



The Churchill Weavers Collection: An American Treasure Uncovered

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Abstract

In 2007, the Kentucky Historical Society (KHS) 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 have since cataloged the archive at the box level, using the Archives module in PastPerfect to retain crucial information about weave structures, patterns, products, fiber content, 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.

In 2012, the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) awarded the Kentucky Historical Society (KHS) a grant under its Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives program 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. The 24-month project ended on March 31, 2015. It made thousands of textiles by American handweaving legend Churchill Weavers available online and in person. Now that the collection is no longer hidden, it has the potential 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, 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.

As the largest component of the collection, the fabric archive 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, upon receiving the CLIR grant, that staff made 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 (Figure 1). David Carroll Churchill and his wife, Eleanor Franzen, founded the company and ran it for more than 50 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.



Fig. 1: Churchill Weavers loomhouse, ca. 1960

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 and standalone retail shops in major U.S. cities. Fine department stores, such as Saks Fifth Avenue and Lord & Taylor, and small independent stores carried its products. Baby blankets, couch throws, and ladies' accessories were Churchill Weavers's mainstays, but 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 a handcraft business rooted in Appalachia; 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 that they called the Master Sample Collection (Figure 2). It contained a sample of every design, product, and

experimental piece produced, as well as 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.



Fig. 2: 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 the Churchill Weavers slogan, "America's Finest and Largest Handweavers." Although the boxes mitigated damage from moisture, pests, and dirt, storing textiles in cardboard boxes is not ideal; thus it is remarkable that the samples had survived into the twenty-first century. Staff wrote the inventory numbers on the boxes and developed a card file system for finding items in the archive. Churchill Weavers 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 85 years of operation, Churchill Weavers could no longer compete with less expensive foreign imports or overcome 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 the remaining items. Factory operations in Berea came to an end.

Lila Bellando recognized the importance of preserving 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 KHS about acquiring the collection. Elated at the opportunity, KHS secured private funding to purchase it from her.

The Churchill Weavers collection is KHS's single largest acquisition; the fabric archive consists of 2,369 boxes of textiles (Figure 3). Churchill Weavers and KHS staff did not have an official item count at the time of acquisition, although some estimates were as high as 100,000 samples.



Fig. 3: Fabric archive on pallets in KHS's museum storage, 2007

Besides the fabric archive, the collection includes 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 walled off with plexiglas. This arrangement 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).



Fig. 4: Cataloging stations in *Magic in the Weaving*, 2008

Collection staff chose to catalog the fabric archive at the item level, which is standard practice for documenting museum artifacts. It is a process in which each artifact is given an individual catalog number and collection record, and each 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 spaces 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.

Two years later, KHS hired a part-time project assistant to reassess the fabric archive. She evaluated earlier cataloging work and determined that item-level cataloging was ineffective for this collection. Churchill Weavers and KHS staff estimated that there were 40,000 to 100,000 textiles in the archive. If staff continued to catalog the textiles item by item, she projected it would take them 10 or more years to catalog 40,000 pieces. KHS could no longer dedicate a team of staff members to the project as 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, director of museum collections and exhibitions, and the director of 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 itself 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 their original order. Although she used abbreviated terms to describe

items and her resulting finding aid was skeletal, 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 took into account the inventory system's significance.

The project assistant determined that the new cataloging strategy should 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; however, it was necessary to translate their records into a system that would work for KHS staff and for researchers. The project assistant's goal was to ensure that the new strategy would capture item details crucial to anyone studying handwoven textiles and present them in an effective, yet efficient format.

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 museum collections and exhibitions team, who manage KHS's artifact collections, including the Churchill Weavers fabric archive, normally uses the Objects catalog. The team decided that the Archives catalog would work best for this new approach, however, because it would facilitate both item-level and box-level cataloging in ways that the Objects catalog cannot (Figure 5).

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: (1) scope and content and (2) container list. The scope and content field was used to record the

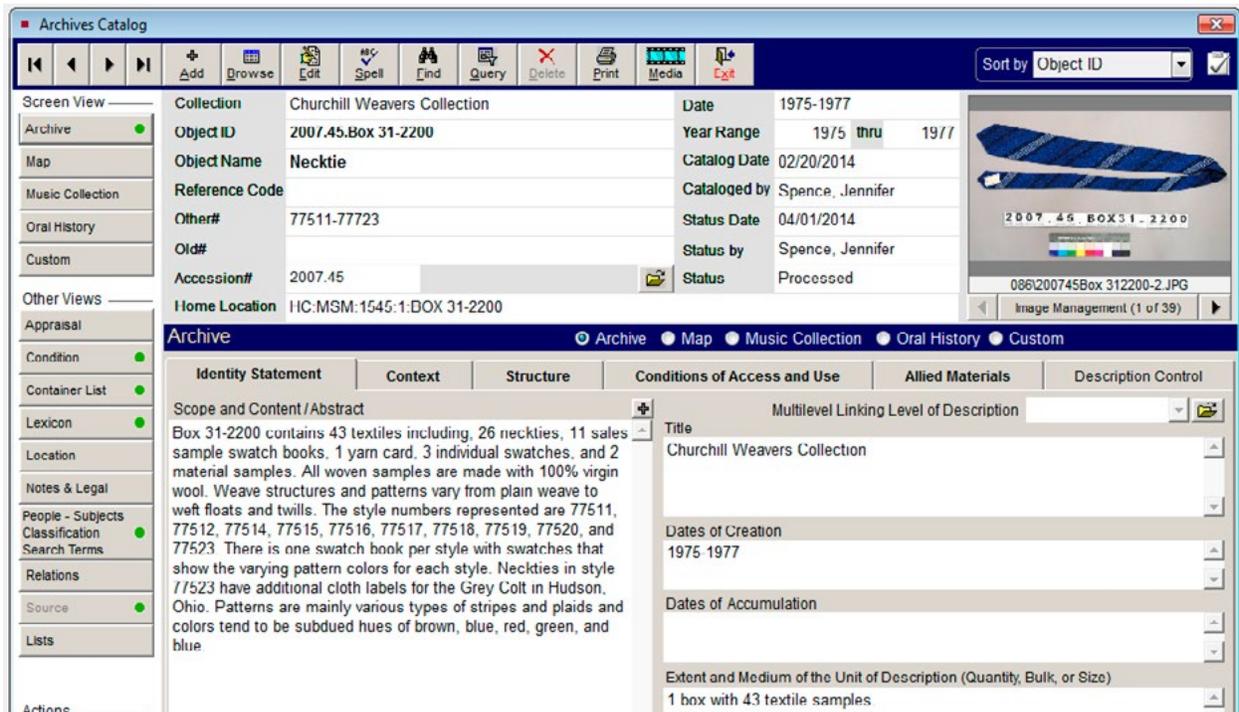


Fig. 5: Screen shot of an Archives record

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.

Container lists were used with each box record to itemize textiles (Figure 6). This approach made it possible to isolate unusual and particularly interesting artifacts with more detailed cataloging that is not covered by the scope and content. Many boxes had dozens or even hundreds of swatches. A container list record may contain information for two or more samples that are duplicates or very similar in design and style instead of creating hundreds of records. The container lists 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 the weaver who created that piece. The ability of both staff and researchers to access

this detailed information is critical for this collection. Staff anticipate that future researchers will add more data to this expandable structure.

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 into PastPerfect is Nomenclature 3.0 for Museum Cataloging, which is the standard cataloging tool for man-made objects. PastPerfect has fields for up to three object names based on the built-in lexicon. This feature 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

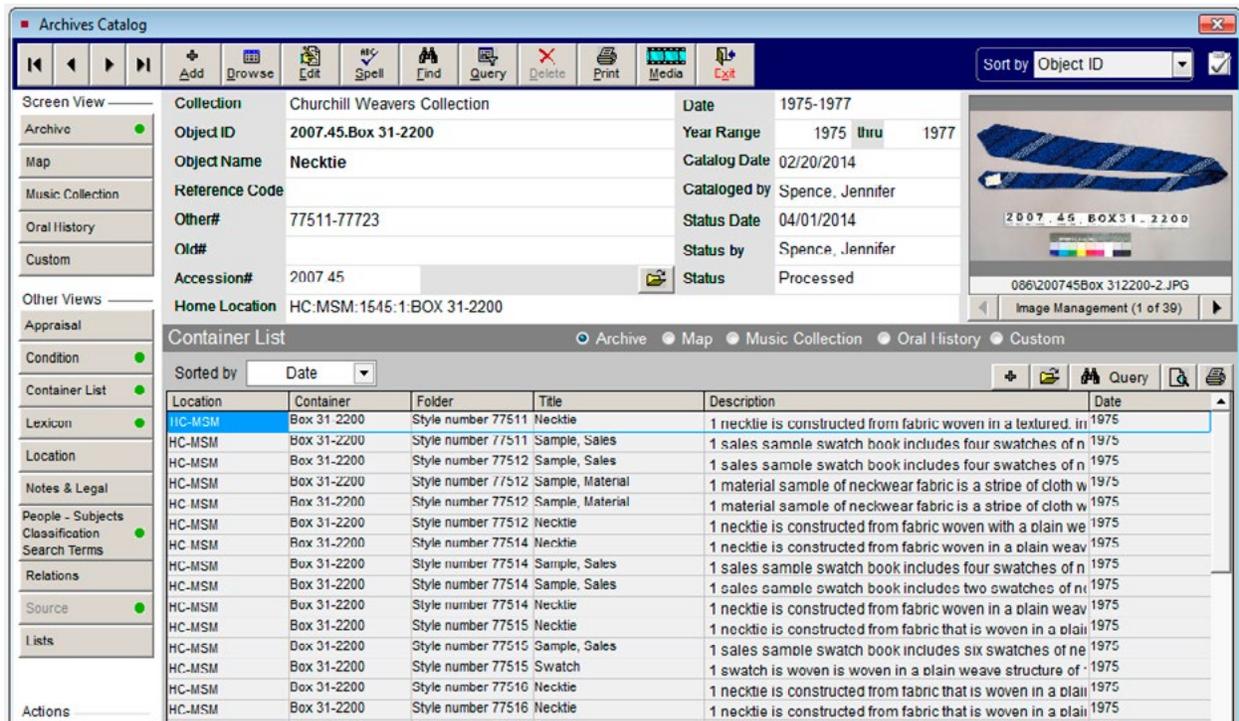


Fig. 6: Screen shot of an Archives record's container list

is 2007.45, and catalog numbers had been assigned to 1,629 samples 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 three-part, alphanumeric numbering system. In the number 2007.45.Box 31-114, for example, 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 is 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. They photographed the fabric archive in "box shots," where textiles of the same box were pictured together in groups of two or more. They photographed large finished products (e.g., baby

¹ Box locations for artifacts managed by the museum collections and exhibitions staff include the box's length, thus allowing for better management of the various boxes and their room and shelf locations. Staff store fabric archive textiles in 31-inch long newspaper boxes.

blankets, throws), unusual artifacts, and items that cannot fit into a group shot individually (Figure 7.) An unlimited number of images can be attached to a single catalog in PastPerfect. Each shot was linked to the collection record with image information and uploaded to the online collection database. The project team believed it was important to provide a visual image for each box, both as an aid to researchers and as a conservation tool. The images taken allowed staff to record the condition of each box at the time of processing.



Fig. 7: Box record shot



KentuckyHistoricalSociety

OBJECT CATALOG

Research Home Keyword Search Advanced Search Random Images Archives Objects

Archive Record

[Return To Search Results](#) [Email to a Friend](#) [Send Us Feedback](#)

	Collection	Churchill Weavers Collection
	Catalog Number	2007.45.Box 31-577
	Object Name	Scarf, Neck
	Other number	1942-17, 1942-18
 	Creator	Churchill Weavers
	Other Creators	Churchill Weavers staff
 	Date	1942
	Scope & Content	Box 31-377 contains 2 finished shawls and 9 finished scarves woven in varying weaves, colors, and patterns. The style numbers and numbers per style are 1102 (1 sample), 1104 (1 sample),

Fig. 8: Screen shot from a PastPerfect Online record

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

A select number of fields from the catalog record were exported to PastPerfect Online: collection, catalog number, object name, other number, creator, other creators, date, scope and content, system of arrangement, and any available images (Figure 8). 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 <http://kyhistory.pastperfectonline.com/>.

The project team incorporated textile rehousing into the cataloging workflow. The fabric archive had been packed in small, brown acidic boxes. Once cataloged and photographed, all textiles were removed from these boxes, rehousing into longer and wider archival boxes, and supported with unbuffered acid-free tissue paper (Figure 9). Textiles found to be damaged by pests, mold, or mildew were treated accordingly. General textile cleaning was done if fabrics were found with dirt and accretions caused by previous storage conditions at Churchill Weavers.

The project assistant and volunteers were making progress with the collection, but they needed more help to complete the project. In 2012,



Fig. 9: Before rehousing (left) and after rehousing (right)

KHS received the Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives grant from CLIR. 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 in the team's project plan was 25 to 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, although 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 percent 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. More than 20 volunteers and 8 interns served on the project. Their responsibilities included everything from rehousing and

photographing the textiles to marketing and promoting the collection (Figure 10). The project team would not have accomplished digitization initiatives without their help, especially because CLIR stipulated that no grant funds could be used for digitization.

Before KHS received 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 new volunteers and interns over the granting period. Staff created training materials to help keep work consistent, including documents for rehousing, cataloging, and using Photoshop to clean up images before adding them to the database.



Fig. 10: A Churchill Weavers's project volunteer rehousing textiles

The backgrounds of our volunteers and interns were diverse. The project team had interns from visual studies, public history, and history programs at 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 identified weavers, textile scholars, and other museum professionals as the people who would use this collection. In the first year 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 (Figure 11) 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.

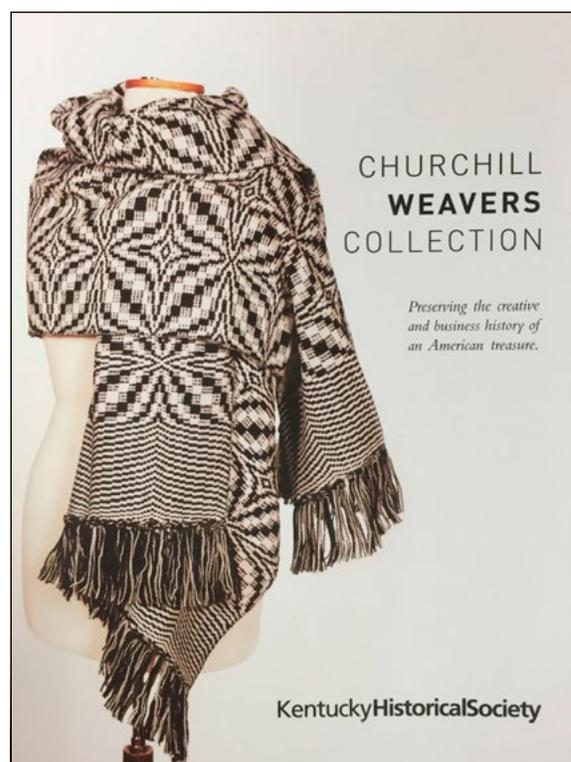


Fig. 11: Churchill Weavers Collection brochure

Staff developed a new line of Churchill Weavers–inspired products for the KHS gift shop (Figure 12). 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.



Fig. 12: Custom-made Churchill Weavers–inspired gift shop merchandise



The collection has had a strong social media presence. Project staff worked to promote it through Pinterest, Facebook, and the KHS blog, *Chronicle*; the staff also encouraged interns and volunteers to write blog and Facebook posts. The project coordinator and assistant wrote about the collection for several external blogs, including the Textile Society of America's *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 learning about weaving and the fiber arts.

KHS's Scholarly Research Fellowship Program developed a new fellowship for researchers who wish to study the fabric archive. The Churchill Weavers Fellowship is the first of its kind designed for a KHS artifact collection. KHS will use a private donation to fund the fellowship. The fellowship review panel selected two project proposals for 2015. The fellows' projects are to be completed by June 2016.

Conclusion

A weaving collection as complete as the Churchill Weavers fabric archive is extraordinary. Loomhouses in the Appalachian region rarely kept samples of their work. If they did, their collections often succumbed to pests, dirt, fire, and natural light. KHS is proud of the Churchill Weavers collection and the accomplishments in cataloging it. KHS is certain that the collection not only will inspire scholars and weavers, but also will enrich scholarship in many disciplines.

Cataloging the fabric archive was a daunting task, but the 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 anticipate that future researchers will add to the data structure and make suggestions on areas needing improvement.

KHS is very thankful to CLIR and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for their financial support. This jewel of a collection would still be hidden without their help. KHS also thanks the volunteers and interns who have served on the project. To catalog, digitize, and rehouse 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.