

Kentucky Historical Society

The Churchill Weavers Collection— An American Treasure Uncovered

CLIR Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives 2015 Unconference &
Symposium Panel: Obstacles and Solutions: Establishing Cataloging
Methodologies for Specialized Collections

Jenifer Spence, Churchill Weavers Project Coordinator, Kentucky Historical Society
2/12/2015

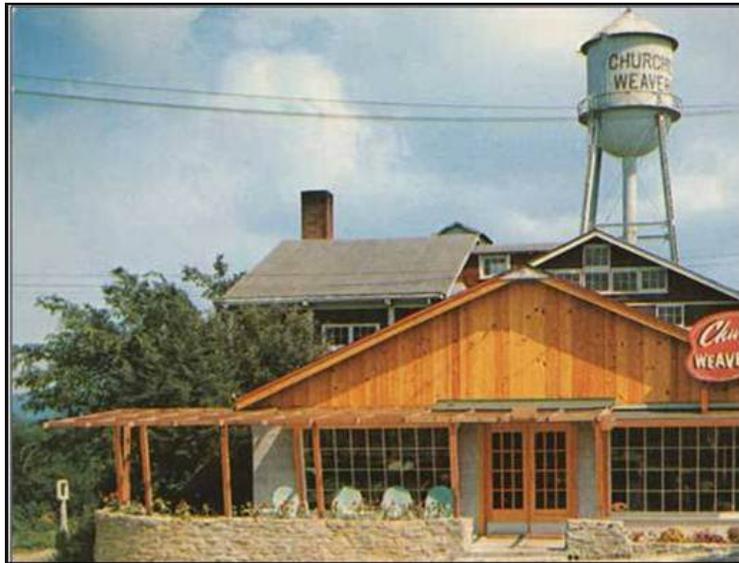


Figure 1: The Churchill Weavers loomhouse, ca. 1960

Abstract

In 2007, the Kentucky Historical Society acquired the fabric archive from one of America's finest handweaving studios—Churchill Weavers. Following preliminary efforts to catalog the fabric archive at the item-level, KHS staff determined that a hybrid of archival and artifact cataloging techniques would work best for this collection. Staff has since cataloged the archive at the box-level, using the Archives module in PastPerfect to retain crucial information about weave structures, patterns, products, fiber contents, and colors of more than 34,000 textiles. This paper looks at the challenges, successes, and innovative work that occurred in cataloging the textile collection. Presented are the unique promotional efforts making this important fabric archive known.

Introduction

In 2012, CLIR's Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives program awarded a grant to the Kentucky Historical Society (KHS) for the project, *The Churchill Weavers Collection—40,000 Textiles Uncovered*. This financial support enabled KHS to catalog its single largest acquisition, and one of the most important textile collections for Appalachia. *40,000 Textiles Uncovered* is a 24-month project which will end March 31, 2015. The project has resulted in thousands of textiles by American handweaving legend, Churchill Weavers, made available online and in person. Now that the collection is no longer "hidden," it has the opportunity to make a profound impact on scholarship.

Churchill Weavers was a cherished Kentucky handcraft business and a leader in the American textile industry. KHS has dedicated significant resources to preserve the company's legacy and its place in Kentucky history. The Churchill Weavers Collection at KHS is vast. It includes the fabric archive and a comprehensive collection of three-dimensional artifacts and business records documenting the company's productive history. It is rare to find a handweaving collection as complete as this.

KHS applied for the Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives grant for the Churchill Weavers fabric archive. The fabric archive, as the largest component of the collection, needed the most work by KHS staff to make it accessible. KHS had hired a Project Assistant to evaluate the collection and design a cataloging approach in 2010. Yet, it was not until 2012, when CLIR awarded the grant, that staff could make real progress with the collection. This paper looks at the cataloging methods developed for this specialized collection and the creative work behind it.

Churchill Weavers: An American Handweaving Legend

Churchill Weavers was a handweaving business that operated in Berea, Kentucky from 1922 to 2007. David Carroll Churchill, and his wife, Eleanor Franzen, founded the company and ran it for over fifty years. In 1973, the Churchill family sold the company to business partners

(and husband and wife duo), Richard and Lila Bellando. The company changed ownership once again when the Bellandos sold it to Crown Crafts in 1996.

Churchill Weavers set the national standard for luxury handwoven goods. By the 1940s, the business had both an expansive network of salespeople across the United States selling its products and standalone retail shops in major American cities. Fine department stores, such as Saks 5th Avenue and Lord and Taylor, and small, independent stores carried its products. Baby blankets, couch throws, and ladies' accessories were Churchill Weavers's mainstays; yet, the company produced everything from swing capes and bow ties to experimental cloth for NASA's first spacesuits.

The company used traditional handweaving methods to make fashionable textile pieces for an upscale market. Churchill Weavers's main consumers were middle and upper-class women, though fashion designers, celebrities, and even European aristocrats sought-out its styles. But for Kentuckians, Churchill Weavers was seen as a handcraft business rooted in Appalachia; and for many, giving a new mother a "Churchill Handwoven" baby blanket was a longstanding tradition.

As a record of production, Churchill Weavers maintained a fabric archive they called the Master Sample Collection. The Master Sample Collection had a sample of every design, product, and experimental piece produced, and textiles in various stages of testing and production. If a customer questioned a product's design or color, employees could find its master sample to verify its quality and appearance.



Figure 2: The Master Sample Collection in the Churchill Weavers loomhouse basement, 2007

Churchill Weavers archived the textiles according to inventory numbers called *style* and *cloth numbers* and stored the fabrics in cardboard shipping boxes. The boxes were the size of two conventional shoeboxes and printed with their slogan, “America’s Finest and Largest Handweavers.” Though storing textiles in cardboard boxes is not ideal, the boxes mitigated damage from moisture, pests, and dirt, making it remarkable that they had survived into the 21st century. Staff wrote the inventory numbers on the boxes and developed a card file system to finding items in the archive. Churchill Weavers even hired an archivist in 2002 to write a basic finding aid. Staff continued to update the fabric archive until 2006.

Churchill Weavers at the Kentucky Historical Society

After eighty-five years of operation, Churchill Weavers could no longer overcome cheap foreign imports, or the organizational problems of its parent company, Crown Crafts. In 2007, Crown Crafts sold the Churchill Weavers name and equipment to a handweaving business in Indiana, and auctioned-off remaining items. Factory operations in Berea came to an end.

Lila Bellando recognized how important it was to preserve the company’s long history. After Churchill Weavers closed, Lila purchased the company's business and weaving records, fabric archive, and other artifacts, and sought a permanent home for them. She approached the Kentucky Historical Society about acquiring the collection. KHS was elated at the opportunity and secured private funding to purchase it from her.

The Churchill Weavers Collection is KHS's single largest acquisition. 2,369 boxes of textiles make-up the fabric archive. Churchill Weavers and KHS staff did not have an official item count at the time of acquisition, though some estimates were as high as 100,000 samples.



Figure 3: The fabric archive on pallets in KHS's museum storage, 2007

Besides the fabric archive, the collection comprises business, marketing and design records; swatch books, weft write-ups, draft files and pattern books; photographs, audiovisual materials and oral histories; and looms, signs, and tools. It is truly a comprehensive collection, both in breadth and scope.

Early Cataloging Efforts

Cataloging of the fabric archive began in May 2008. KHS created a small working exhibition to celebrate the acquisition and to share it with museum visitors. The exhibition, titled *Magic in the Weaving: The Churchill Weavers Collection Revealed*, showed collection highlights and staff at work cataloging it. KHS's registrar, assistant registrar, archivists, and curators worked behind an area of the gallery cornered-off with Plexiglas walls. This gave museum visitors a "behind-the-scenes" look at how KHS preserves archival materials and artifacts, and the opportunity to ask staff questions about caring for them.



Figure 4: Cataloging stations in *Magic in the Weaving*, 2008

Collections staff chose to catalog the fabric archive at the item-level. Item-level cataloging is standard practice for documenting museum artifacts. It is a process in which each artifact is given an individual catalog number and collections record. The item is marked with its catalog number. For textiles the number is often written on a fabric label that is sewn onto the artifact. Catalogers took a photograph of one sample per box of textiles cataloged and completed a catalog worksheet by hand for each item. The worksheets had blank-fill-ins to record information such as object names, measurements, weave structures, materials, and condition issues. By the time the exhibition closed in September 2008, staff had cataloged 1,629 textile samples this way.

Two years later, KHS hired a part-time Project Assistant to re-assess the fabric archive. She evaluated earlier cataloging work and determined that item-level cataloging was ineffective for this collection. Churchill Weavers and KHS staff predicted 40,000 to 100,000 textiles in the archive. If staff continued to catalog the textiles item-by-item, she projected it will take them ten or more years to catalog 40,000 pieces. KHS could no longer dedicate a team of staff members to the project like it had in 2008. Besides, item-level cataloging would generate thousands of database records overwhelming researchers and staff using the collection.

A New Cataloging Approach

The Project Assistant worked with KHS's Special Collections Administrator, Registrar, and Directors of Museum Collections and Exhibitions and Special Collections and Library, to develop a new cataloging strategy. After several months of re-evaluating the collection, and looking at several cataloging methodologies, they agreed on a hybrid approach of item-level and box-level cataloging.

In evaluating the collection, the Project Assistant found that the archive's inherent structure would lend well to a hybrid approach. The contract archivist hired by Churchill Weavers arranged the collection into archival series and sub-series based on product types. When creating the arrangement and developing the finding aid, the archivist took into consideration the company's organizational system of keeping similar styles, fabrics, and patterns in the same box or series of boxes. She insisted on keeping true to the archive by retaining items in original order. Though her resulting finding aid was skeletal, and she used abbreviated terms to describe items, it became a helpful guide for cataloging the collection at KHS. It provided an overview of the collection, explained how Churchill Weavers had organized it, and the inventory system's significance.

The Project Assistant determined that the new cataloging strategy needed to reflect the hybrid nature of the fabric archive—it is both an archive and a collection of individual artifacts. Churchill Weavers had done preliminary work for box-level cataloging. It just needed to translate to a system that would work for KHS staff and for researchers. The Project Assistant's goal was that the new strategy would capture item details crucial to anyone studying handwoven textiles and present them in a format for effective, yet efficient, cataloging.

KHS uses PastPerfect Museum Software for documenting its collections. PastPerfect has separate catalogs for cataloging artifacts and special collections. These modules are simply called *Objects* and *Archives*. The Objects catalog is used by the Museum Collections and Exhibitions (MC&E) team who manage KHS's artifact collections, including the Churchill Weavers fabric archive. The team found that the Archives catalog would facilitate both item-level and box-level cataloging in ways that the Objects catalog cannot. They decided that the Archives catalog would work best for this new approach.

The Project Assistant began the process of cataloging the archive. In this new scheme the boxes were cataloged one at a time, in original order, and a database record was created for each box. Detailed box information was captured in two crucial locations in the archives catalog record: *Scope and Content* and *Container List*. The Scope and Content field was used to record the overall description of objects in the box, such as numbers of items, product type (e. g., blanket, scarf), product format (e. g., swatch, final product), style numbers, weave structures, patterns and pattern numbers, colors, and fiber content.

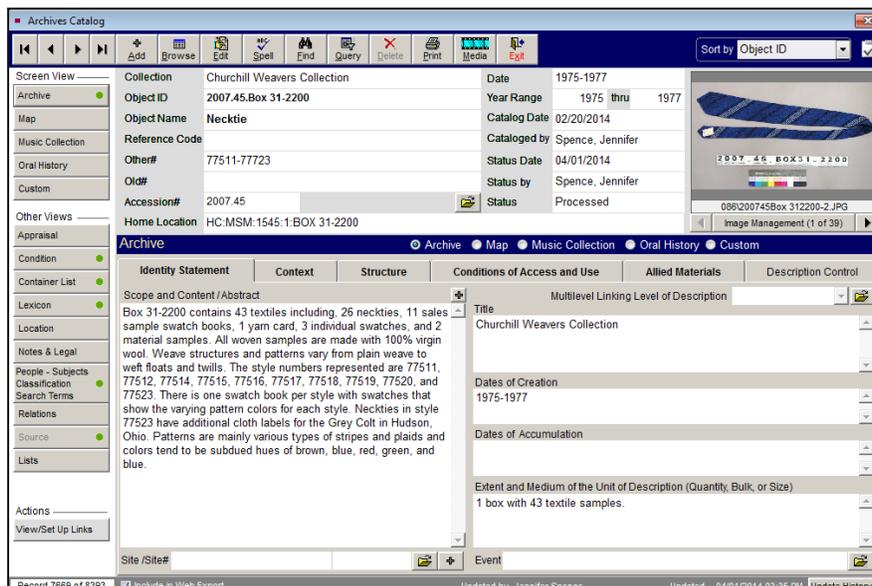


Figure 5: Screen shot of an Archives record

Container Lists were used with each box record to itemize textiles. This approach allowed for isolating unusual and particularly interesting artifacts with more detailed cataloging that is not covered by the Scope and Content. Many boxes had dozens or hundreds of swatches. A Container List record may contain information for two or more samples which are duplicates or very similar in design and style instead of creating hundreds of records. They were used to group like items together, isolate them, and catalog them separately from other unrelated items in a box. Itemization details included attached notes identifying specific dates of creation or the name of weaver that created that piece. The ability of both staff and researchers to access this detailed information is critical for this collection. Staff anticipates future researchers to add more data to this expandable structure.

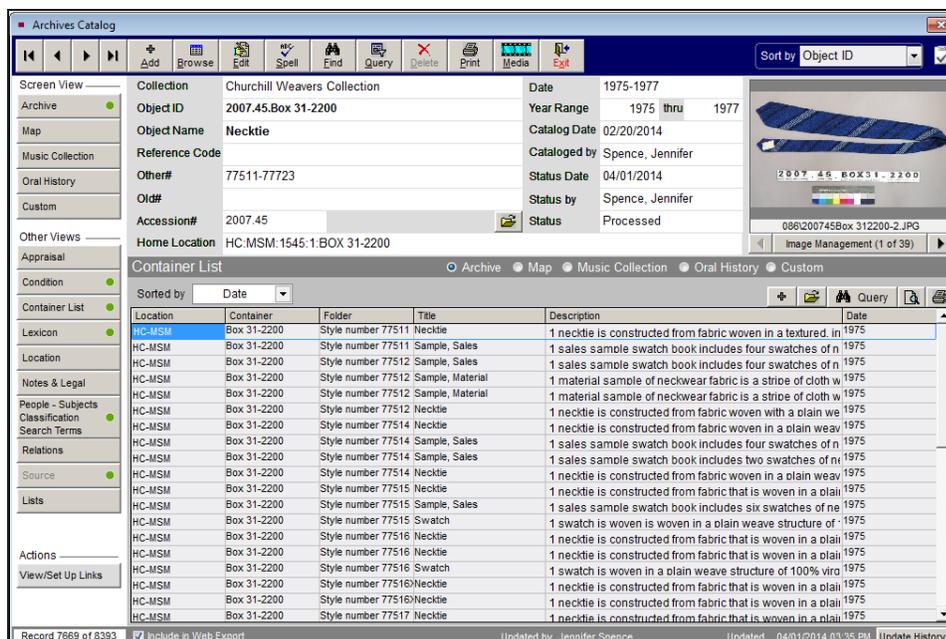


Figure 6: Screen shot of an Archives record's Container List

Other main fields used in the Archives record were Collection, Object Name(s), Object ID Number, Date, Other Numbers, Administrative/Biographical History, Creator, Other Creators, System of Arrangement, Location, and Condition Report. Built in to PastPerfect is *Nomenclature 3.0 for Museum Cataloging*. *Nomenclature 3.0* is the standard cataloging tool for man-made objects. PastPerfect has fields for up-to three Objects Names based on the built in lexicon. This worked well for this type of box-level cataloging as there was often more than one type of textile object per box—a box may have a swatch of baby blanket fabric and a finished blanket.

One of the first challenges encountered was devising a numbering system for this hybrid system. The accession number for the fabric archive is 2007.45, and 1,629 samples had catalog numbers assigned to them in 2008. In this new system, staff assigned an object id-number to each box of textiles, but not to each textile. Staff devised a tri-partite, alphanumeric numbering system. An example of this identification is 2007.45.Box 31-114, where 2007.45 is the collection

number and Box 31-114 delineates the box number.¹ The textiles are not assigned catalog numbers. If someone removes a textile from its box, a fabric label with the box's catalog number will be sewn-on or pinned to the fabric.

From 2010 to 2012, the Churchill Weavers project team was the Project Assistant and a cadre of volunteers. The Project Assistant and volunteers worked to photograph the fabric archive in “box shots.” This means that textiles of the same box were pictured together in groups of two or more. They photographed large finished products (e.g., baby blankets, throws), unusual artifacts, and items that cannot fit into a group shot individually. An unlimited number of images can be attached to a single catalog in PastPerfect. Each shot was linked to the collections record with image information, and uploaded to the online collections database. The project team felt that was important to provide a visual image for each box, both as an aid to researchers and a conservation tool. The images taken allowed staff to record the condition of each box at the time of processing.



Figure 7: Pictured is a sample record shot

The Kentucky Historical Society uses PastPerfect Online as a record hosting platform and search tool. This is an easy and inexpensive service that uses MWeb technology and allows for easy Google indexing of records and customization of data displays. The online portion pulls directly from the PastPerfect database and putting a record online was as easy as clicking a small

¹ Box locations for artifacts managed by MC&E include the dimensions of the box's length. This allows for better management of the various boxes and their room and shelf locations. Staff stores fabric archive textiles in 31" long newspaper boxes.

“Include in Web Export” dialogue box in the Archives record. The record was only ready to be included in the queue for web export to PastPerfect Online once the images were attached and the record verified for accuracy. The export occurred weekly and the data was transferred to an external server.

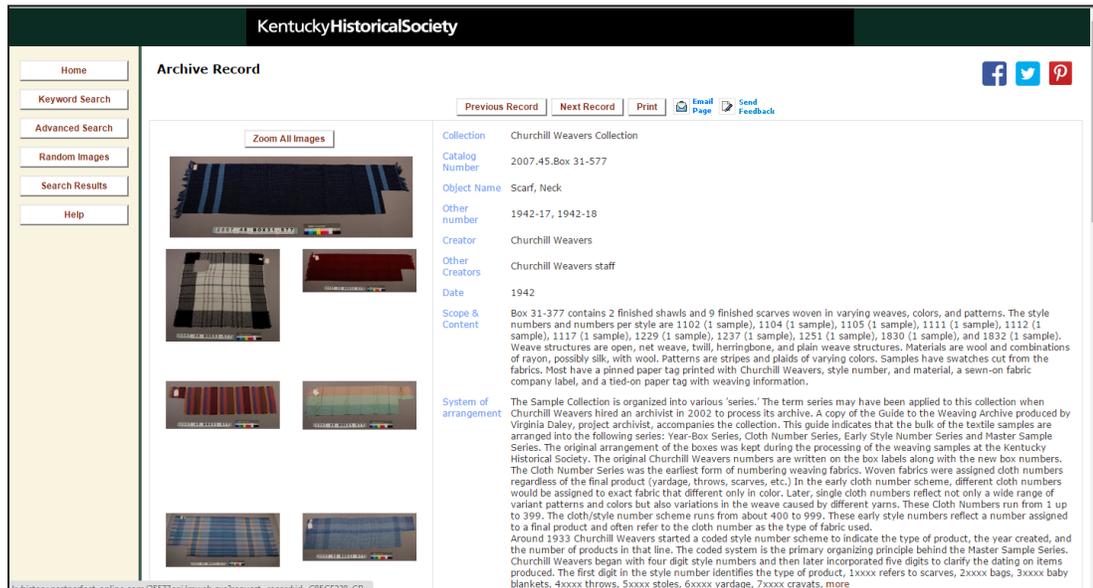


Figure 8: Screen shot from a PastPerfect Online record

A select number of fields from the catalog record were exported to PastPerfect Online. Those fields for the Churchill Weavers fabric archive records were: Collection, Catalog Number, Object Name, Other Number, Creator, Other Creators, Date, Scope & Content, System of Arrangement and any available images. Researchers can access the online Objects Catalog through KHS’s website as well as at pastperfect-online.com where artifacts from hundreds of museums, archives, and libraries can be searched. The online catalog can be found at history.ky.gov/objects.

The project team incorporated textile re-housing into the cataloging workflow plan. The fabric archive was packed in small, brown acidic boxes. Once cataloged and photographed, all textiles were removed from these boxes and re-housed into longer and wider, archival boxes and supported with un-buffered acid-free tissue paper. Textiles found with old pest and mold and mildew damage were treated accordingly. General textile cleaning occurred if fabrics are found with dirt and accretions due to previous storage conditions at Churchill Weavers.



Figures 9 and 10: Before re-housing (left) and after re-housing (right)

In 2012, KHS applied for a Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives grant. The Project Assistant and volunteers were making progress with the collection, but they needed more help to complete the project. CLIR awarded the grant to KHS later that year. In early 2013, the Project Assistant became a full-time Project Coordinator and KHS hired a full-time Assistant Project Specialist. KHS was now able to fully implement the hybrid strategy and complete collections cataloging.

The cataloging goal projected in the team's project plan was 25-30 boxes per week, and the team consistently met this goal. On average, the team cataloged 30 boxes per week, or 119 boxes per month. The hybrid cataloging approach was effective, though a small quantity of materials, such as bolts of yardage and sample books, needed item-level cataloging. After all of this, the team had an accurate item count of the archive. They revised the estimated item count from 40,000 to 100,000 items to 34,000. As of February 2015, 100% of the Churchill Weavers fabric archive is accessible, both online and in person.

Churchill Weavers Volunteers and Interns

Volunteers and interns were integral to helping the Project Coordinator and Assistant meet project goals. Over twenty volunteers and eight interns served on the project. Their responsibilities included everything from re-housing and photographing the textiles to marketing and promoting the collection. The project team would not have accomplished digitization initiatives without their help, especially since CLIR stipulated that no grant funds could be used for digitization. Prior to receiving the grant, the Project Assistant worked to train volunteers and interns in digital photography and photo-editing. Project staff used experienced volunteers to

help train interns and new volunteers hired over the granting period. Staff created training materials to help keep work consistent. These included documents for re-housing, cataloging, and using Photoshop to clean-up images before adding them to the database.



Figure 11: A Churchill Weavers’s project volunteer re-housing textiles

The backgrounds of our volunteers and interns were diverse. The project team had interns in visual studies, public history, and history programs from the University of Kentucky, Loyola University Chicago, and Middle Tennessee State University. The collection inspired several of them to pursue careers in public history and museum work. One intern wrote her master’s thesis about the company’s innovative business practices, and KHS is working to publish it in its scholarly publication, *The Register*. Our volunteers had backgrounds and experiences that were incredibly beneficial to the project. Several of them were weavers and fiber enthusiasts who helped to name weave structures and fibers, and two volunteers were professional photographers.

Promoting the Churchill Weavers Collection

The project team worked with KHS’s Marketing and Communications department to develop strategies for reaching target audiences. They had identified weavers, textile scholars, and other museum professionals as the people who would use this collection. In year one of the

grant, KHS created and implemented a communications plan to attract these key people. The plan included activities such as using social media (e. g., Pinterest and Facebook), presenting conference sessions and educational programming, and developing printed marketing materials.

In 2014, KHS created a “Churchill Weavers Collection” brochure and distributed it to more than 300 institutions. Staff targeted museums, galleries, university programs, and weaving guilds in the United States. Institutions and individuals have responded positively to the brochure. The National Museum of the American Coverlet in Bedford, Pennsylvania was the first museum to express interest in the collection. KHS’s development team found the brochure helpful for connecting with present and future supporters. KHS anticipates more interest from targeted institutions as the brochure continues to circulate.

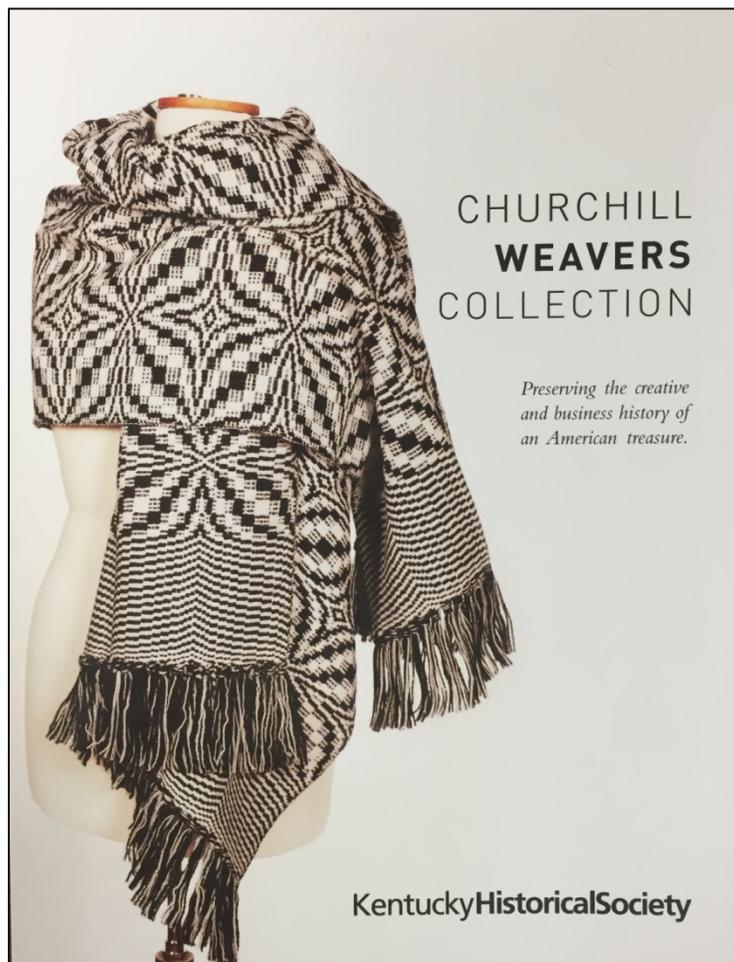


Figure 12: Churchill Weavers Collection brochure

Staff developed a new line of Churchill Weavers inspired products for the KHS gift shop. The items include a note card series, a Christmas ornament, magnets, a decorative box, and jigsaw puzzles. The products are a fun and creative way to promote the collection to museum visitors. Packaging on the merchandise includes links to the online catalog and collection information.



Figure 13: Custom-made Churchill Weavers inspired gift shop merchandise

The collection has had a strong social media presence. Project staff worked to promote it via Pinterest, Facebook, and the KHS blog, *Chronicle*, and encouraged interns and volunteers to write blogs and Facebook posts. The Project Coordinator and Assistant wrote about the collection for several external blogs, including the Textile Society of America’s blog and two other blogs, *The Revivalist*, and *Appalachian History*. They also presented several sessions at the Southeastern Museums Conference Annual Meeting in 2014, the Kentucky Council of Archives, and Kentucky Crafted: The Market. The Project Coordinator worked with KHS’s education department to develop content for a fashion camp inspired by Churchill Weavers. Other outreach activities include work with Frankfort’s Early Learning Village kindergarten school, where students are engaged in learning about weaving and the fiber arts.

KHS’s Scholarly Research Fellowship Program developed a new fellowship opportunity to study the fabric archive. This fellowship, called the Churchill Weavers Fellowship, is the first of its kind designed for a KHS artifact collection. KHS will use a private donation to fund one fellowship per year. It is anticipated that the first fellow will begin summer 2015.

Conclusion

A weaving collection as complete as the Churchill Weavers fabric archive is an extraordinary thing. Loomhouses in the Appalachian region rarely kept samples of their work. And if they did, their collections often succumbed to pests, dirt, fire, and natural light. The Kentucky Historical Society is proud of the Churchill Weavers Collection and the accomplishments made in cataloging it. KHS is certain that the collection will inspire scholars and weavers and enrich scholarship in many disciplines.

Cataloging the fabric archive was a daunting task, but this hybrid approach of item-level and box-level cataloging made the process more manageable. It is a new approach for KHS artifacts, and, so far, it has worked well for this collection. Staff anticipates that future researchers will add to the data structure and make suggestions on areas needing improvement.

KHS is incredibly thankful to the Council on Library and Information Resources and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for their financial support. This jewel of a collection would be still “hidden” without their help. KHS also thanks the volunteers and interns who have served on the project. To catalog, digitize, and re-house more than 34,000 textiles is no small feat. Thank you, too, to philanthropists Joan Cralle Day and the Cralle Day Foundation and Thomas P. Dupree for generous gifts that allowed KHS to acquire and preserve the Churchill Weavers Collection.