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Cassimere: Hiding in Plain Sight

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In the nineteenth century, cassimere was one of the most produced woolen fabrics in American mills. Cassimere is much in evidence in state and federal census reports of wool manufacture from 1837 to the early 1900s. It appears in Cole's *Complete Dictionary of Dry Goods* "Cassimere is the general term applied to that class of all wool cloths used for men's clothing, woven either plain or twilled, coarse or fine, of 'woolen' yarn. The pattern of cassimere is always woven plain and distinct, and the cloth is never napped."¹

Cassimere appears early in the twentieth century in the *Thomas Register of American Manufacturers* of 1905-06 under Woolen goods (after whistles, wigs, and witch hazel) and the Register lists at least one hundred and one mills making cassimere.² In 1914, it is listed in Bennett's *Woolen and Worsted Fabrics Glossary*.³ But in later twentieth century fabric reference books, it disappears, or if you find it, as in the 1960 American Fabrics *Encyclopedia of Textiles*, it is described as a hard wearing cloth made of worsted yarn. ⁴ Similarly, in the 1967 *Dan River Mills Dictionary*, it is defined as worsted suiting.

Woolen and Worsted Fabrics Glossary

Confusion abounds around the etymology of the word cassimere, but the nineteenth century fabric was generally known as a lightweight woolen fabric, twilled, and not napped. It was woven with fine woolen singles yarn by woolen mills that procured the wool, often locally, washed, carded, spun, and finally wove it. It was woven with at least four shafts or harnesses. The minimal finishing- washing but no napping or shearing- distinguishes it from both broadcloth and flannel, the other common woolen cloths of the nineteenth century.

Going down the rabbit hole of etymological speculation, the use of the term cassimere may derive from the place name of Kashmir. From the geographical reference and from association with the fine wool of cashmere goats, the word makes a series of leaps or corruptions to end at

¹ George Cole, *Complete Dictionary of Dry Goods* (Wichita, Kansas: Forest City Publishing Co. 1890), 37.

² *Thomas' Register of American Manufacturing, Buyers Guide 1905-1906*, 1146.

³ Frank Bennett, *Woolen and Worsted Fabrics Glossary*, (Boston: Frank Bennett & Co. 1914), 244.

⁴ American Fabrics Magazine, *Encyclopedia of Textiles*, (Doric Publishing Company, 1972), 527.

cassimere.⁵ Along the way, as hinted in Denny's 1928 *Fabrics and How to Know Them*, fine cashmere goat fiber becomes associated or alludes with fine Spanish (Merino) wool. Denny writes in her definition of cashmere:

1. "Originally meant fine wool of cashmere goat used in cashmere shawls of India. Some modern fabrics employ genuine cashmere wool.
2. Light weight dress fabric similar to henrietta"⁶

Woolen cloths produced in Kersey, England perhaps introduced the twill structure and further muddled the etymology as kerseymere (another place name association) and cashmere blended together.

Cassimere first appeared as a simple 2/2 twill in eighteenth century England, patented and named by Francis Yerbury in 1766.⁷ The twill was not new, but the weight was. His stated goal was to make "thin superfine cloth for the summer season at home, and warmer climates abroad". In the patent application he notes "two species of my thin cloth, distinguished by the name of cassimers; one is quilled in the weaving with a flat wale, the other with a round one...."

Yerbury specified in his patent that the same yarns be used for warp and weft, of a thinness he described as superfine, also that Spanish wool be used. It was probably not a coincidence that when Yerbury first patented his "invention", Hargreaves' spinning jenny had just been invented in the region. The spinning jenny had a multiplicity of wool wheel spindles mounted on a reciprocating carriage which efficiently augmented the tasks of the handspinner, by mechanically drawing the wool thinner and then twisting it. Following Yerbury's patent, cassimere production took off in the west of England.

Cassimere's use in Europe was noted by Napoleon Bonaparte's valet who wrote "The Emporer's vest and britches were always of white casimere; he changed them every morning and they were washed only three or four times."⁸

Cassimere was first imported into the US, then manufactured domestically, along with other cloth of British origin including broadcloth and flannel. It was used for both clothing and furnishings, particularly draperies.⁹ Cassimere production, as with other woolens, was aided by the introduction of the merino in the early 1800s, as cassimere required medium to fine grade wool.

The Bronsons, authors of *the Domestic Manufacturer's Assistant*, included a draft for "Casimere". As with other fabric descriptions, they included specifications for yarn (5 run or a singles of 8000 yds/lb), set at 48 ends per inch.¹⁰ Other weavers writing identical drafts spelled it cashmere, as in this weaver's draft book dated 1860 (though it looks earlier).

⁵ Abram Smyth Palmer, *Folk-Etymology Dictionary Of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning*, (London: George Ball and Sons, 1882), 201.

⁶ Grace Denny, *Fabrics and How to Know Them*, (Philadelphia: Lippincott Company, 1928), 30; Henrietta, according to American Fabrics *Encyclopedia*, was a twill weave made with silk warp and wool weft, 201.

⁷ English Patents and Inventions, Specification 1766, n. 858.

⁸ Constant, *Recollections of the Private Life of Napoleon*, 1836, www.gutenberg.org/files/3740/3740.txt

⁹ Florence Montgomery, *Textiles in America 1650-1870*, (New York: WW Norton and Co, 2003), 192.

¹⁰ J&R Bronson, *Domestic Manufacturer's Assistant*, (Utica, NY: William Williams, 1817), 102.

Weavers Draft Book, Winterthur Museum

Cassimere came to be one of the most produced woolen fabrics in American mills with the introduction of “fancy” cassimere, and increased fashion possibilities. In 1840, Mr. Samuel Lawrence, agent of the Middlesex Mills of Lowell, had an American visitor. Mr. Lawrence said “He had an overcoat woven in diamond figures, of great beauty; said he saw it at an exhibition, at Paris; Bonjean and Son, of Sedan, were the manufacturers. He gave me a small bit from the inside of the collar”.¹¹ John Hayes, American woolen industry chronicler in *Fleece and the Loom*, credits Bonjean with the first fancy cassimere around this time.¹²

Imagined diamond pattern sample, Peggy Hart

In 1836, William Crompton invented a power loom with a patterning device, a dobby head and chain. Bonjean’s diamond was the inspiration for Mr. Lawrence to invite William Crompton to bring his loom to the Middlesex mill in Lowell MA, to attempt to produce something similar. Up until the invention of the fancy loom, the predominant woolen cloth produced was satin. Crompton’s loom had one shuttle, but in 1857 Lucius Knowles, Crompton’s main rival and future partner, engineered drop boxes, which enabled a power loom to run more than one shuttle. Multiple shuttles allowed color patterning such as checks and plaids, in addition to more elaborate weave structures.

¹¹ United States Centennial Commission, *International Exhibition 1876*, (Lippincott and Co. 1877) 43: Cole, Arthur, *American Wool Manufacture*, Vol. 1, (NY: Harper and Row, 1969) 306-307.

¹² Hayes, *Fleece and the Loom*, Address before the National Association of Wool Manufacturers, 1865, 34.

To put cassimere in the context of American textile manufacturing history, the following appeared in an article about the woolen industry.

“We have yet to speak of the satinets, peculiarly a creation of Yankee economy. If we may resort to the stage for a metaphor, and depict broadcloth, dark, heavy, sumptuous, as the tragedy of manufacture; and cassimere, varied, diverse, brilliant, as its comedy; nothing remains but to describe the satinets.”¹³

I spoke about satinets at the 2018 TSA symposium: it was a fabric with a cotton warp and wool weft widely manufactured in the early to mid 1800s. However as both power loom design evolved, and domestic wool became more widely available, many early satinets mills switched over to cassimere production in the 1850s.

The Census of Manufacturers data shows that a shift to cassimeres began with the invention of the Crompton loom. William Bagnall, chronicler of the early textile industry, profiled a handful of manufacturers in five textile manufacturing states. He wrote of James Eddy, who made satinets beginning in 1824 in Fall River MA but began making cassimeres in 1843.

“In 1843, in common with many other manufacturers of satinets, the firm began to make fancy cassimeres, fabrics the manufacture of which was introduced in this country in 1839 in the Middlesex Mills of Lowell MA...”¹⁴ He also wrote about the Wheelocks’ woolen mills in Uxbridge, MA, who first wove satinets in 1846 but switched to fancy cassimeres.

“These fabrics.... have been introduced extensively into in the woolen mills throughout the country, which had been previously engaged in the manufacture of satinets, until they have nearly superceded that no longer popular fabric for men’s clothing.”¹⁵

From the years 1845 to 1865 the production of cassimere increased fivefold, especially for use in civil war uniforms. Massachusetts was a center of production, with 146 woolen mills in 1855 and 134 in 1860, including some of the largest in the country, the Middlesex Mill in Lowell being the largest.¹⁶

MA Census of Manufactures	Yards of cassimere produced
1845	2,451,458
1855	6,444,585
1865	15,412,242

After the war, cassimere became a staple woolen fabric for men and boy’s suiting.

¹³ *New York Times*, Sept. 19, 1865.

¹⁴ Bagnall, *Sketches of Manufacturing Establishments in New York City and of Textile Establishments in the Eastern United States*, Vol. 2, (unpublished) 966.

¹⁵ Bagnall, 984.

¹⁶ Statistical Tables of Certain Branches of Industry in Massachusetts, United States Census of Manufactures, 1860.

Warsaw Collection of Business Americana
Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian

Textile designers developed many variations, publishing their patterns in industry publications such as *Manufacturers Wealth* and *Fiber and Fabric*. Variations included backed cassimeres, double cassimeres, diamond cassimere, Harris' "double and Twist" cassimere (using plied yarn in the warp), cassimeres requiring anywhere from 8 to 32 shafts. Fancy cassimere also included color effects such as pinwheel, houndstooth, and log cabin. Because it was not napped, the weave structure and color patterning showed clearly.

58-64-1-1109

Manufacturers' Wealth.

Semi-Monthly Journal, Devoted to Textile Manufacturers and their Labors.

No. 12. LITTLE FALLS, N. Y. 1872

Manufacturers' Wealth.
OTTO SCHAEFER, Editor.
P. O. Box 24, Little Falls, N. Y.
To whom all communications should be addressed.

TERMS OF ADVERTISING.
SOLID MATTER, 20 cents per line.
BUSINESS NOTICES, 10 " " "
Advertising by the year, 25% per cent. discount.

1872 Each number contains five to eight patterns for weaving Fancy Goods; two to three samples for mixing wool; and three to five receipts for coloring Wool, Silk, the samples. Also two patterns for weaving Cotton and Woolen Goods, and three to five receipts for coloring Cotton.

A Word to the Reader.
This paper is open for a limited number of advertisements, by means of which its usefulness as a circulating medium is greatly enhanced. So long as it adapts itself to the wants of textile manufacturing interests, it will be extensively read and resorted to as a means of intercommunication between those variously interested in this great branch of industry. I desire to make this paper as useful as possible, and its value will soon make it a necessity to the manufacturers. Persons subscribing for three months or more have the privilege of asking as many questions about manufacturing, and for any receipts for coloring or drafts for weaving, as they choose, and I will give full explanation in the following number free.

This paper is printed in shape easy to be bound. The last month of each year I shall print an extra sheet containing the index for the year.

Back numbers can be obtained by sending for them.

ON DESIGNING.
This number will finish the old style. - In the next number I shall give some very nice patterns of the new style of goods.

A FANCY CASSIMERE.
It requires 12 harness to weave this pattern, and will produce good plain cloth, if made of any of those mixings given in this number. Warp and filling alike. Take 4,000 threads of 5 run, or 3,600 threads of 4 run yarn, and have it 78 inches in the loom; 4 threads in a dent.

CHAIN FOR WEAVING.

Filling, 4 run.

A 12 HARNESS CASSIMERE.
It requires 4,100 threads of 5 run, or 3,600 threads of 4 run yarn, and have it 76 to 78 inches in the loom, 4 threads in a dent.

DRESSING OF THE WARP.
16 threads of black yarn.
16 " of black and green twist, or any twist you prefer.

DRAWING OF THE WARP.
The 16 threads of black yarn to be drawn on harness, 1, 2, 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 4, 1, 2, 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 4, and the 16 threads of twist on harness, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and so through.

CHAIN FOR WEAVING.

Filling, 3 or 4 run black.

Manufacturers Wealth
Collection of Watkins Woolen Mill, Historic Site, Lawson, MO

Cassinette, a cheaper version using a cotton warp, was also produced during the nineteenth century. It was much like satinnet, except that instead of using a satin weave it was woven with a twill. Cassinette was mentioned in several British publications, including the *Economist and General Advisor* in 1824. Whether it caught on in England is not known, but it appears in the New England Mercantile directory in 1849 as cashmerett, manufactured by mills in MA and NH. It later shows up in the hearings of a committee investigating the Iowa Reform School in 1879. The prison tailor was being questioned regarding his work. In answer to a query about his manufacture of turn out suits, he confirmed that he used “cheap stuff”: jeans, cassinette and satinnet for making prisoners’ clothes.

When worsted combing and spinning machinery became available in the 1880s and the production of worsted cloth overtook woolen, cassimere patterns were appropriated for worsted fabrics, with the result that cassimere came to be defined as a worsted fabric. At the same time, woolen mills continued to weave cassimere, calling it novelty women’s wear. With decades of inventiveness and the resulting trove of cassimere weave structures, contemporary designers still use them, and cassimere continues to be woven. Only the name has been lost!

Historical examples of wool garments made of cassimere are scarce. Instead, a good place to find cassimere is to look at wool quilts, and braided and hooked rugs. The common, lightweight woolen fabric was a perfect source of material to recycle into rug making and quilt tops. Particularly during the Depression many thrifty housewives cut up and repurposed old clothes.

Quilt made from woolen mill samples, Collection of Vermont Historical Society

For new examples of cassimere, check Civil War reenactor web sites offering reproduction fabric for sale. Or, contact your local fibershed, who may be bringing it back full circle to local wools, local mills.¹⁷

¹⁷ Examples: www.westernmassfibershed.com, www.fibershed.com.

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