on the loom in plain sight of the worker.”

All of the overshot coverlets required only a four-harness loom and were probably woven by a woman in her own home. The Jacquard loom would have been the property of a professional weaver, men who worked on commission. Many of these coverlets have woven in a corner or along one side the date, the weaver, and/or the person making the purchase. Of the six pieces pictured from the Wade Collection, five were Jacquard woven and only one was an overshot. Another overshot coverlet pictured was given to Hall by William Wade. Hall showed a preference for the women weavers, “I am sure these professional weavers loved their work, but they wrought for money’s sake as well as for art’s sake, and their work lacks the quality that our spiritual sense apprehends when we touch an old coverlet made by the toil-worn hands of a patient woman who wove with her threads a thought of love for the home that would be beautified, and another thought for the husband and children who would sleep warmer through all life’s winters under her blue and white coverlet.” Of the remaining 12 coverlets illustrated, some could have been woven on a simple treadle loom with four-harnesses, such as the twills. However, the doubleweave ones would have utilized at least a sixteen-harness loom. This paper will concentrate primarily on the overshot and other structures that could be woven on a foot-powered harness loom because this is the type of loom found in the Appalachian Mountains.

In the captions for the illustrations, Hall gives valuable information about the coverlets. Most of the time, the coverlet carries a pattern name, although some are identified by the name of the owner or weaver. In most cases, she identifies the coverlet owner with their place of residence. In about half of them, she indicates who wove the coverlet, usually with the county of origin. Sometimes the notes give the age of the coverlet. Hall has an entire chapter devoted to coverlet names that she categorizes by subject. However, she does note that names are not a reliable way to distinguish patterns. “Sometimes one name does duty for two or three dissimilar designs, and a design may have one name in North Carolina, another in Kentucky, another in Tennessee, and still another in Virginia, as if it were a criminal fleeing from justice.”

In the foreword, Hall first declares that there are too many people to thank for helping her in the research for this book. She then goes on to name several people who contributed to the book. Examination of this list is a good indication of some of the major collectors of coverlets in the early twentieth century. Hall’s gratitude begins with “Miss May Stone and Miss Katherine Pettit

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12 Ibid. 146-7.
of the Settlement School at Hindman in Knott County, Kentucky.”

In the three years before they started the school on Troublesome Creek in 1902, Stone and Pettit organized summer camps in the area. They conducted classes in cooking, modern hygiene, basic literacy, and other useful household subjects for women and children. As recorded in a journal written at the camp in 1901, Stone and Pettit learned to weave from a local woman. Hall observed, “Sometimes the life of the lowlands and the life of the highlands meet in a settlement school, and there comes a renaissance of the arts of weaving and spinning.” She describes the settlement workers finding old drafts, learning the secrets of the dye pot, and recreating the old coverlets.

In 1912 Pettit went further into the Kentucky mountains where she founded the Pine Mountain Settlement School. Pettit developed a personal collection of coverlets, many of them taken as payment for school fees. These and others of her textiles now reside in the Bodley-Bullock historic house in Lexington, Kentucky. Besides her interest in coverlets, Pettit also collected recipes for natural dyes.

The tag that accompanies this coverlet in the Bodley-Bullock House says, “‘Kentucky Winding Blades’ Madder Red. This coverlet was made by ‘Granny Stallard who was 110 year old when she died about 20 years ago. She sent this with a number of other coverlets and blankets with her great great grandchildren to the Pine Mountain Settlement School to pay for their tuition. She said that most of these were made when she was in the ‘rise of her bloom’ – 16 years of age.”

13 Hall, Handwoven Coverlets, 6.


15 Hall, Handwoven Coverlets, 67-70.


Next on the list was Jennie Lester Hill, identified as the former Superintendent of Fireside Industries at Berea College. When William Gooddell Frost accepted the presidency of Berea College in 1892, one of the conditions was that tuition be free. He dedicated himself to fundraising and instituted a work/study program for students. He presented big donors with handwoven coverlets, secured locally, in appreciation for their generosity and attesting to a highly skilled craft still practiced in the Appalachian Mountains.

A student-recruiting letter from 1897 encouraged girls to come to Berea College, insuring that they could cover expenses by working three hours a day. The letter stated that the required room deposit could be secured by the mother selling handwoven fabric to the school, with exact amounts of remuneration given for different types of cloth. The Fireside Industries, under which both student industries and community crafts were organized, sold items to supporters of Berea. Jennie Lester Hill exhibited a flare for publicity and understood the market for handwoven goods. "Nothing is more artistic for furnishing country houses or for country wear. The mountain girl may choose the flashy, shoddy goods at the country store in preference to her mother's homespun, for it is new to her, but the golf girl will not."19

This piece was woven at the Fireside Industries at Berea College. Hall says the name can be "Sea Star," "Sea Shell," "Isle of Patmos," "Gentleman's Fancy," or "Lady's Fancy" depending on the locality where it was woven.

18 Berea College to Friends, 27 November 1897. Special Collections, Berea College.

19 Jennie Lester Hill, "Fireside Industries of the Kentucky Mountains." *The Southern Workman (Published Monthly by Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute)* April 1903, 212.
Hall describes making the acquaintance of Grace Tabor, a noted writer on gardening and landscape design. Tabor told Hall that she had recommended Anna Ernberg to become the full-time head of the Fireside Industries. In a series of letters to President Frost, William Wade praised Ernberg’s knowledge of weaving and agreed to pay for her relocation from New York to Berea. In her book, Hall includes two overshot coverlets woven at the Fireside Industries under the direction of Anna Ernberg.

Ernberg grew up and was educated in Sweden. Shortly after establishing herself at Berea, Ernberg wrote “Ruskin’s Ideal for Humble Homes,” an essay which laid out her philosophy of crafts and linked her to the Art and Craft Movement. Although she had been teaching weaving in New York City, she was happy to move to Berea College, where she managed the Fireside Industries for 25 years.

Following down Hall’s list of gratitude is Laura M. Allen, Director in Weaving in the Mechanics’ Institute, Rochester, New York. She first taught basketry at the institute, and then added weaving instruction after spending a couple of summers learning the craft. The Ramikin, the yearbook for the institute, noted that she “has a well established shop at her home.” She collected textiles, over 350 pieces of which she donated to the Smithsonian Institution, and accumulated over 1,200 drafts. She intended to publish some of her drafts, but died before that was accomplished. Marguerite Porter Davison took up that task. In A Weaver’s Source Book, Davison presented 224 drafts that were drawn out in a consistent contemporary format by Charles C. Denzler. Because the drafts identify who contributed them to Allen, this also becomes a valuable resource of coverlet and pattern draft collectors in the early twentieth century.

In the way that people in the story cross each other’s lives, Marguerite Porter Davison worked for a couple of years as assistant to Anna Ernberg at the Fireside Industries at Berea College. On Ernberg’s recommendation, she taught weaving during the summer of 1915 at Katherine Petitt’s school at Pine Mountain. Davison dedicated A Weaver’s Source Book to her mother and to Anna Ernberg.

Elizabeth Daingerfield did not fit into the model of the others on the list. Instead of a life in the arts or social service movements, she chose horses. Lexington where she lived is the heart of the thoroughbred raising country. After her father died, she took over his job of managing Castleton, a horse farm. When one of the most famous of racehorses, Man O’War, was retired to stud, the

20 William Wade to President Frost. 24 February 1911, and William Wade to President Frost, 10 May 1911, Special Collections, Berea College.


22 The Ramikin (Rochester, New York: Senior Class of Mechanics Institute, 1912 &1915).

23 Marguerite Porter Davison, A Handweaver’s Source Book (Swarthmore, Pennsylvania: By the Author, 1953).

owner chose Daingerfield to arrange the breeding. She never married, and her nephew described her as, “Lizzie was essentially ladylike—but pretty damn tough.”

Besides coverlets, Daingerfield also collected quilts. She wrote book reviews for the local newspaper and published several magazine articles on quilts. The four coverlets that Hall features from Daingerfield show that she had an interest in historic pieces and documenting who wove them and where they came from.

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26 “Interview with Keene Daingerfield, August 1, 1979.” Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries. https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7v416t1n58.
Tennessee, called *Shuttle Crafters*. The June 1942 Appalachian edition of *House & Garden*, contains an account of the Dougherty ancestor, seventeen-year-old Jean Adams serving as a drummer boy under French command during the Revolution War. He stayed in the new world, apprenticed to a cabinetmaker, and then set off to make his fortune in the western lands in the hills of eastern Tennessee. His descendants, the Doughertys can document weavers in their family in an unbroken chain over many generations. They had in their possession a draft for “Young Man’s Fancy” that notes that it was copied on April 16, 1833.²⁷

Sarah often dressed in period costume when she demonstrated weaving at different events. She had an extensive collection of coverlets and coverlet drafts. The coverlet depicted in the Hall book indicates that the weaver, Sallie Dougherty copied the design from a coverlet found at Mount Vernon. The Davison book has 34 drafts collected by Sarah Dougherty, including the Mount Vernon one. Unfortunately, the Dougherty collection of coverlets, the drafts, and all the records of the business were lost in a fire that consumed their weaving cabin.²⁸

The famous photographer Doris Ulmann photographed both Sarah Dougherty and her mother, Leah Adams Dougherty when she made trips into the Appalachian mountains to document craftspeople for Allen Eaton’s book, *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands*. The photograph of the mother dressed in black with a white high lace collar sitting at a loom made it into the Eaton book.²⁹

Only one commercial company is on Hall’s gratitude list—J. Capps and Sons of Jacksonville, Illinois. J. Capps and Sons was founded in 1839 as a woolen mill, going on to produce blankets and overcoats during the Civil War. Towards the end of the century, they manufactured men’s pants and eventually men’s suits. The business began producing “Indian” blankets in 1892 and continued production until 1917. These were brightly colored blankets using geometric shapes in their designs. The blankets were traded to Native Americans in the west, but were not made by or designed by “Indians.” None of the business records indicates any production or reproduction of coverlets.³⁰

Not much could be found about the other people listed as contributing to the coverlet book. Mrs. Henderson Daingerfield Norman was Elizabeth’s younger sister. Another woman mentioned, “Miss Florence Strong” also had a connection to Elizabeth. She gave one of the coverlets illustrated in the book to Daingerfield. Miss Amy Du Puy was a Pittsburgh socialite, the daughter of one of the area’s steel families. She was on the board of Kinsley House, a social

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²⁷“Look Back To A Pioneer Day” *House & Garden*, June 1942. 74.

²⁸ Mary Frank Helms interview by the author, June 1991.


settlement house. Miss Madie Woodbury is among the deaf-blind individuals identified by William Wade. In an essay Miss Woodbury wrote for the supplement to his survey of the people with dual disabilities, she says she likes housework and doing needlework—“crochet, knit, and sew by hand and on a machine.” Since three coverlets in the book come from Danville, Illinois, the home of Madie Woodbury, it can be assumed that she secured them for the author. I could find no additional information about the remaining two—Dr. William Arnold, a retired Navy doctor, and Miss Susan Beeler of Fountain City, Tennessee.

Several other collectors and/or weavers identified in the captions on the featured coverlets come from the Appalachian Mountains. Three coverlets depicted in color, indicate that they came from Allanstand Industries in Asheville, North Carolina. Frances Goodrich, who founded Allanstand Industries, came to the mountains of western North Carolina as a missionary for the Presbyterian Church. Selling coverlets and other weaving provided much needed ‘cash-money’ to families that lived from what they grew and some seasonal paid labor. Allanstand Industries moved from Madison County, North Carolina to Ashville in 1908 to a more convenient location for their customers.

This photo accompanied an article written in 1919 by Frances Goodrich for the Presbyterian “Home Mission Monthly.”


The gift to Goodrich of a “Double Bow Knot” coverlet started her on a quest to revive weaving. She sought out weavers, among them two that Hall mentioned—Elmeda Walker and Cumi Woody. Walker lived not too far from Allanstand, but across the mountain in Flag Pond, Tennessee, while Woody made her home in Mitchell County, North Carolina. Cumi Woody became associated with the weaving activities in the Penland area.

Francis Goodrich actively collected coverlet patterns, and did drawdowns of the drafts in neat watercolor renditions. When she transferred the Allanstand Industries business to the recently formed Southern Highlands Handicraft Guild in 1931, the weaving records became part of the Guild’s holding. Several of the drafts have been gathered, converted to the contemporary recording system, and published through the work of Barbara Miller and Deb Schillo.

In 1913 President Wilson’s First Lady, Ellen Axson Wilson commissioned Elmeda Walker and Allie Josephine Mast to weave fabrics for the Blue Mountain Room in the White House in Washington, DC. Josie wove the rugs using the “Sun, Moon, and Stars” coverlet pattern, while 76-year-old Elmeda produced 60 yards of fabric for upholstery and curtains in the “Double Chariot Wheel” pattern.

Paying summer guests stayed at the large Mast home in Valle Crucis, North Carolina, and a weaving business grew out of the admiration for the handwoven textiles they saw around the house. Josie enlisted two of her sisters and a log cabin on the family property for the weaving production.

One avid collector of all sort of weaving patterns began her work in the Appalachian Mountains a decade later than Hall’s book. Lucy Morgan first went to Penland, North Carolina to teach at the Appalachian School started by her brother, an Episcopal priest. She studied weaving with both Anna Ernberg of Berea College and Edward Worst, Manual Arts Director of the Chicago Public Schools. She founded the Penland Weavers and Potters, conducted summer weaving institutes that grew into the Penland School of Craft, and amassed many notebooks filled with weaving drafts.

Many Appalachian weaving centers, often connected with independent schools sponsored by agencies from outside the mountains, had weaving programs as part of regional economic development. They used overshot patterns common in coverlets, but produced easier to sell

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37 Ibid. 75-95.
smaller items. Weavers at Arrowcraft at the Pi Beta Phi School in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, wove coverlets in the 1930s, but soon concentrated goods that were easier to produce. Even with Anna Enberg’s personal interest in coverlets patterns, she realized she primarily sold to women who bought a guest towel, baby blanket, or placemats out of household account money.\textsuperscript{38}

While most of the people mentioned so far, knew one another and communicated by letters, sometimes a collector connects with the objects, just out of affection for them. Leonidas Chalmers Glenn collected coverlets in the mountains of Kentucky and Tennessee in the second decade of the twentieth century. By profession, he was a geologist and served as head of the geology department and then ran the Science Division at Vanderbilt University in Nashville.\textsuperscript{39} During his geological studies in the mountains, he bargained for coverlets he often saw drying or airing on hedges. As a scientist, he documented the coverlet owners (often photographing them), their location, and the pattern names. The coverlets have now passed down to his grandchildren.\textsuperscript{40}

\begin{center}
\textit{Color and bold designs attracted Glenn.}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{38} Alvic. \textit{Weavers}.


\textsuperscript{40} Notes made by Donna and David Glenn and communicated to the author.
In Appalachia, most of the coverlets collectors also wove. As weavers, they also sought out drafts because they had interest in comparing and replicating the patterns. Because weaving by home weavers carried on a bit longer in the recesses of the mountains, there were rich resources to be uncovered by those searching them out.

Early twentieth century coverlet pattern collectors from other parts of the country are known, because they either wrote about their explorations or were written about. Notable among them are Laura Allen, Edward Worst, Mary Megis Atwater, and William H. H. Rose, known as Weaver Rose.41

Interest in coverlets has continued with some periods showing more activity than others. In 1925 the Colonial Coverlet Guild of America was incorporated in the state of Illinois. Two of the major requirements of membership, which have since been dropped, is that the member must possess a coverlet and supply of photograph of it when joining. In 1940, with a revision in 1955, the Guild published a book with close to 350 coverlets, each given a full-page black and white photograph.42 Of those, slightly over one quarter are overshot patterns, another forth are those that were woven on multi-harness looms, with the remaining half in Jacquard designs.

In May of 2006, coverlets got a home in Bedford, Pennsylvania at the National Museum of the American Coverlet.43 This museum has brought together those people interested in coverlets as antiques and those who are weavers or others intrigued by the structure of the fabric. The museum walls can host 50 to 60 coverlets displayed in full during exhibits.


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