2018

Dresden Embroidery in Early Kentucky Counterpanes

Laurel Horton

Kalmia Research, laurel@kalmiaresearch.net

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>

Part of the [Art and Materials Conservation Commons](#), [Art Practice Commons](#), [Fashion Design Commons](#), [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), and the [Museum Studies Commons](#)

Horton, Laurel, "Dresden Embroidery in Early Kentucky Counterpanes" (2018). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 1086.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/1086>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

**Textile Society of America 16th Biennial Symposium
Vancouver, Canada — September 19-23, 2018**

Published in *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings 2018*

Presented at Vancouver, BC, Canada; September 19 – 23, 2018

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/>

Copyright © by the author(s).

Dresden Embroidery in Early Kentucky Counterpanes

Laurel Horton

Elegant white bedcovers from the early nineteenth century survive in substantial numbers in public and private collections. These highly embellished textiles include quilted, embroidered, and woven examples, but scholars of these specific genres have rarely ventured into this unfamiliar, overlapping territory. Many of these are accompanied by names, dates, places, and other information about their makers.

This paper is drawn from a larger research project to identify and examine surviving white embellished bedcovers in southeastern states, and to trace the threads that connect these textiles to the lives of the women who made them. Among embroidered counterpanes surviving in museum and private collections are four counterpanes that feature a particular form of embroidery.¹ Dresden work, a distinctive type of “open-work” embroidery producing a lace-like effect, originated in Germany in the 1720s and became popular with fashionable consumers throughout Europe and the American colonies. These fine laces were produced by professional embroiderers, but, gradually, amateur seamstresses also learned the technique.²

Dresden work most often appeared on handkerchiefs, collars and cuffs, but during the early nineteenth century, a few bold women adapted the technique to embellish their embroidered counterpanes. Although examples also survive in other places, there seemed to be a significant concentration of examples from Kentucky. I decided to take a closer look at four of these counterpanes and the lives of their makers to see if there were any connections among them.³

One such counterpane was originally attributed to Amelia Mildred Chenoweth (1775—1835).⁴ The Chenoweth family were prominent among the earliest settlers in Jefferson County, and are remembered in connection with the “Chenoweth Massacre.” In 1789, a Shawnee raiding party attacked the family home, killing three children and wounding three others, including fifteen-year-old Amelia.⁵ However, the more likely maker was her less famous daughter, Naomi Nash (1797—1874), who married Dr. James Porter in 1823. The counterpane remained in Louisville, handed down through Naomi’s descendants. The Museum of Early Decorative Arts (MESDA) acquired it from Naomi’s great-grandson in 1967.

¹ The term *counterpane*, like many textile descriptors, has had multiple referents. “Early 17th century: alteration of counterpoint, from Old French contrepoinTE, based on medieval Latin culcitra puncta ‘quilted mattress’ (puncta, literally meaning ‘pricked’, from the verb pungere). The change in the ending was due to association with pane in an obsolete sense ‘cloth.’” Oxford <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/>.

² Kathleen Staples, “Dresden Embroidered Lace,” *Sampler & Antique Needlework Quarterly* 9, no.3 (October 2003), 36-44.

³ Family information from museum accession files has been verified, updated, augmented, and/or extrapolated from documents on Ancestry.com and other online and published sources.

⁴ MESDA accession #2033.3. Paula W. Locklair, *Quilts, Coverlets, and Counterpanes: Bedcoverings from the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts and Old Salem Collections* (Winston-Salem NC: Old Salem, 1997), 28.

⁵ Their mother, Margaret McCarty Chenoweth (1751—1839) was severely injured, presumed dead, and scalped. Despite her injuries, she recovered and bore two more children. “Cherokee Massacre,” *The Kentucky Encyclopedia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 180-81; Gail King, “Frontier Louisville,” *Courier Journal Magazine* (October 15, 1978), photocopy in MESDA accession file.

Naomi Nash (1797—1835), Jefferson County, Kentucky. White linen counterpane embroidered with cotton and linen yarn, 116 x 104 inches. Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts 2033.3. Photograph by Wesley Stewart.

The Metropolitan Museum owns a second Kentucky counterpane featuring Dresden work. It was made by Mary Walker Stith (1802—1884), whose family moved from Bedford County, Virginia, to Breckinridge County, Kentucky. Mary reportedly began work on this counterpane at age thirteen in 1815. The following year, she married her first cousin, William Bolling Jones. She completed the counterpane in 1818, around the time of the birth of the first of her twelve children. Mary and her husband later moved to Missouri, where the counterpane reportedly descended to a granddaughter.⁶

Mary Walker Stith Jones (1802—1884), Breckinridge County, Kentucky. White cotton counterpane embroidered with cotton yarn, 100 ½ x 87 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art #39.111. Photograph in public domain.

⁶ Accession #39.111. Amelia Peck, *American Quilts and Coverlets in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: MQ Publications, 2007), 204-5, 302.

A third example is owned by the Jefferson County Historical Society, in Madison, Indiana.⁷ The donor, Mary Fowler, said that it was made in Kentucky, and research has identified the maker as Judith Bennett (1796—1880), the donor's maternal grandmother. Judith was the daughter of Brook and Sophia Ristine Bennett. By 1820 the family had moved from Lexington, Kentucky to Madison, Indiana where Judith married William Brown in 1823. The counterpane descended to her elder daughter, Jemima Brown, then to her sister's daughter.⁸

Judith Bennett (1796—1880), Lexington, Kentucky. White linen counterpane embroidered with cotton yarn, 88 x 80 inches. Jefferson County (Indiana) Historical Society #93.33.01. Photograph courtesy of Ron Grimes.

The fourth Dresden-worked Kentucky counterpane is in the collection of the Kentucky Historical Society, in Frankfort.⁹ The maker was Elizabeth “Betsy” Patton Toomey (1894—1861), whose grandfather, Michael Patton, emigrated from Derry, Ireland, first to Virginia, then to Clark County, Kentucky. Betsy embroidered the initials of her maiden name, “B.P.T.,” which suggests that she made the counterpane before her marriage to John Caldwell in 1814. The couple moved to western Kentucky and produced twelve children. After John's death, Betsy and several of her children moved to Missouri. The counterpane was donated by a great-granddaughter of the maker.¹⁰

⁷ Jefferson County (Indiana) Historical Society (JHS) Museum accession # 93.31.01

⁸ JHS Library, Fowler Family Papers.

⁹ Kentucky Historical Society accession #19.11.

¹⁰ Although Betsy Patton Toomey Caldwell's descendants are numerous, none of the online trees include the names of her parents. Her father remains unidentified. However, from the archived papers of the donor, the author has determined that Betsy's mother was Sarah Patton (1762-1795). Betsy was two years old when her mother died, and she was raised by Elizabeth Yeager Patton, the wife of her uncle James. Margaret Gray Blanton Papers, Box 7, Folder 1, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Elizabeth “Betsy” Patton Toomey (1894–1861), Clark County, Kentucky. White counterpane (woven with flax warp and mixed cotton/flax weft) embroidered with mixed cotton/flax yarn. Kentucky Historical Society #1981.11. Photograph courtesy of KHS.

The particular complexities of Dresden work, unlike more conventional embroidery, make it difficult to replicate without formal instruction. This means that the four young women who made these counterpanes very likely attended girls’ academies or small schools, where they learned academic subjects and needlework, both plain and ornamental. Schools and individual needlework instructors advertised their curricula in newspapers.¹¹ The earliest known mention of Dresden work in southern newspapers appeared in 1754 in the advertisement Martha Logan’s boarding school in Charleston, South Carolina. Logan offered “all kinds of Tent and Dresden Work, Embroidery with Silk, Cruells, or silver and gold Thread.”¹² During the late eighteenth century, the availability of instruction in Dresden work gradually spread from coastal cities into the interior settlements in North Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland.¹³

¹¹ “The *MESDA Craftsman Database* contains information about artisans gathered through primary research in public and private records. The program’s researchers scour newspapers, city directories, court records, probate inventories, wills, and private papers in search of information pertaining to southern craftsmen working in 127 trades.” <https://mesda.org/research/craftsman-database/about-the-craftsman-database-2/>

¹² Martha Logan advertised her school from 1741 to 1768. *The South Carolina Gazette*, Charleston SC, July 25, 1754. MESDA Craftsman Database.

¹³ Instructors whose advertisements specifically mentioned Dresden work include the following: Elizabeth Gardner, Norfolk VA, 1766–1772 (*The Virginia Gazette*); “Miss Wright, from England,” Fredericksburg, VA, 1772 (*The Virginia Gazette*); Mrs. Polk, Annapolis MD, 1774 (*The Maryland Gazette*); Maria Smith, Winchester VA, 1788 (*The Winchester Mercury*); Mrs. Bruin, New Bern NC, 1787 (*Martin’s North-Carolina Gazette*); Mrs. M. Hodgson, Richmond VA, 1795 (unknown source); Mrs. O’Reilly, Baltimore, 1799–1802 (*The Telegraph & Baltimore Daily Advertiser*); Frances Bowen, Raleigh, 1807 (*The North-Carolina Journal*). MESDA Craftsman Database.

In Kentucky, newspapers published advertisements for schools offering needlework instruction in the Lexington area as early as 1797. Although none of the Kentucky advertisements specifically mention “Dresden” work, the technique would have been included among the “fancy needlework” offered. The instructors sometimes identified themselves as coming from eastern cities, such as Philadelphia, Boston, and Charleston. By the 1810s, instructors offered needlework instruction in numerous locations throughout the commonwealth.

Few documents survive related to female education of this period. However, according to family history, Mary Walker Stith attended one session at a Catholic school in Bethlehem, in Hardin County, “where, among other skills, she was taught needlework.”¹⁴ No information survives for the education of the other three women, but the presence of Dresden work in their counterpanes indicates that their families had the financial resources and the social aspirations to provide for their education.

Mary Walker Stith would have learned the process of Dresden embroidery by stitching a sampler, the hallmark of a girl’s proper education. After leaving school, she could refer to this sampler to design her counterpane. It is likely that Naomi Nash, Judith Bennett, and Betsy Toomey learned the technique in some similar fashion.

We know that Mary Walker Stith was sixteen when she completed her counterpane in 1818, and that Betsy Patton Toomey embroidered “B.P.T.” sometime before her marriage at age nineteen in 1814. The other two makers, Naomi Nash and Judith Bennett, both married in 1823; Naomi was twenty-six, and Judith was twenty-seven. Naomi and Judith may well have made their counterpanes during their teen years, which could place all four counterpanes in the 1810s. Research on these white bedcovers as a group suggests that the young women who made these elegant white bedcovers generally did so as expressions of their own identity rather than in preparation for marriage.¹⁵

Learning how to embroider a sampler in a classroom is one thing. The individual decision to apply those small-scale motifs to the vast surface of a counterpane requires a more serious commitment of time and effort. These four young women made the extra effort, but they were not alone. They were part of a much larger movement of women, especially very young women, who created elaborately embellished white quilts and embroidered counterpanes during this period.¹⁶

Although examples of these white bedcovers survive from throughout the 19th century, the highest concentration date from the period 1810—1830. This activity coincides with the 1807 American embargo of British goods and the War of 1812.¹⁷ These handcrafted white textiles appear have functioned as symbols of American efforts to reduce dependence on British imports during both the American Revolution and the War of 1812.¹⁸ Patriotic women during both

¹⁴ Peck, *American Quilts & Coverlets*, 204.

¹⁵ Laurel Horton, “Looking for Polly Armistead: Intimations of Mortality and Identity in a Late-18th Century Needlework,” *The MESDA Journal*, forthcoming in 2019.

¹⁶ Gail Bakkom, “Candlewicks’: White Embroidered Counterpanes in America, 1790-1880,” *Uncoverings 2015* (Lincoln NE: American Quilt Study Group, 2015), 76.

¹⁷ Bakkom, “Candlewicks,” 68.

¹⁸ Laurel Horton, “The Making of a Kentucky Counterpane,” *Journal of Backcountry Studies* 8, no. 1 (2014), 3-4. <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/jbc/article/view/908/549>.

periods were encouraged to spin and weave their own yarn and fabric, instead of purchasing imported goods. Among the popular British imports were elegant white, tufted counterpanes, hand-woven in Bolton, Lancashire from American-grown cotton.¹⁹ Some woven and embroidered American counterpanes incorporated design elements derived from these imported textiles, a clear indication of the patriotic motivations of their makers.²⁰

The great-granddaughter of Betsy Patton Toomey reported that her ancestor “did all the processes” of making her counterpane.²¹ Such “home-production narratives” frequently accompany early white counterpanes. For example, of some twenty white quilts and counterpanes in the collection of the Kentucky Historical Society, fourteen are accompanied, not only by the makers’ names, dates, and/or locations, but also with a statement that the maker—alone or aided by her family or enslaved servants—participated in the production of fiber and/or cloth.

Some curators regard these family stories as romantic inventions of the Colonial Revival. They recognize that these white bedcovers came from genteel families who could well afford to purchase yarn and fabric for their daughters’ needlework. However, preliminary results from analyses of fibers and weave structures offer substantial evidence of handspinning and handweaving.²² Some young Southern women indeed appear to have participated in the processing of the fiber and/or fabric for their white counterpanes, not out of necessity, but to express their connection with the patriotic efforts of their mothers and grandmothers during the revolutionary period.

No oral tradition survives for Judith Bennett’s counterpane, but a textile conservator determined that the cotton embroidery thread and linen fabric and were spun and woven by hand.²³ Mary Walker Stith’s descendants reported that the cotton for the cloth, yarn, and fringe of her counterpane was grown on the family farm, and that the cloth was woven by an enslaved weaver named Morley. This is a rare acknowledgement of the work of an enslaved artisan. Doubtless there were other women and men who not only picked cotton, but also spun and wove it for the young white women. Some of the makers’ families owned slaves, some of them did not.

Naomi Nash was fifteen years old when her father died in 1812. Her widowed mother and her nine children reportedly supported themselves through “all kinds of profitable work.” The four older girls spun and wove cotton, flax, and wool. Naomi and her sisters also made straw hats, which they traded at John Chenoweth’s store “for imported goods from the city of Philadelphia.” The family’s oral tradition emphasized the family’s humble self-sufficiency and resourcefulness, but the maker of this counterpane clearly had access to formal instruction in needlework and a

¹⁹ Erin Beeston and Laurel Horton, “Bolton’s Cotton Counterpanes: Hand-Weaving in the Industrial Age,” *Quilt Studies* 14 (Halifax: British Quilt Study Group, 2013), 7-36.

²⁰ Laurel Horton, “Weft-loop Woven Counterpanes in the New Republic: The Rediscovery of a Textile Legacy,” *Uncoverings 2014* (Lincoln NE: AQSG, 2014), 90-114.

²¹ Betsy Toomey’s counterpane is the only one of this group for which fiber analysis results are definitive.

²² Margaret Ordoñez and Laurel Horton, Analyses of fibers and weave structures in white bedcovers in the Kentucky Museum and Kentucky Historical Society, unpublished data, April 2-4, July 2018.

²³ Ramona Duncan, [condition report and conservation proposal, 1988], #93.31.01accession file. The Historical Society applied to the Mary and Barry Bingham, Sr. Fund to cover the costs of conservation. JCHS accession files.

predilection toward refinement. The family's home-production efforts appear to be motivated by patriotism, industry, and self-expression, as well as necessity.²⁴

In 1805, one family member participated in a public spinning duel, reported in the Louisville paper: "Mrs. Hause and Miss Betsy Chinoweth, both of Jefferson County, spun on a wager in one day 65 cutts of yarn, equal to almost 6 day's work. On examination at night it was found that Mrs. Hause had spun five cuts the most, and of course, won the bet."²⁵ The younger spinner was probably Naomi's sister, seven-year-old Elizabeth Nash. It is likely that the writer referred to the young spinner by her mother's maiden name due to the Chenoweth family's prominence and reputation for industry.²⁶ This item was reprinted in the Cincinnati paper, and the editor added an introductory paragraph that reveals the political context that made this event newsworthy: "We record the following specimen of Female Industry, because we think it highly worthy of imitation, particularly in a country like this where the soil is capable of yielding in the greatest abundance every raw material necessary for the clothing of its inhabitants, which, if properly manufactured, would preclude the necessity of buying at an extravagant price, goods of foreign growth and manufacture, and of course would retain a large quantity of cash in our country, which is now unnecessarily laid out for the superfluities of dress."²⁷

There is no evidence to indicate that the four women who made these particular counterpanes knew one other. Instead they were participants in a larger movement of idealistic and ambitious young women who chose to express themselves, individually and as patriotic Americans, by making counterpanes. Dresden work was simply one of the many techniques available to these particular women.

American white quilts and counterpanes represent great variety, vitality, and virtuosity in their designs; but, as a group, those made by Kentucky women tend to be less symmetrical, and more inclined toward irregularity and innovation. Counterpanes from throughout the South typically feature a large floral basket prominently in the center, but Kentucky women took some liberties with this convention. For example, Mary Walker Stith placed a very small basket in the center of her counterpane, but then she overwhelmed it with a diamond chain and the oversized Dresden motifs in the vine border. A more extreme form of innovation is Naomi Nash's idiosyncratic design. Instead of emanating from a basket, her four flowering vines emerge from corner bowknots to form a balanced arrangement of five oversized blossoms in the center.

A number of other Kentucky needleworkers, including Betsy Toomey and Judith Bennett, Toomey, dispensed with the basket and grounded central botanical sprays in a double bowknot. Their two counterpanes also share similar botanical elements distributed in similar arrangements. Judith lived in Fayette County, and Betsy lived in Clark County, the adjacent county to the east, suggesting the possibility of a common instructor, style, or design source in the Lexington area. Although we don't know her identity, she may have been one of the numerous needleworkers who advertised in the *Kentucky Gazette*. For example, Lucy Gray advertised her school "for the

²⁴ Shirley D. Harris, *The Chenoweth Family in America* (Scottsville KY: Gerald Printing Service, 1994), 215.

²⁵ Unidentified newspaper, Louisville (July 25, 1805), MESDA accession files.

²⁶ Naomi's father, Harmon Nash was born in Pennsylvania, worked as a riverboat hand, and died of yellow fever in Louisiana in 1812. A descendant's profile of Harmon Nash refers to him as having "married into the Chenoweth family." Mrs. Lizzie H. Dean, "Fairmount Scribe Gives Biography of Pioneer Kentuckian," *The Jeffersonian* (August 24, 1948), MESDA accession files.

²⁷ *The Western Spy*, Cincinnati, (August 14 1895). MESDA Subject Database.

instruction of young ladies,” at her home four miles from Lexington. She offered “the various branches of needlework, also, the art of drawing Sprigs, flowers &c. for the use of the needle.” Her advertisements in the *Kentucky Gazette* spanned 18 years, from 1797 to 1815.²⁸

Kentucky was settled in the late 18th century largely by young families who had participated in America’s struggle for independence. Their daughters grew up with an awareness that their lives and work had a place in the context of the larger society. Some of these young women found a way to express their American identity with their needles, as well as their looms and spinning wheels. These white embellished counterpanes are not only examples of exquisite needlework, but also, individually and collectively, they are documents of women’s education, identity, and expressive culture.

²⁸ *The Kentucky Gazette* (March 24, 1799). Gray’s school was located “four miles from Lexington,” and later in Shelbyville. MESDA Craftsman Database.

Bibliography

- Bakkom, Gail. “‘Candlewicks’: White Embroidered Counterpanes in America, 1790-1880.” *Uncoverings 2015* (Lincoln NE: American Quilt Study Group, 2015): 61--92.
- Beeston, Erin, and Horton, Laurel. “Bolton’s Cotton Counterpanes: Hand-Weaving in the Industrial Age.” *Quilt Studies 14* (Halifax: British Quilt Study Group, 2013): 7-36.
- Blanton, Margaret Gray. Papers, Box 7, Folder 1. Wisconsin Historical Society.
- Fowler Family. Papers. Jefferson County (Indiana) Historical Library.
- Harris, Shirley D. *The Chenoweth Family in America*. Scottsville KY: Gerald Printing Service, 1994.
- Horton, Laurel. “Looking for Polly Armistead: Intimations of Mortality and Identity in a Late-18th Century Needlework.” *The MESDA Journal 39* (2019).
- _____. “The Making of a Kentucky Counterpane.” *Journal of Backcountry Studies 8*, no. 1 (2014). <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/jbc/article/view/908/549>.
- _____. “Weft-loop Woven Counterpanes in the New Republic: The Rediscovery of a Textile Legacy.” *Uncoverings 2014* (Lincoln NE: American quilt Study Group (2014), 90-114.
- The Kentucky Encyclopedia*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky (1992).
- Locklair, Paula W. *Quilts, Coverlets, and Counterpanes: Bedcoverings from the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts and Old Salem Collections*. Winston-Salem NC: Old Salem, 1997.
- MESDA Craftsman Database. <https://mesda.org/research/craftsman-database/>.
- MESDA Subject Database. <https://mesda.org/research/subject-database/>.
- Peck, Amelia. *American Quilts and Coverlets in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: MQ Publications, 2007).
- Staples, Kathleen. “Dresden Embroidered Lace.” *Sampler & Antique Needlework Quarterly 9*, no.3 (October 2003): 36-44.