

## The Making of a Kentucky Counterpane

Laurel Horton (MESDA Summer Institute, 2012)

*“Not only do women experience life differently from the way men do, they also shape it differently. The record suggests that women care about some things which men do not value highly.”*

*Anne Firor Scott<sup>1</sup>*

In May 2012, a volunteer at the Sunnyside Ministry, in Winston-Salem, was sorting through donated clothing and blankets, when she noticed an old white bedspread with hand stitching. The staff contacted MESDA, and this nineteenth-century counterpane is now in a museum collection instead of a homeless shelter or a landfill (figure 1). Typed notes accompanying the bedcover identify the maker as Ann Hutchison of Woodford County, Kentucky, and include a family story that “she raised a little patch of cotton, spun the yarn and wove and embroidered the counterpane entirely through her own efforts.” Museum curators periodically encounter such claims from textile donors, and they tend to dismiss them as nostalgic notions produced by the Colonial Revival in twentieth-century America.<sup>2</sup> The claim is clearly inappropriate for patchwork quilts with printed fabrics or for machine-woven bedspreads; but, for these embellished white counterpanes, there may be a thread of truth in these yarns.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1 Ann Hutchison counterpane (MESDA # 5678)

Ann Hutchison’s candlewick counterpane is an example of the early white bedcovers that once held great significance for the women who made them. They embody the efforts of American women toward economic independence and echo the aspirations and values of women of the new republic.<sup>4</sup> The meaning has become lost, forgotten, or distorted over time, and since 2006 I have researched these textiles and their makers, in an attempt to restore them to their proper place as documents of American experience.<sup>5</sup>

The word *counterpane* can refer generically to any decorative bedcover, but this paper uses the more specific meaning of a decorative bedcover, often white, embellished with a raised design, either “worked” (embroidered) or woven. The term, variously spelled (e.g., counterpain, countypin) is frequently encountered in period sources, both British and American.<sup>6</sup> The word *candlewick* describes embroidery using a comparatively heavy yarn to form loops and tufts, which raise the design to greater prominence. Although the term may have been applied to embroidery earlier, it was widely used by the early twentieth-century.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps a more functional

description would be *raised embroidery*, further delineated as looped or tufted.<sup>8</sup> The earliest known dated example of tufted raised embroidery is the Polly Armistead counterpane, dated 1793, in the MESDA collection.<sup>9</sup>

### The Textile Context

American colonists, particularly in the southern colonies, imported most of their textiles from Europe.<sup>10</sup> The eighteenth century saw the development of a consumer culture, as the use of textiles softened the beds, chairs, and windows in the homes of ordinary people.<sup>11</sup> Among the imported consumer textiles popular in America were white figured counterpanes woven on handlooms in Bolton, Lancashire.<sup>12</sup> In 1769, John Higgin, a Savannah merchant, published an advertisement offering goods imported from Liverpool, including “cotton counterpanes.”<sup>13</sup> But in the years leading up to the American Revolution, colonists expanded domestic textile production in an effort to reduce their dependence on British imports.<sup>14</sup> In 1774 Gardiner Fleming, a master weaver in Norfolk, Virginia, advertised his intention to produce similar wares: “Journeymen Weavers well recommended, will meet with good Encouragement by applying to the Subscriber. Two are particularly wanted to work on one Loom Counterpanes 10 quarters broad.”<sup>15</sup>

Although trade with Britain resumed after the war, efforts to increase domestic manufactures continued into the nineteenth century. Women in backcountry settlements continued to spin and weave the fabric for most of their families’ clothing.<sup>16</sup> Even in the towns with access to river trade, women’s textile skills were encouraged and sometimes rewarded. . . An 1805 newspaper item offered as a “Specimen of Female Industry . . . highly worthy of imitation” the report of a spinning duel in which “Mrs. Haufe and Miss Betsey Chinoweth, both of

Jefferson County, Kentucky, spun on a wager in one day, 65 cutts of yarn, equal to 6 days work.” Mrs. Haufe won the bet by a margin of five cutts.<sup>17</sup>

The making of white counterpanes remained a hallmark of American womanhood in the New Republic well into the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> In 1818, the Agricultural Society of Maryland awarded a prize of two dollars to a Mrs. Baldwin for a “Cotton Counterpane of Household Manufacture.”<sup>19</sup> Of the fifteen white counterpanes currently in the collection of the Kentucky Historical Society, the names of ten of the makers are known. The donors of nine of these reported some variation of a home-production narrative: the flax and/or cotton were grown on the family farm, the maker wove the linen, and/or the maker spun the cotton. All of these textiles were made between 1800 and about 1830.<sup>20</sup>

Imported and handsewn counterpanes co-existed during this period. The 1820 estate inventory of Thomas H. Berryman, of Fayette County, Kentucky, included “two white figured [counterpins] @ 10.00,” and “one worked counterpane @ 5.00.”<sup>21</sup> Bolton’s influence in central Kentucky was not limited to store-bought bedcovers. In 1817, John Sutcliffe, “from Bolton, England,” announced his availability for making “Weavers’ reeds, in Brass, Steel and Cane,” claiming “25 years experience in the above business.”<sup>22</sup>

#### Ann Hutchison’s Counterpane

Ann Hutchison was born 1811 in Woodford County, Kentucky (figure 2). She was the fourth of seven children of Andrew James and Mary McPheeters Hutchison, who were born in Virginia and married in Woodford County in 1795.<sup>23</sup> Most of the documented counterpanes of this era were made by women in their teens, and Ann probably made her counterpane between

1825 and 1830, not in preparation for marriage *per se*, but as a marker of the feminine attributes associated with “republican womanhood,” such as industry, diligence, virtue, and domesticity.

Ann was 28 when she married Henry Platt McKee in 1837.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 2. Woodford County, Kentucky

Ann would have learned the womanly art of embroidery from her mother, from another relative, or at one of the small female academies established in central Kentucky during the early nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Ann Hutchison did not create her counterpane in a vacuum. She would have been aware of earlier white bedcovers in her neighborhood and, likely, in her own home. The reverence accorded these textiles by descendants—and the very fact of their survival—suggests that these nominal bedcovers were not put to everyday use. A woman likely displayed her counterpane on a bed to show to female guests or visitors, removing it when they had departed, much as quiltmakers do today. These counterpanes embodied the ideals of American womanhood, cultural values widely shared—and largely unspoken—among women of this era. The women’s fathers and husbands would have been aware of their wives’ handiwork, and probably supported their patriotic efforts in home production. But unlike the practical fabrics made into clothing for the family, the counterpane would have seemed a useless nicety, a decorative item in the domestic landscape. Needlework was one of the predictable occupations of women, so quiet, ordinary, and nonthreatening. Most men would have been unaware of the deeper personal meanings embodied by the making of these counterpanes.

When Ann decided to embroider a counterpane of her own, she needed a large sheet of fabric and a quantity of yarn. Ann's father was a farmer, and flax was a major crop in Woodford County.<sup>26</sup> As a young woman growing up in this particular location, during an era when domestic manufacture was encouraged, Ann would certainly have had the skills to spin flax and weave linen. However, fiber analysis indicates that Ann did indeed make her counterpane from cotton.<sup>27</sup>

How plausible is her granddaughter's claim that Ann "raised a little patch of cotton, spun the yarn and wove and embroidered the counterpane entirely through her own efforts"? She could certainly have spun the soft cotton yarn she used for the embroidery..<sup>28</sup> However, the short fibers of cotton make it difficult to spin by hand into a yarn strong enough to stretch onto a loom to form the long warp threads. Some weavers used linen yarn for the warp and cotton for the crosswise weft yarns, creating a mixed fabric known as "fustian."<sup>29</sup> Though difficult, however, hand-spinning a strong cotton yarn was not impossible for an experienced and committed spinner. Although Woodford County farmers reported no commercially grown cotton in 1840, the county listed one "cotton manufactory," a spinning mill of 250 spindles operated by eight employees<sup>30</sup> Backcountry families were raising cotton for their own use by the early 1800s.<sup>31</sup> Local families would have taken their own cotton to the small local cotton mill to be spun, just as they carried their corn to the local grist mill to be ground. Whether Ann spun the cotton yarn herself or took it to the mill, she certainly would have had the skills to weave the fabric for her counterpane. Once the yarn is spun, the process of warping the loom and weaving is essentially the same for cotton and linen. She bleached the woven fabric and sewed three lengths together. The two lengthwise seams form a small ridge on the back but are barely visible from the front.

With her prepared fabric ground, hand-spun cotton embroidery yarn, and needle in hand, how did Ann begin? She was already familiar with a variety of decorative stitches, and she had seen the counterpanes made by other women. At this moment—before needle pierces fabric, before the loose, pliant coils of yarn are formed into close, firm knops—anything seems possible.<sup>32</sup> Whatever notions, motivations, or imaginings occurred to the maker during the planning and preparation stages are suspended, and the maker contemplates the *tabula rasa* of her own future.

Perhaps this is the key to understanding why women made these white counterpanes. Women of this era had few options for exploring their expressive impulses without risking disapproval. Within the narrowing feminine sphere, needlework was not only acceptable, but admirable. Within the boundaries of a fabric rectangle, a woman could choose her own mode of expression. Among the hundreds, perhaps thousands of surviving white counterpanes, no two are exactly alike. Is the astonishing variety embodied in these textiles merely the result of idle doodling or evidence of individual journeys into unknown selves? Perhaps both, and everything in between.

When Ann was ready to put needle to fabric, where did she start? Did she plan her design first? Draw it out with a pencil? No pencil marks remain visible (as they do on some other counterpanes). Parts of the design seem crowded; some motifs collide or link up in unpredictable ways. If Ann Hutchison started with a plan, it was a loose one and she didn't seem to mind changing it as she went along.

Perhaps she started in the middle. Counterpanes often feature a large central element surrounded by smaller motifs, framed by one or more borders. The central motif is often a

botanical subject emanating from some sort of basket or urn. In the approximate center of her counterpane, Ann placed a floral motif, a pinwheel of eight angular petals (figure 3).



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Then, she gave it a stem, an act that introduced an orientation, identifying the top and bottom (or head and foot) of the design. To the stem she added branches, with leaves, tendrils, peapods, and bunches of grapes (figure 4). There's no attempt to be botanically correct. This stem comes to rest in a motif that resembles a polka-dot bowtie. Not a basket, not an urn, but a double bowknot, minus the trailing ribbon ends one might expect.

The center is established, and she knows which way is up. Now what? More flowers. She placed six secondary floral motifs in an arc around the top of the center. One looks like a five-petaled starfish with webbed arms (figure 5). Compared with other motifs, this one is small, compact, static. Perhaps she worked this one first and then decided to move toward something more open and flowing. The other five motifs seem to explore the mutations of a tulip, from a graceful, realistic outline with separate petals, through three-pronged variations of increasing abstraction, culminating in form resembling a jester's cap. After creating this floating garland over the centerpiece, she linked them together with stems, except for one motif which remains



unattached to the others. Maybe she embellished these vines as she lined them out, or maybe she left the details until later (figure 6).



Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Now for the border. Most of these counterpanes are framed by graceful, undulating vines. Ann's vine is a bit more complicated and somewhat irregular, producing an alternation of two loops in and two loops out (figure 7). There's no indication that she drew this out beforehand, as she had to squeeze and stretch the loops to round the four corners. With the border situated, she added branches and motifs of whatever size was needed to fit the space between the vine and the floating elements in the center (figure 8). The profusion and complexity of the motifs, the variation in size and distribution all suggest that, rather than becoming bored or impatient with work on the counterpane, she did not wish it to end.

At some point, she decided she was finished. She signed her work with her initials and added a fringe, probably one of her own making. Finally, Ann would have stepped back from the finished counterpane, seeing it as a separate entity, but one that existed because of her efforts. It survives as the physical manifestation of the work of her hands, and a mirror of her inner life (figure 9).



Figure 9

Ann Hutchison was one of an untold number—probably thousands—of women who made embellished white counterpanes and quilts during the early-nineteenth century. Ann Hutchison’s counterpane is an individual creation, but it is also part of a tradition practiced by American women. With further study of other Kentucky counterpanes of the period, we can begin to develop a clearer understanding of local and regional variations within this important larger textile tradition.

Henry Platt McKee died in 1882, at the age of 69. In 1900, Ann Hutchison McKee and her unmarried daughter, Malvina, were living with the family of Ann’s youngest daughter, Ada McKee Harrison, in Connorsville, Indiana. Ann died the following year. Her counterpane eventually went to her granddaughter Ethel Lynne McKee, who was fourteen years old when her grandmother died. Ethel married twice, bore three children, and, at some point, recognized the fragility of an oral narrative. She recorded the story and attached it to the counterpane. She died in 1978, in Winston-Salem. Thirty-four years later, the counterpane has resurfaced, and it survives with its provenance intact. And, as it turns out, there are threads of truth in that old family yarn.

#### Acknowledgements

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Firor Scott, "Introduction," *"A Share of Honor": Virginia Women, 1600-1945*. (Richmond: Virginia Women's Cultural History Project, 1984), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Gunn, *Perfecting the Past: Colonial Revival Quilts*, in *American Quilts in the Modern Age, 1870—1940*, ed. Marin F. Hanson and Patricia Cox Crews (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 229-33.

<sup>3</sup> MESDA collection, acc. 5678; Susan Roediger, telephone conversation, 16 July 2012; Johanna Brown, oral communication with author, 17 July 2012; Tyler Cox, "High Style": Kentucky Counterpane finds a new home at MESDA," *Old Salem Museums & Gardens Biennial Magazine for Friends and Supporters* (Spring 2013), 22-23. Brown's initial attitude toward these narratives is consistent with that of the majority of curators encountered by the author in visits to about a dozen textile collections between 2006 and 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980);

<sup>5</sup> Laurel Horton, "Early American White Bedcovers: The Invention of Necessity," podcast of symposium paper, "Quilted and Corded Needlework: International Perspectives," April 2, 2011.  
<http://www.quiltstudy.org/connections/podcasts1.html>;

<sup>6</sup> Typical sources include probate records, newspaper advertisements, and judicial court cases.

<sup>7</sup> Gail Bakkom, email communication with author, 26 July 2012. Bakkom is creating a database of candlewick bedcovers.

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Staples, oral communication with author, 5 July 2012.

<sup>9</sup> MESDA collection, acc. 3173.

<sup>10</sup> Rolla Tryon, *Household Manufactures in the United States, 1640-1860*. (New York: Augustus Kelley, 1966 [1917]), 70-71.

<sup>11</sup> T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Erin Beeston and Laurel Horton, "Bolton's Cotton Counterpanes: Hand-Weaving in the Industrial Age," forthcoming in *Quilt Studies* 14, ed. Hazel Mills (York: British Quilt Study Group, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> *Georgia Gazette* (January 11, 1769). Early American Newspapers database, accessed 11 February 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Tryon, 75-104.

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<sup>15</sup> *Norfolk Intelligencer*, 14 July 1774; MESDA Subject Database.

<sup>16</sup> Tryon, 153-58.

<sup>17</sup> *The Western Spy*, Cincinnati, 14 August 1805. MESDA Subject Database. A *cut* is defined as “120 rounds of the legal reel, and 91 inches long.” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>18</sup> Although American women have continued to make white bedcovers into the early twenty-first century, the majority of the white counterpanes date from the first three decades of the nineteenth century, based on the author’s research in public and private collections and published sources.

<sup>19</sup> *The Maryland Republican & Political & Agricultural Museum*, Annapolis, Maryland, 13 June 1818. MESDA Subject Database.

<sup>20</sup> Kentucky Historical Society, textiles and object records.

<sup>21</sup> Fayette County, Kentucky, *Wills, Vol. E, 1819-1822*, p. 206, June 1820. MESDA Subject Database.

<sup>22</sup> *Kentucky Gazette*, Lexington, Kentucky, 16 May 1817. MESDA Subject Database. Reeds are interchangeable, comb-like components installed on a loom which determine the number of warp threads per inch.

<sup>23</sup> MESDA acc. 5678 object file. Curator Johanna Brown compiled genealogical data for the maker’s family.

<sup>24</sup> This statement is based on the author’s research on the makers of southern counterpanes.

<sup>25</sup> Of 49 “needleworkers” identified in Kentucky between 1800 and 1860, 29 were associated with twenty-three named academies. Four academies and eight independent instructors were located in Lexington. MESDA Craftsman Database, printout provided by Kim Wilson May, 26 June 2012.

<sup>26</sup> In 1830 Andrew Hutchison’s family included four sons and three daughters, aged 10 to 29 years, and three slaves, a woman in her twenties and two female children. U.S. Census, 1930. In 1840 Woodford County farmers produced 1,061 tons of hemp and flax (a production figure exceeded only by Fayette, Scott, and Mason counties). The 1840 Agricultural Census Compendium. The local schedules list the production of individual farms, and these data would provide more detail of the family and their resources.

<sup>27</sup> Fiber analysis performed by Kimberly S. Ivey, July 2, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Among the home-production narratives accompanying white counterpanes, the notes for Elizabeth Grahams’s embroidered counterpane (DAR Museum 54.117) specifically state that she spun the yarn for the *embroidery* from cotton grown on the family plantation in York County, South Carolina. Access to locally grown cotton may account for the predominance of embroidered counterpanes in southern states; white whole-cloth quilts (including stuffed and corded work) are more frequently found in the north. “Of the dozen embroidered bedspreads which have family histories in the DAR collection, they are predominantly from Virginia, South Carolina, and Kentucky. None of them is from the North, nor is any of metropolitan origin. Exclusively they seem to be southern and rural.” Jean Taylor Federico, “White Work Classification System,” in *Uncoverings 1980*, ed. Sally Garoutte (Mill Valley CA: American Quilt Study Group, 1980), 69.

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<sup>29</sup> A counterpane woven by Elizabeth O'Neal in 1804 in Nelson County, Kentucky has a linen warp and cotton weft. Collection of author.

<sup>30</sup> Tryon, *Household Manufactures*, 159.

<sup>31</sup> In 1804 Elizabeth O'Neal reportedly grew the cotton for the weft of her counterpane in Nelson County, Kentucky.

<sup>32</sup> Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (New York: Berg, 2000), 80.