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The Threads that Bind Us: Researching Nineteenth Century Weaving Drafts from the Dahlonega Library Archives

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Weaving was a prevalent craft during the eighteenth and nineteenth century in Southern Appalachia. Weaving drafts were traditional handwritten sequences of the threading order on the loom used to create specific patterns.¹ People used these drafts to weave patterned bedspreads called coverlets. Antique drafts were often written on long strips of paper using hash marks or numbers to indicate where threads would be placed on a loom for weaving. About three years ago, a collection of handwritten weaving drafts was found at the Lumpkin County Library. Initially, these drafts were only recognized as slips of scrap paper with dash markings. Research into these drafts required multiple participants of the Appalachia community, including local weavers, historians, and University of North Georgia students.

Sallie Sorohan, a local historian who received training in the 1990s for archives at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, worked eight years for the Lumpkin County Library before retiring. While working for the library, Sorohan came across slips of paper with handwritten dashes on them. Sorohan had found old weaving drafts from the Lorenzo Dow Davis Collection, donated to the Lumpkin County Library by Douglas and Barbara Abee Saxton.² The Saxton's had obtained the drafts from Minnie Belle Patton who purchased them at a yard sale in Lumpkin County.³ The drafts were originally donated to the local Historical Society, but not having a proper way to preserve them, the Society gave them to the library.

The hand-drawn weaving patterns had belonged to Susan Davis, wife of Lorenzo Dow Davis, dating from 1832 to 1893.⁴ The Davis' were original settlers of Lumpkin County, mill owners, and gold mine investors.⁵ Lorenzo and Susan Davis were both educated and had nine children.⁶ Upon discovering these drafts, Sorohan contacted Anne Amerson, a local historian and writer in Lumpkin County.

Next, Amerson contacted Tommye Scanlin, a local weaver and tapestry artist, believing that she may have some insight about the drafts. Tommye Scanlin, weaving professor and Department Head of Fine Arts emeritus from the University of North Georgia, started weaving in 1969. Scanlin received her MFA in weaving at East Tennessee State University, and first taught a high school class on frame-loom weaving. She began the weaving program at North Georgia in 1972. After seeing the drafts, Scanlin called Sorohan to confirm that they were old handwritten weaving drafts.

Scanlin then contacted Jo-Marie Karst, the current weaving professor at the university. Karst taught her first weaving class at North Georgia College and State University (now UNG) in the Fall of 2008 and became the primary weaving professor in the Fall of 2009. After her examination of the drafts, Karst invited a group of weaving students to visit the library and take a look at them. Then from Scanlin's recommendation, Karst contacted Barbara Miller, former instructor at the John C. Campbell Folk School, and Deb Schillo, a librarian and archivist at the Southern Highlands Craft Guild headquarters. The guild was chartered in 1930 and is one of the

1. Barbara Miller and Deb Schillo, *Brown Book of Weaving Drafts* (Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing, Ltd, 2013), 6.

2. "Inventory of the Lorenzo Dow Davis Collection," *Chestatee Regional Library System*, 2009, http://www.chestateelibrary.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=254&Itemid=1

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

strongest craft organizations in the country.⁷ Today, the guild represents almost 1000 craftspeople in 293 counties of 9 southeastern states.⁸

Karst stated, “The drafts needed to be translated by an expert in deciphering historic weaving patterns.” Karst knew that Miller and Schillo were co-authors of a recently released book entitled *Frances L. Goodrich’s Brown Book of Weaving Drafts*, in which many 1800s diagrams found in the Guild’s archives were published after being translated with computer software by Barbara Miller. Karst and Scanlin realized that Miller and Schillo were the experts they needed to “put loose ends together” on this project. Karst therefore invited both Miller and Schillo to visit the university in September of 2014 to present a lecture regarding their book as well as the history of the Southern Highland Craft Guild. The lecture was open to the local community as well as faculty, staff, and students, in the Dahlonega Library and Technology Center.

In addition to the lecture, Miller and Schillo held a workshop in the UNG weaving studio with a group of Karst’s present and former students, local weavers, and members of the Chattahoochee Handweavers Guild of Dunwoody, Georgia. The workshop discussed the drafts found in the Lumpkin County Library. Karst made copies of the original drafts as well as the translated modern drafts to create handouts for her students. Miller and Schillo showed the students how to read the original handwritten drafts as well as the translated modern drafts.

Karst began preparing her students to weave samples from the drafts found in the library. Students were allowed to weave the pattern of their choice by selecting one draft. They learned that in order to read a weaving draft, one must understand the warp and weft threads. The warp consists of a set of lengthwise threads that are held by the frame of the loom. The tabby, or plain weave, in which the weft, the thread thrown left to right, floats over two or more warp ends to create the design or pattern.⁹ Many of the weaving samples were woven in this weave structure called overshot. Students chose the color for their weft yarn: two-ply Harrisville Shetland wool. All students generated their own calculations in preparation to weave their samples. The samples were woven with 16/2 mercerized cotton for the warp and tabby. Each student wove a traditional piece using the materials provided and were then allowed to create a modern piece with the materials of their choice.

The completed works were exhibited in Hansford Hall Gallery from October to December of 2014. The students that participated in the exhibition were Bridget Williams, Donya Kobari, Leah Westberry, Megan Whitey, Stacey Baehr, Christina Packard, and Laura Tuttle. The traditional patterns woven were Huckey Back, Kings Diamond, Diaper, World’s Wonder, Wheel of Fortune, Snake Trail, and Unnamed World’s Wonder. These woven patterns listed correspond respectively with the listed artists. Students learned traditional methods of planning for weaving and added that to their previous knowledge to take the designs into a modern direction. The exhibition was able to combine the efforts of past and present weavers, making threads that bind together the legacy of weavers for more than a century.

7. “What is the Southern Highland Craft Guild,” *Southern Highland Craft Guild*, 2015, <http://www.southernhighlandguild.org/pages/folk-art-center/general-info.php>.

8. Ibid.

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