

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

The Warp and the Weft:
Woven coverlets and threads that bind generations

The Ripon Historical Society has more than 30 full-size quilts in its collection, as well as several doll quilts and quilt squares.

Ten quilts are listed on the National Quilt Index, a digital repository of quilt images and information about quilts. Many in the collection date prior to 1916 and the oldest confirmed quilt date is 1840. However, there are a few in the society’s “quilt” collection that are coverlets and not quilts, one of which may be more than 200 years old.

Coverlets differ from quilts in the way that they are made. A quilt is generally made from manufactured fabric that is then cut and assembled in pieces, often in a geometric pattern. The pieces are then sewn to a backing with a filler material in between.

A coverlet is made from scratch. A weaver works on a loom to construct the textile itself, one row at a time, and the pattern is created during the process of passing threads perpendicular to each other, over and under one another, in a particular order.

Two main types of woven coverlets exist: “Geometric” and “figured and fancy.” The pattern motifs in geometric types are based on circles and squares. Geometric coverlets were generally produced by women for their own use at home on narrow looms. Bed covers such as these were often given as wedding gifts. It also was common practice for young women to weave coverlets in preparation for marriage.

The society has one geometric woven coverlet in its collection. Its records indicate that Louisa La Belle Lawson (1874-1973) donated a coverlet to the society belonging to her grandmother, Keziah Cromwell Lawson (1800-1892). Keziah and Stephen Lawson (1796-1887), Belle’s grandfather, lived in Charlton, N.Y. most of their lives as farmers. Sometime between 1860 and 1870, they relocated to Rosendale, where many of their children already were living.

Their son, Charles Lawson (1819-1908), was Belle’s father, and he was married to Melissa Adams, Belle’s mother. In 1918, several years after her father’s death, Belle and her mother, moved to 515 Ransom St. in Ripon, now known as the Pedrick-Lawson House, owned and managed by the Ripon Historical Society.

The geometric pattern in this coverlet was created using indigo dyed weft, likely of wool, and natural warp, likely of cotton. The geometric pattern is a repeated “chariot wheel” motif. The earliest woven coverlets were done using a type of overshot weave. The name “overshot” comes from the way horizontal weft yarns jump over several vertical warp yarns at once. This coverlet, like all coverlets not woven on a broad loom, has a center seam.

The coverlet was woven as one



JOHN AND ABIGAIL Hockenbery are the original owners of two “figured and fancy” coverlets that now are in the possession of the Ripon Historical Society.

submitted photo

continuous 36-inch-wide length, then cut in half. The two halves then were sewn together, making the whole coverlet 72-inches wide. The National Museum of American History has a similar coverlet with the “chariot wheel” motif. While the date of the Lawson coverlet has not been confirmed, the National Museum of American History dates its quilt as no earlier than 1790, but no later than 1825 because at that point the introduction of the Jacquard patterning mechanism to create figured and fancy coverlets all but replaced traditional overshot patterning in many regions of the United States.

Interestingly, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation also has a coverlet with a nearly identical chariot wheel pattern that dates to 1793. One could speculate that Keziah herself, adhering to customs of the time, wove the coverlet in preparation for her marriage, at the age of 18.

This would date the coverlet to 1818. Thus, the coverlet could be more than 200 years old. When Keziah moved west, she presumably took the coverlet with her and, after her death, it ultimately came into the possession of her granddaughter, Belle Lawson.

The second type of coverlet, known as “figured and fancy,” was woven with specialized programmable looms. Some looms were equipped with a Jacquard attachment that used punch cards to control the patterns in the weave. Each cotton warp thread was attached to a needle that would either go through a hole, raising the corresponding warp thread, or be blocked by the card, causing the warp thread to stay down. This method allowed for the efficient creation of elaborate curvilinear patterns.

By the 1820s, the Jacquard machine and others like it came to the United States and were adopted by professional weavers.

The loom and patterning device used to weave such coverlets would

have been cost and space prohibitive for anyone but the professional coverlet weaver.

Coverlet making between 1820 and 1860 was generally practiced by men, who wove for clients in workshops. Many weavers were born and trained in Europe and came to the United States to practice their trade.

Once in America, immigrant weavers often moved beyond coastal cities, where industrialization already had begun, to rural towns in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The coverlets from New York and New Jersey are among the earliest figured and fancy coverlets.

New York and New Jersey coverlets are primarily blue and white, double cloth, featuring complex floral motifs, architectural elements, birds and stars. Red and white double cloth also was common. One prevalent design was the double roses motif.

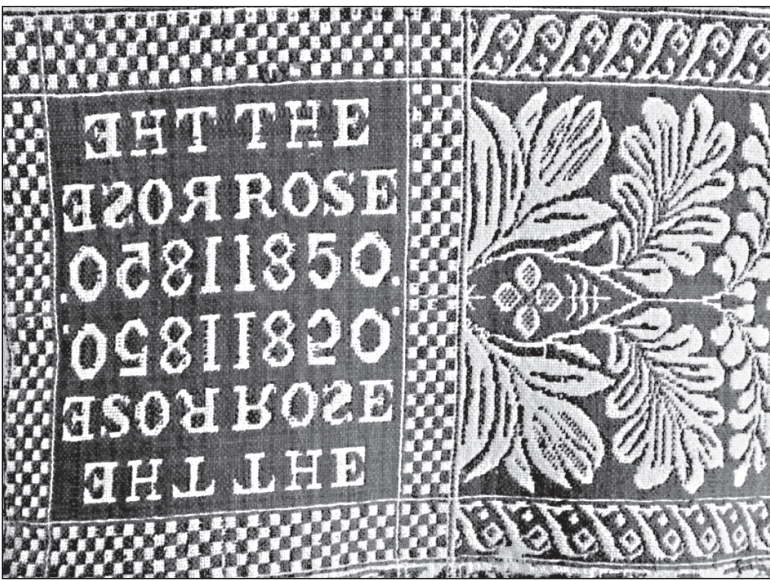
Many weavers of this period followed the popular taste of the time. Clarita Anderson, author of “American Coverlets and Their Weavers,” has done extensive research on 19th-century coverlets and the weavers themselves.

In her book, she affirms that “figured and fancy” coverlets were the preferred style of middle-class Americans throughout much of the 19th century.

These coverlets were typically commissioned and purchased as part of a dowry or as a gift to commemorate a special occasion.

Many weavers added unique inscriptions, such as their name, location, the year it was made and the name of the person it was made for. Because the coverlets were meant to be reversible, inscriptions were woven in backwards and forwards, to enable the observer to read it on both sides of the textile.

The society has two “figured and fancy” coverlets in its collection. Both belonged to Abigail Phillips Hockenbery (1806-1888). Abigail was either born in Pennsylvania or New Jersey. She married John Hockenbery in 1837 when he was living in Hunterdon, N.J. Census data indicates that John was employed in agriculture in New Jersey in the 1840s. In the 1850s, the family was living in Philadelphia,



THE RIPON HISTORICAL Society has two “figured and fancy” coverlets that belonged to Abigail Phillips Hockenbery in its collection.

submitted photos

specifically the Kensington area.

Traditionally, Kensington was known as the original hub of working-class Philadelphia, with both native and immigrant workers living close to their work sites or working at home. The textile trades came to dominate Kensington by the mid-19th century.

In 1852, a Philadelphia directory of various trades and manufacturers indicates that John was a trader, dealing in flour and feed. By 1862, perhaps due to the lure of inexpensive land, the family, along with its adult children, had relocated west to Waushara County, Wisconsin.

Of the two “figured and fancy” coverlets, one is woven from natural cotton warp and red wool weft, with double roses and leaf motifs. Each corner has a woven inscription “THE ROSE 1850” woven in backwards and forwards, indicating either the date the quilt was made or, perhaps, commemorating a special occasion.

Evidence suggests that Abigail Hockenbery, or a member of her family, purchased the quilt from a New York weaver. The Henry Ford Museum has an identical quilt in its collection.

According to its records, the “Rose” coverlet was woven by an unknown weaver in New York.

The second “figured and fancy” coverlet is woven from natural cotton warp and indigo wool weft, with a similar double roses motif. This coverlet also features eight-pointed stars and birds. The motifs in this coverlet also are consistent with New York and New Jersey coverlets of the period and it too was likely purchased by Abigail Hockenbery or a member of her family from a professional weaver.

The Hockenberys would have had ready access to purveyors of this type of coverlet, given their place of residence. These highly decorative bed coverings would accompany Abigail to Wisconsin, where she would eventually hand them down to her daughter-in-law, Margaret Ann Hammond Hockenbery.

Coverlets can tell a lot about the

times and places, and the people who made them.

Both the Hockenbery and Lawson families were farmers who originated in the Northeast and eventually settled in the Midwest. Yet, the two types of coverlets reflect varied influences of traditions, the impact of industrialization and the sway of popular tastes on the lives of those that owned them. Keziah and Abigail were not just looking to the past as they headed west with woven keepsakes from their old lives, they were looking to the future. For them, the coverlets represented a connection to family, identity and history.

Coverlet making came to a halt with the onset of the Civil War. Wool and linen were diverted to military uniforms, blankets and other necessities. After the war, America’s industrial revolution led to economical factory woven blankets that replaced more expensive hand-woven coverlets.

The tradition of commissioning a coverlet for special occasions, such as weddings, and anniversaries, eventually died out.

The society’s quilt and coverlet collection is historically significant. It needs the public’s help to continue to care for and preserve this collection. By sponsoring a quilt for \$40, a person could fund the purchase of an archival acid-free quilt box to facilitate proper storage for the preservation of one quilt.

“Please help us to continue our mission to preserve this important part of Ripon’s history,” the Ripon Historical Society said.

To donate to the Quilt Sponsorship Fundraiser, send a check to Ripon Historical Society, 508 Watson St., Ripon, WI, 54971 or visit www.riponhistory.org/quilt-sponsorship/.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information follow us at Facebook/riponhistory or www.riponhistory.org