



Pennsylvania German Textile Cataloging

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Abstract

In 2011, the Goschenhoppen Historians, the Schwenkfelder Library & Heritage Center, and the Mennonite Heritage Center, all located in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, received a Hidden Collections Grant from the Council on Library and Information Resources to catalog their collections of Pennsylvania Germans textiles. These collections represent a “common thread” of textile-making and use traditions based on the organizations’ mutual Pennsylvania German heritage and insight into how an ethnically homogeneous community’s material culture developed and evolved over time as a result of technology, new influences, religious beliefs, and availability of commercial goods. The chief objectives of the project were to: (1) catalog and photograph each organization’s textile collections, and (2) provide access online through each organization’s PastPerfect database. Secondary goals included a standardization of terms used for the various textile forms and the development of a lexicon of equivalent terms in the Pennsylvania German dialect.


The organizations hired a cataloger, Caitlin Harvey, to catalog and photograph their collections and enter the documentation into each organizations’ online PastPerfect database. The outcome of this project was an extraordinary leap forward in the management, documentation, and accessibility of the collections that are essential both to our in-house activities and to research by others. The finished product greatly advances the standardization of terms and interpretation of Pennsylvania German textiles that will not only provide templates for the organizations’ continuing documentation and preservation efforts, but will be a readily available resource for other collecting institutions and collectors.

Introduction

In 2011, the Goschenhoppen Historians, the Schwenkfelder Library & Heritage Center (SLHC), and the Mennonite Heritage Center (MHC) were the fortunate recipients of a Hidden Collections grant from the Council on Library

and Information Resources (CLIR) 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 organizations, but also it marked the first online accessibility of the Pennsylvania German textile collections as a cohesive, well documented entity.

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



The chief objectives of the project were to: (1) catalog and photograph each organization's textile collections, and (2) provide access online through each organization's PastPerfect database. Secondary goals included a standardization of terms used for the various textile forms and the development of a lexicon of equivalent terms in the Pennsylvania German dialect. With the grant funding, the organizations hired 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. Founded in 1964 as an educational organization, the Goschenhoppen Historians 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 County and northeastern Berks County in Pennsylvania. Their major projects include the Goschenhoppen Folklife Festival; the museum of Pennsylvania German folklife at Red Men's Hall, Green Lane, Pennsylvania; and the 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 overseen by a board of directors.

A group of very dedicated volunteers, many of whom are original founding members, lead the organization. The main principal investigator on the project, Nancy Roan, is a recognized expert on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century quilts from the region and author of the book *Lest I Should be Forgotten* on local quilting traditions. Project consultant Alan Keyser, a member

of the Historians, is an expert on weaving and woven textiles, and he is the author of several books on Pennsylvania German textiles, including *Forgotten Pennsylvania Textiles of the 18th and 19th Centuries*. A project priority was to capture knowledge about the provenance and the history of the textile collection from the original founding members while it is still available. 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.

Originally established as an informal collection in a private home, the SLHC was founded in 1884 to ensure the preservation of the cultural identity of the Schwenkfelders, an eighteenth-century German Protestant group. Today, the SLHC, a not-for-profit organization, is preserving, interpreting, and documenting the history of this group along with the local Pennsylvania German heritage and culture in their 15,000-square foot facility in Pennsburg, Pennsylvania. In addition to 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 organization employs five full-time and two part-time staff; adjunct staff serve as associate director of research and associate director of theology. The SLHC conducts symposiums, brown bag lunch series, children's programs, and workshops. Principal investigator Candace Perry, curator of collections, has been with the institution for 16 years and has published numerous articles and developed exhibits on Pennsylvania German culture and heritage.



Mennonite Heritage Center. The Mennonite Historians of Eastern Pennsylvania (MHEP) built the present-day Mennonite Heritage Center, a historical museum and library located in Harleysville, Pennsylvania, in 1990. The MHEP organization is a 501(c)3 and was incorporated in 1974. The Center's staff and board of trustees work to preserve and share information on more than 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 created 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 members carry out a full schedule of exhibits, programs, and events. Principal investigator Sarah Heffner, director, 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.

Collaborative Activities

The three organizations collaborate on programs, exhibits, and events. The Mennonite Heritage Center and the SLHC sponsored a workshop "Exploring the History and Artistry of Fraktur" in 2009, which 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 MHC,

and toured historic meetinghouses and schools where the fraktur were created.


The organizations loan each other artifacts for changing exhibits. Staff at each organization frequently consult with each other and serve as guest curators for each other's exhibits. For example, the 2010 MHC exhibit "Comforts of Home" 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 that takes place on the first weekend in December. It features exhibits and demonstrations at the Red Men's Hall of the Goschenhoppen Historians, the MHC, and the SLHC. Between 300 and 500 visitors attend the annual event.

Textile Project Personnel

Principal Investigator: Candace Perry, curator of collections, SLHC. Candace oversaw the textile cataloging at the Schwenkfelder Library and jointly managed the project with the other two principal investigators.

Principal Investigator: Nancy Roan, Goschenhoppen Historians. Nancy managed the project with the other principal investigators. She was in charge of organizing the textile collections at Red Men's Hall, the Goschenhoppen museum. Other volunteers from the Goschenhoppen Historians involved with the project included Bob Wood, who transported textiles to be cataloged and constructed shelving for the textile storage room; Sandi Karlson, who was 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 volunteers Pat Gottshalk and Anne Grasberger, who assisted in labeling and proper storage.



Principal Investigator: Sarah Heffner, director, Mennonite Heritage Center. Sarah served as project administrator.

Project Advisor: Joel Alderfer, collections manager, Mennonite Heritage Center. Joel oversaw the textile cataloging at the MHC and managed the project along with the principal investigators.

Project Cataloger: Caitlin Harvey. Caitlin worked full-time from April 2012 to March 2014 to catalog the textiles of the Goschenhoppen Historians, the MHC, and the SLHC.

Financial Administrator for the Grant: Rose Moyer, assistant 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. Among the most significant, but unexplored, parts of this culture were textiles. The collections of the Goschenhoppen Historians, the SLHC, and the MHC advance knowledge about the production, use, and traditions of Pennsylvania German textiles from this period. Included are early tablecloths, bed linens, coverlets, yardage, and grain sacks—domestic-use textiles that attest to home fiber production, an essential activity 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. The making of samplers was an essential part of the domestic education of many women of German descent. By the nineteenth century, other types of decorative needlework created by young and older women replaced traditional samplers. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, patchwork and quilting became an activity enjoyed by Pennsylvania German women both for the provision of bedcoverings for the family and as a means of self-expression and creativity. 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. The needlework and quilt provenance records will interest scholars in material culture and women's history, and will aid in understanding women's roles in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Pennsylvania German household.

The costume collections of all three organizations illustrate the early rural simple dress common to most Pennsylvania German groups in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The distinctive Mennonite plain garb in the collections evolved in the early twentieth century to reflect the response to both the religious teachings of the Mennonites and the changing culture around them.

The Goschenhoppen Historians, the SLHC, 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 with scholarship on furniture or ceramics, scholarship on textiles generally is still scant, and most of it centers on New England textiles. 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 today.

The Goschenhoppen Historians, the SLHC, and MHC textile collections were in various stages of cataloging at the beginning of the project. Volunteers for the Goschenhoppen Historians had completed basic inventories of much of their collection of 700 textile objects and worksheets for most of them. 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 1,960 objects was 80 percent cataloged, but the information was in various formats and levels of description. The Center had an objects card catalog and worksheets, and the accessions of the last six years were in 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 CLIR grant as an excellent opportunity to advance the care and stewardship of their collections.

All three organizations had a commitment to collection stewardship, but shared budgetary constraints. The SLHC and the MHC have full-time staff responsible for museum, library, and archival work, while the Goschenhoppen Historians operate with a dedicated and knowledgeable corps of volunteers. The SLHC undertook a capital campaign for building expansion in 2001 and at that time hired a curator of collections and an archivist. The MHC expanded its staff with the addition of a full-time archivist in 2006 to address

the cataloging backlog, which persisted even though the collections manager had several summer college interns who had been assisting with cataloging projects before 2006. The SLHC and the MHC 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. The Goschenhoppen Historians have volunteers and a collections committee who regularly dedicate time to working on the documentation of the collections, and a member of that committee holds the position of curator.

The Goschenhoppen Historians, MHC, and SLHC did not seek joint funding for their textile project from sources other than CLIR. 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. Coming from 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, as small institutions that are competing with larger, more nationally recognized organizations, it is sometimes difficult to garner support or funding for projects.

Key Points

Project advisors played a key role early in the project in helping set the course. Winterthur Director of Collections Linda Eaton was very generous in sharing her cataloging expertise. The early meetings with her were influential in determining the course we took for cataloging; she also helped us understand that our project goals were ambitious and that we should probably reconsider them 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. In our discussions of categories and textile terminology, Linda and the Winterthur cataloging team advised cataloging by category instead of by each of the three collections as originally stated in the grant proposal. That advice proved very helpful in facilitating the workflow.

Linda also advised that we keep terminology simple and direct. In addition, she recommended that we record how much time was spent at each location and how many records were completed in that time so that we had a fair sharing of labor and progress among the three organizations and stayed on track according to priorities established. It was straightforward, practical advice, but very helpful. Winterthur's cataloging process should be a model for any museum collection where there is a cataloging backlog.

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 a master's degree 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 in 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 necessary for its timely completion, as well as for the physical demands of the work.

The project principal investigators knew each other well and were able to work through problems that emerged. Developing standardized 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 explored new ground with the database, both with the identification of the objects and the use of appropriate terminology. Pennsylvania German textiles share features in style and construction with other European folk and immigrant textile traditions, which can either aid or confuse identification and interpretation. As cataloger, Caitlin sorted through varied descriptions from all three institutions and worked toward standardization that we hoped would serve not only our researchers, but also other museums that own collections of Pennsylvania German textiles.

The project staff had Caitlin begin by photographing, measuring, and cataloging all the woven coverlets and quilts. The assistance of volunteers in hanging textiles and taking notes was key in this part of the project.

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

Caitlin worked at both MHC and the SLHC, and the Goschenhoppen Historians brought their collections to the SLHC for cataloging. She shifted her work station every few months, which made it possible for her to work with staff of all three organizations.



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

Regular project meetings helped keep the lines of communication open and project expectations realistic. In the grant application, we ambitiously stated that we would have monthly meetings. We did not quite achieve that timetable, but instead met when beginning a new textile category or when Caitlin had questions 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 evolve as researchers study the collections and staff are able to provide better provenance and other documentation. However, the CLIR grant allowed us to make an extraordinary leap forward in the management, documentation, and accessibility of the

collections by creating records in the database that are essential both to our in-house activities and to research by others. It also pushed the Goschenhoppen Historians to implement new technology that gives them twenty-first century tools for cataloging and tracking their collections. Our finished product greatly advances our effort toward the standardization of terms and interpretation of Pennsylvania German textiles that we hope will serve other organizations as well as our own.

The rewards and pitfalls of this intensive collaborative effort among organizations that are very similar in many ways and quite different in others—and the group’s ultimate development of a finished product that will serve the organizations and their audiences for years to come—is an excellent model for other small organizations that are embarking on a joint project.