

## **CLIR HIDDEN COLLECTIONS GRANT**

### **Pennsylvania German Textile Cataloging**

**Submitted by Candace Perry**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2011, the Goschenhoppen Historians, the Mennonite Heritage Center, and The Schwenkfelder Library & Heritage Center, all located in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, were the fortunate recipients of a CLIR Hidden Collections grant to catalog their very significant, but relatively unknown, collections of Pennsylvania German textiles. This project was not only an innovative stride forward for these small institutions, but it marked the first online accessibility of Pennsylvania German textiles as a cohesive, well documented entity.

The three organizations share common geography as well as the “common thread” of similar textile-making and use traditions based in their mutual Pennsylvania German heritage, so a collaborative project that would focus on both of the differences and similarities of each collection was an obvious choice. The collections provide insight into how an ethnically homogeneous community’s material culture developed into a distinctive culture and adapted over time as a result of technology, new influences, religious beliefs and availability of commercial goods.

The chief objectives of the project were 1) to catalog and photograph the textile collections of each institution and 2) provide access online through each institution’s PastPerfect database. Secondary goals included a standardization of terms that would be used for the various textile forms and the inclusion of a lexicon of equivalent terms in the Pennsylvania German dialect. With the grant funding, the institutions were able to hire a full time cataloger, Caitlin Harvey, who worked with a small group of interns and volunteers to implement the project.

## **Background on the Three Organizations**

### **Goschenhoppen Historians, Inc.**

The Goschenhoppen Historians (GH) are nationally recognized for their expertise in the preservation and dissemination of the history of Pennsylvania German folk culture, specifically in the region known historically as the Goschenhoppen, which encompasses part of northwestern Montgomery and northeastern Berks Counties in Pennsylvania. Founded in 1964 as an educational organization, their major projects include the Goschenhoppen Folklife Festival, their museum of Pennsylvania German folklife at Redmen's Hall, Green Lane, and their restoration of the eighteenth century Henry Antes Plantation, a National Historic Landmark. The volunteer based organization, registered as a 501(c) 3 in 1967, is led by a Board of Directors.

The organization is led by very dedicated volunteers, many of whom are original founding members of the organization. The main PI on the project, Nancy Roan, is a recognized expert on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century quilts from the region and is the author of the book *Lest I Should be Forgotten* on local quilting traditions. Alan Keyser, another Goschenhoppen Historian, is an expert on weaving and woven textiles and author of several books on Pennsylvania German textiles, including *Forgotten Pennsylvania Textiles of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. A project priority was to capture the knowledge about the provenance and the history of the textile collection from these original founding members before it is no longer available. Another dedicated volunteer, Linda Szapacs, provided assistance with organizing and

inputting textile record information into digital form. Other Goschenhoppen volunteers assisted with cataloging, moving the collections, and other tasks.

### **Schwenkfelder Library & Heritage Center**

The SLHC was founded in 1884 as an informal collection in a private home to assure the preservation of the cultural identity of the Schwenkfelders, an 18th century German Protestant group. Today the SHLC, a not-for-profit organization, is preserving, interpreting, and documenting the history of this German Protestant group along with the local Pennsylvania German heritage and culture in their 15,000 square-foot facility in Pennsburg, PA. Along with a special collections of rare books, manuscripts and photographs, the SLHC has significant collections of fraktur (the decorated folk art manuscripts and drawings of the Pennsylvania Germans), textiles and other decorative arts. The Heritage Center employs five full time and two part time staff along with adjunct staff who serve as Associate Director of Research and Associate Director of Theology. The SLHC conducts symposiums, “brown bag” lunch series, children’s programs and workshops. PI Candace Perry, curator of collections, has been with the institution for sixteen years, and has published numerous articles and developed exhibits on Pennsylvania German culture and heritage.

### **Mennonite Heritage Center**

The MHC, a historical museum and library built in 1990 by the Mennonite Historians of Eastern Pennsylvania and located in Harleysville, a 501(c) 3 incorporated in 1974. The MHC staff and Board of Trustees work to preserving and sharing over three centuries of Mennonite faith and life in southeastern Pennsylvania. Archival collections include rare books and manuscripts, maps, broadsides, letters, genealogies, deeds, church records, and other printed materials. There are manuscript collections from many local Mennonite persons and families. The collection of 125 locally and Mennonite made fraktur is particularly significant. The artifact collection includes quilts, coverlets, samplers, clothing, furniture,

farm implements, housewares, and musical instruments. Four full time and three part time staff carry out a full schedule of exhibits, programs and events. PI Sarah Heffner, director, has initiated numerous programs and events relating to Pennsylvania German material culture as well as the annual Pennsylvania German Folk Art Sale that takes place in December. Joel Alderfer, Collections Manager, was the key MHC staff person on the cataloging project.

The three organizations collaborate on programs, exhibits and events. A workshop, "Exploring the History and Artistry of Fraktur", was sponsored by the MHC and SLHC on August 12-14, 2009 and was supported by a Pennsylvania Humanities Council grant. The workshop featured presentations by fraktur scholars Mary Jane Hershey, John Ruth, Allen Viehmeyer, Lisa Minardi, Candace Perry, Joel Alderfer and Clarke Hess. Participants viewed historic fraktur from the collections of the SLHC and the MHC and toured historic meetinghouses and schools where the fraktur was created.

Artifacts are loaned between the organizations for changing exhibits. Staff at each organization frequently consult with each other and serve as guest curators for each other's exhibits. The 2010 MHC exhibit "Comforts of Home", for example, featured an early twentieth century kitchen, parlor and bedroom setting, and incorporated artifacts from all three organizations.

The "Christmas Market" tour is an annual event the first weekend in December which features exhibits and demonstrations at the GH Redmens' Hall, MHC and the SLHC. Approximately three to five hundred visitors attend the annual event.

### **Textile Project Personnel**

**PI: Candace Perry, Curator of Collections, Schwenkfelder Library & Heritage Center.** Candace oversaw the textile cataloging at Schwenkfelder Library and jointly managed the project with the other two PIs.

**PI: Nancy Roan, Goschenhoppen Historians.** Nancy managed the project with the other PIS and in charge of organizing the textile collections at Redmen's Hall, the Goschenhoppen museum. Other Goschenhoppen Historians volunteers involved with the project included Bob Wood who transported textiles to be cataloged and constructed shelving for the textile storage room; Sandi Karlson who is responsible for maintaining spreadsheets of new acquisitions and their storage locations; Linda Szapacs who worked with Nancy Roan to organize and direct the project; and Pat Gottshalk and Anne Grasberger, volunteers who assisted in labeling and proper storage.

**PI: Sarah Heffner, Director, Mennonite Heritage Center** served as project administrator.

**Project Advisor: Joel Alderfer, Collections Manager, Mennonite Heritage Center.** Joel oversaw the textile cataloging at the Mennonite Heritage Center and managed the project along with the PIs.

**Project cataloger: Caitlin Harvey.** Caitlin worked full time starting in April 2012 through March 2014 to catalog the textiles of the Goschenhoppen Historians, Mennonite Heritage Center and the Schwenkfelder Library & Heritage Center.

**Financial Administrator for Grant: Rose Moyer, Asst. Director, Mennonite Heritage Center.** Rose maintained the financial records for the textile project.

**Consultant: Linda Eaton, Director of Winterthur Museum Collections.** Linda provided guidance and direction to the project, particularly for developing a plan for the cataloging process.

**Consultant: Alan Keyser, Pennsylvania German historian and textile authority.** Alan provided guidance and direction, particularly on the woven textiles.

### **The Pennsylvania German Textile Collections**

The Pennsylvania Germans produced their most distinctive material culture from the early eighteenth through the mid nineteenth centuries, and among the most significant, but unexplored

aspects, has been textiles. The textile collections at GH, MHC and SLHC advance knowledge about the production, use and traditions of Pennsylvania German textiles from this time period. The early tablecloths, bed linens, coverlets, yardage, and grain sacks, for example along with the attest to home fiber production, which was an essential part of rural daily life for the Pennsylvania Germans.

Needlework and quilts, usually the more decorative work found in the collections, were generally made by young girls and women. Sampler making by girls and young women were an essential part of the domestic education of many women of German descent, and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, traditional samplers were replaced by other types of decorative needlework that was created by young and older women. Beginning in the mid nineteenth century, patchwork and quilting became an activity enjoyed by Pennsylvania German women as both a means of self-expression and creativity, and to make using bedcoverings for the family. The quilts in the collections record the patterns, colors and textile preferences of the southeastern Pennsylvania German women as their acculturation with their neighbors and American life in general began to take root. Access to the needlework and quilt provenance records will interest scholars in material culture and women's history, and aid in an understanding of women's roles in the in the 18th and 19th century Pennsylvania German household.

The costume collections of all three organizations illustrate early rural simple dress common to most Pennsylvania German groups in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and that was followed by more conservative Mennonite garb and assimilation in the late 19th century for the others. The distinctive Mennonite plain garb in the collections evolved in the early twentieth century to reflect the response to both religious teachings of the time and the changing culture around them.

The GH, SHLC, and MHC textile collections are a significant resource for textile scholars because the collections were gathered and preserved in the context of the communities that produced them.

Many of the artifacts in the three collections were donated by the original families who had preserved them through the generations.

Compared to furniture or ceramics, scholarship on textiles generally is still scant and the majority of it centers on textiles in New England. The cataloging project for the Pennsylvania German textile and clothing collections is contributing to the understanding of regional and ethnic similarities and differences in early America that continue to influence our lives even today.

The GH, SLHC and MHC textile collections were in various stages of cataloging at the beginning of the project. GH volunteers had completed basic inventories of much of their collection of 700 textile objects and worksheets for a majority of their objects. The SLHC collection of 900 textile objects had an extensive backlog of both accessioning and cataloging as a result of nearly a century of collecting. The MHC collection of 1960 objects was 80% cataloged but the information was in various formats and levels of description, including an objects card catalog, worksheets, and the last six years' of accessions entered into the Past Perfect database. Almost the entire MHC collection had been accessioned. Very little, if any, of the three collections had been photographed. The three organizations viewed the Hidden Collections grant as an excellent opportunity to advance their collections care and stewardship.

All three organizations had a commitment to collection stewardship but share budgetary constraints. The SHLC and the MHC have full-time staff responsible for museum, library, and archival work while GH operates with a dedicated and knowledgeable corps of volunteers. The SHLC underwent a capital campaign for building expansion in 2001 and hired a curator of collections and an archivist at that time. The MHC expanded its staff with the addition of a full time archivist in 2006 to address the cataloging backlog (the collections manager has had several summer college interns assisting him on cataloging projects prior to 2006). The SHLC and the MHC have participated in the Advanced Stewardship Program of the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts, Philadelphia and now

have detailed preservation plans with annual goals. GH has volunteers and a collections committee who regularly dedicate time to working on the documentation of the collections, and have a member who holds the position of curator.

GH, MHC and SLHC did not seek joint funding for their textile project from other funding sources. The three organizations have been working steadily at cataloging with the goal of moving to digitization but presently lack the staff and budget to handle the workload. As small institutions committed to professional museum standards, we thought that the CLIR funding opportunity presented an excellent opportunity to have our textile collections fully cataloged and accessible. We appreciated the funding priority for "Hidden Collections" because we find it is sometimes difficult to garner support/funding for projects as small institutions that are competing with larger, more nationally recognized organizations.

### **Key Points**

#### **Project advisors played a key role early on in the project in helping set the course.**

Winterthur Director of Collections Linda Eaton was very generous with sharing cataloging expertise. The early meetings with her were influential in determining the course we took for cataloging, and also, helping us understand that our project goals were ambitious, and probably should be reconsidered in light of the amount of time we had. She invited the project staff to visit with the Winterthur cataloging team to discuss how to move forward efficiently with our project. Along with discussing categories and textile terminology, Linda and the Winterthur cataloging team advised cataloging by category instead of by each of the three collections as we originally stated in the grant proposal. That advice proved very helpful in facilitating the flow of work.

Linda also advised that we keep terminology simple and direct and record how much time was spent at each location and how many records completed, so that we had a fair sharing of labor and



progress between the three institutions, and to stay on track according to priorities established. It was straight forward, practical advice but very helpful in keeping us on track. Winterthur's cataloging process should be a model for any museum collection where there is a cataloging back log.

**Selection of the right project cataloger was also important.**

The grant required a new hire for the project. We were very fortunate to find Caitlin Harvey, a young professional with her MA in the History and Culture of Fashion from the London College of Fashion, London, England. Caitlin had a good general background in textiles, specifically costume; but was new to Pennsylvania German textiles. Perhaps most importantly, she was flexible in working with our three similar, but distinctly individual organizations and juggling time with project staff who were also working with event and exhibit schedules. Caitlin brought a great deal of energy to the project, which we found was very necessary for its timely completion plus the physical needs of the work.

**The project PIs knew each other well and were able to work through problems/issues that developed.**

Developing standardized description textile description terms for the project was an involved process because of the specialized, and distinctly Pennsylvania German nature of many of the textiles. The project staff had to balance the desire to be comprehensive with the need for brevity for the online catalog fields. We were exploring new ground with the database, both with the identification of the objects and the utilization of appropriate terminology. It is important to note that Pennsylvania German textiles share differences and similarities in style and construction with other European folk and immigrant textile traditions, which can either aid, or confuse, identification and interpretation. As cataloger, Caitlin had to wade through varied descriptions from all three institutions and work toward standardization that we hope would serve not only our researchers, but other museums that own collections of Pennsylvania German textiles.

The project staff decided to have Caitlin begin with photographing, measuring and cataloging all the woven coverlets and quilts of the three organizations due to the physical requirements of hanging the objects for examination and photography. Volunteers played necessary roles in this part of the project, as their assistance was key in helping to hang the textiles and take notes.

One of the main challenges for the project was that we underestimated the time needed to organize, photograph, measure and record data for all the objects. For the textile categories other than quilts and coverlets, we worked to prioritize by provenance and rarity. For example, some categories of clothing at the Mennonite Heritage Center are repetitive so we chose not to attempt cataloging for all of the dozens of black wool shawls and net head coverings in this project, but selected a sample group based on provenance and/or uniqueness of the objects.

Caitlin worked at both MHC and SLHC, with GH bringing their collections to SLHC for cataloging. She would shift her work station every few months, which resulted in all of the staff of the respective institutions to have time to work with her.

**Regular meetings kept the project on track and allowed us to make collaborative decisions.**

Regular project meetings helped with communication and discussing expectations for the project. The grant application stated that we would have monthly meetings which ended up to be overly ambitious – we did not quite achieve that time table but instead met when as we were going to begin a new textile category and/or when Caitlin had questions that she wanted to present to the group.

**Conclusion**

In early 2014 Caitlin completed her work on the project. The finished product is still evolving and probably will continue to as research is done on the collections and staff is able to provide better provenance and other documentation. What the Hidden Collections grant allowed for us, however, was

an extraordinary leap forward in the management, documentation and accessibility of the collections, creating records in the database that are essential to both our in-house activities and research by others. It also pushed the Goschenhoppen Historians to acquire new technology that gives them 21st century tools for cataloging and tracking their collections that they did not have before. Our finished product greatly advances our effort toward standardization of terms for and interpretation of Pennsylvania German textiles that we hope will serve other institutions as well as our own.

The rewards and pitfalls of this intensive collaborative effort between organizations that are very similar in many ways and quite different in others, and how the group was able ultimately to develop a finished product that will serve the organizations and their audiences for years to come, is an excellent model for other small institutions that are embarking on a joint project.