

# Woven Coverlets Tell Story of Past

Nancy Ostman, February 22, 2014



*Photo caption:* This 1832 woven coverlet was made by Archibald Davidson, a Scottish weaver who came to Ithaca in the late 1820s.

Woven coverlets made in the U.S.-pre-Civil War era were used as bed coverings. They were made of wool and cotton (or occasionally wool and linen) on floor looms by hand. Coverlets were woven of two or more colors, made to be reversible with a light and dark color pattern showing as a negative on the back side.

The earliest era of coverlet making, judging from surviving pre-Revolutionary War period to 1820 examples, was a household craft practiced by women or itinerant weavers who used narrow looms that produced simple geometric designs. The boom in coverlet making was fueled by Joseph Marie Jacquard's 1801 invention of a computer-like attachment to looms which picked up each warp (lengthwise) thread individually. This meant that elaborate "fancy" patterns could be woven.

To make fancy coverlets, an expensive loom attachment was required. Thus, most coverlet making between 1820 and 1860 was generally practiced by men, who wove for clients in solitary to 6-person "factories" or workshops. Many weavers were born and trained in Europe. These Scotch, Irish, English, Dutch, and Germans came to the U.S. to practice their trade, as they were pushed out of business in Europe, where the industrial revolution occurred earlier than in the U.S.

Once in the U.S., immigrant weavers often moved beyond coastal cities, where industrialization already had begun, to rural towns of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Later, as the market became saturated in a particular area, weavers continued to move westerly, seeking new clients, primarily in Ohio, Indiana and Illinois.

The weaver who used a Jacquard-style attachment theoretically had no limitations on design. However, a long series of specially punched cards was needed, one for every width-wise

thread. Holes in each card dictated whether or not each lengthwise thread should be picked up. As a result, most fancy weavers worked with a few central Victorian-style patterns and border patterns. Repeated patterns of flowers such as roses or lilies were frequently used, but grapes and vines, medallions, animals and birds, architecture, historical figures, Biblical and Masonic symbols, modes of transportation, and patriotic slogans also were popular. In New York formal and stately designs done in blue and white or red and white were typical. In Pennsylvania, German sensibilities allowed more freedom in designs and more colors, including green, orange, yellow, brown, and black.

Borders were sometimes personalized as to the coverlet maker, the client, date, and place. Some weavers used a corner block or border to “sign” their work. For example, a particular lion, eagle, or flower served as an advertising logo or trademark. The ability to trace the history of a coverlet makes them especially interesting artifacts as family heirlooms. Collectors and historians prize them as information about material and textile culture of particular eras.

Tompkins County was a hub of coverlet making in the peak coverlet period. Archibald Davidson had his factory near Cascadilla Creek in Collegetown where he advertised making coverlets, carpets, and other household linens. Davidson employed at least six people, made many quality coverlets, and wove his name and the “Ithaca Carpet Factory” onto the border.

Jacob Impson started weaving in Ludlowville in Tompkins County, but moved to Cortland where he worked for nearly 30 years, weaving signed and dated coverlets with Cortland or Cortlandville woven into the border.

Jacob Primrose, at the age of 70, wove coverlets in Dryden. Jonathan Conger with members of his family and several apprentices wove in Groton, as did William Bradley,

independently. George Dederich wove in Lansing, and with Jonathan Conger patented improvements to the Jacquard loom in 1827 and 1831. They then sold their patent as franchises, to be used by exclusive dealers in regions of Pennsylvania. Many coverlet makers remain unidentified, especially those who did not sign their work.

Coverlet making came to a fairly abrupt halt with the onset of the Civil War in 1861. Some coverlet makers went off to fight. Others were hampered by the lack of good southern cotton. Wool and linen were diverted to military uniforms, blankets, and other necessities. After the war, styles changed and the U.S. industrial revolution led to economical factory woven blankets that replaced more expensive hand woven coverlets. Thus, the tradition of commissioning a unique coverlet for special occasions, such as for dowries, weddings, and anniversaries, with attendant middle- to upper-class overtones, eventually died out.

*Nancy Ostman is the former Natural Areas Program Director of the Cornell Plantations, and a member of the Tompkins County Quilters Guild.*

Readers can view Jacquard-style looms in action on YouTube.

Bonnie Hays from the Alling Coverlet Museum in Palmyra, NY will be at The History Center on Saturday March 8, from 2:00 to 4:00 PM. She will offer a special presentation on the symbolism used in woven coverlets and their fascinating history from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.