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Women at the Loom:  
Handweaving in Washington County, Tennessee, 1840-1860

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the Department of History  
East Tennessee State University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in History

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by  
Ann Cameron MacRae  
May 2001

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Keywords: Weaving, Women, Washington County, East Tennessee, Appalachia, Antebellum

## ABSTRACT

Women at the Loom:  
Handweaving in Washington County, Tennessee, 1840-1860

by

Ann Cameron MacRae

This thesis explores the evidence for handweaving in antebellum Washington County, Tennessee. The author examines probate inventories, wills, store ledgers, and census and tax materials to determine the identities of the weavers, the equipment and raw materials available to them, and the kinds of textiles that women wove. The author discusses the reasons many women continued to weave cloth at home although commercially woven textiles were available in local stores.

The author concludes that many of Washington County's antebellum weavers wove as a contribution to the country goods the family bartered at the local store. Others may have been responding to an ethnic or family tradition or seeking an outlet for creative expression. For many, a combination of factors influenced them to weave.

By adding to our understanding of women's household activities in East Tennessee, this study adds to the history of the wider Appalachian region.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people made this thesis possible, historians, weavers, friends, and family, too many to single out more than a few. One who cannot be ignored, however, was Lucy Gump, who introduced me to the Washington County probate inventories and encouraged me to use them to study antebellum weavers. Most important were my parents, Jane Canby MacRae and James Lawrence Woodward MacRae. Neither lived to see the completion of this thesis, but both influenced it greatly. My mother taught me to weave and my father taught me to write. From both I learned to be curious about the world, past and present.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

When thirty-seven-year-old John Duncan died in Washington County, Tennessee, at the end of 1850, the county court ordered that one year's provision, as well as a long list of farm equipment and household goods, be set aside for the use of his widow Elizabeth and their children.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the crops, animals, and furniture that the court deemed appropriate for the widow's use was "one loom and rigging, one big Wheel & one quill wheel." She was also allowed to keep one flax hatchel, one spinning wheel and six sheep.<sup>2</sup> The inclusion of spinning and weaving equipment in this "widow's allotment" of 1850 prompts questions about the persistence of domestic textile production in the midst of a market economy.

Antebellum East Tennessee, in general, and Washington County, in particular, argues historian David Hsiung, enjoyed a well-established, commercial economy with raw materials and manufactured goods moving in and out of the region. During the early nineteenth century, relatively speaking, there were already many connections between Appalachia and the outside world.<sup>3</sup> By mid-century, some residents of upper East Tennessee were able to make choices as to

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<sup>1</sup> *Washington County, Tennessee, Inventory of Estates, Book 2, 1844-1857* (hereafter cited as *Inventory of Estates*), Courthouse, Jonesborough, Tennessee, 221; 345. The United States Census for 1850 includes a listing in Washington County, Tennessee, for John Duncan, born in Tennessee, age 36, with property worth \$800; Elizabeth, also born in Tennessee, age 37; and children born in Tennessee: Mary L., 15; James F., 13; and Nancy A., 10. Also living in the house was Nancy Hampton, age 62. Margaret Ellis Sepello, trans., *Population Schedule of the United States Census of 1850 for Washington County, Tennessee* (By the author, 1995), 86.

<sup>2</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, 345-346.

<sup>3</sup> David C. Hsiung, *Two Worlds in the Tennessee Mountains: Exploring the Origins of Appalachian Stereotypes* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 74-102 passim. Southern Appalachia can be generally defined as the mountainous areas of West Virginia,

how isolated or connected, that is, how self-sufficient they wished their lives to be.<sup>4</sup> That residents of Washington County had these choices is borne out by the evidence in probate inventories, newspaper advertisements, and store ledgers. In particular, strong evidence exists that local merchants stocked a wide range of commercially woven textiles.

A study of probate inventories and store ledgers from 1844 to 1857 indicates that Elizabeth Duncan was not the only weaver in Washington County during those years. An estimate based on the probate inventories alone indicates that as many as one hundred of her neighbors continued to weave cloth at home despite the availability of commercially woven cloth. The purpose of the present study is to examine handweaving in Washington County in an attempt to learn what type of cloth the women of Washington County were weaving and why they continued to weave despite their participation in a market economy.

Although much of the evidence of weaving activity in probate inventories and store ledgers is associated with men's names, this study concludes that most, if not all, of the weavers in antebellum Washington County were women. Studies indicate that in the nineteenth-century United States men tended to engage in weaving as a profession, while women tended to weave

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Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. Karl B. Raitz and Richard Ulack, *Appalachia: A Regional Geography* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1984), 19.

<sup>4</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, however, a vastly improved transportation system in other parts of the country left the southern Appalachian area relatively isolated, and economic hardship caused by the Civil War forced many to engage in a more self-sufficient lifestyle than they had enjoyed earlier in the century. Wilma A. Dunaway, *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700-1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Leonard W. Brinkman, "Home Manufactures as an Indication of an Emerging Appalachian Subculture, 1840-1870," *West Georgia College Studies in the Social Sciences* 12 (1973), 51-52.

for their families.<sup>5</sup> There is no evidence of professional weaving in Washington County between 1840 and 1860. In addition, although nineteenth-century merchants kept accounts in the name of the male head of the household, women and girls in the household contributed much of what was exchanged with merchants for credit.<sup>6</sup> In the absence of direct evidence of men weaving, the author adheres to the common understanding among historians that women were the household weavers during this period.

Although sources for this study are limited, they offer important perspectives on the economic activities of the women of antebellum East Tennessee.<sup>7</sup> Wills and probate inventories are filled with details of material culture, although a disappointingly small fraction of persons who died in any given year left such records. The day books and account books of local merchants are also rich sources, revealing not only what customers bought, but also how they paid, whether in cash or barter with feathers, corn, or handwoven cloth. Newspapers published in Jonesborough and Knoxville reveal much about goods and ideas moving in and out of the region. In addition, the Census of Manufactures for the counties of upper East Tennessee

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<sup>5</sup> John W. Heisey, comp., *A Checklist of American Coverlet Weavers* (Williamsburg, Virginia: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1978), 127; Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of American Life, 1790-1840* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 38, 43; Sandra Rambo Walker, *Country Cloth to Coverlets: Textile Traditions in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Central Pennsylvania* (Keystone Books, 1981), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Larkin, 38.

<sup>7</sup> Mary K. Anglin, "Lives on the Margin: Rediscovering the Women of Antebellum Western North Carolina," in *Appalachia in the Making: The Mountain South in the Nineteenth Century* eds. Mary Beth Pudup, Dwight B. Billings, and Altina L. Waller (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 190.

includes surprising detail relating to textile production.<sup>8</sup> Finally, although surviving antebellum textile equipment and textiles are relatively scarce, they add a valuable dimension to an understanding of handweaving in antebellum Washington County.<sup>9</sup>

Several sources provide information on the people of Washington County. The United States census for 1850, the first to list the names of more than just the head of the household, lets the researcher infer the names of many of the weavers in the county. Tax records from the 1840s and 1850s make it possible to learn more about individuals and families, including in what section of the county they lived.

No regional studies of nineteenth-century home textile production have focused on East Tennessee in the twenty years just before the Civil War. In 1972, Harold and Dorothy Burnham published their classic study, *Keep Me Warm One Night: Early Handweaving in Eastern Canada*. The Burnhams' book, the result of twenty-five years of research, describes the traditional handweaving of eastern Canada from the early years of the nineteenth century until about 1900, when commercial weaving of cloth had all but replaced the work of the handweaver except in isolated areas. The strength of the Burnhams' work is the sheer range and volume of textiles documented, photographed, and described in technical weaving terminology.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States Original Returns: Agricultural and Manufacturing Census Records, Tennessee, Anderson through Wilson Counties, 1850* (hereafter cited as *Census of Manufactures, 1850*) Original documents property of Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. (microfilm of handwritten material consulted at Sherrod Library, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee.)

<sup>9</sup> It is unfortunate that there seem to be no surviving East Tennessee letters or diaries from the period under consideration that address spinning and weaving in the home.

<sup>10</sup> Harold K. Burnham and Dorothy K. Burnham, *'Keep Me Warm One Night': Early Handweaving in Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972).

In the early 1990s, the Vermont Historic Textile Project, sponsored by the Vermont Statehood Bicentennial Commission and under the direction of Celia Oliver and Kate Smith, both weavers specializing in nineteenth-century textiles, spent two years identifying and documenting hundreds of examples of nineteenth-century Vermont household weaving still held in private collections. Oliver and Smith's work culminated in a traveling exhibit, *All in a Day's Work: 200 Years of Handweaving in Vermont*, which combined some of the nineteenth-century examples of weaving with that of late twentieth-century weavers influenced by the earlier period.<sup>11</sup> Although Oliver and Smith did not discuss the transition from handweaving to commercial weaving, their study could serve as an excellent model for the documentation of antebellum handwoven textiles in an area such as East Tennessee.

In her 1987 Ph.D. dissertation, "Textile Production in Nineteenth Century Orange, Alamance, and Durham Counties, North Carolina," Laurel E. Janke Wilson studied the effect of the local textile mill industry on home textile production. Wilson used content analysis to organize the information about spinning and weaving contained in the thousands of probate inventories filed in her area of study during the nineteenth century. Wilson concluded that handweaving decreased gradually throughout the nineteenth century and might have disappeared earlier than it did had it not been for the interruption of the Civil War. Wilson further concluded that women played a primary role in domestic textile production during the period of her study.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Celia Oliver and Kate Smith, *All in a Day's Work: 200 Years of Handweaving in Vermont* (Shelburne, Vermont: Vermont Historic Textile Project, 1991). The author of the present study helped with the documentation project and was one of the twentieth-century weavers featured in the exhibit.

<sup>12</sup> Laurel E. Janke Wilson, "Textile Production in Nineteenth Century Orange, Alamance, and Durham Counties, North Carolina" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at

Closer to home, in 1983 Sadye Tune Wilson and Doris Finch Kennedy coordinated a study that documented more than one thousand handwoven nineteenth-century Tennessee coverlets.<sup>13</sup> *Of Coverlets: The Legacies, The Weavers* is a treasury of photographs of Tennessee's weaving heritage. Wilson and Kennedy identified the weavers of many nineteenth-century coverlets but did not discuss the transition from handwoven to commercially produced textiles in Tennessee. Wilson and Kennedy found fewer than two dozen coverlets from East Tennessee, with only one of these woven before 1860.

Textile scholars and economic historians have paid considerable attention to both eighteenth-century handweaving and the nineteenth-century process of transition from handweaving to factory weaving in New England. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, for example, has described the web of relationships among the women in a late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century Maine community as they traded goods and services, including spinning and weaving supplies and equipment.<sup>14</sup> Gail Mohanty and Thomas Dublin have studied the early nineteenth-century New England putting-out system whereby farm women wove warps provided by mill owners.<sup>15</sup> Other scholars have studied the lives of women in the antebellum South; Cynthia

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Greenville, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Sadye Tune Wilson and Doris Finch Kennedy, *Of Coverlets: The Legacies, The Weavers* (Nashville, Tennessee: Tunstede Press, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Random House, Inc. 1990).

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Dublin, "Rural Putting-Out Work in Early Nineteenth-Century New England: Women and the Transition to Capitalism in the Countryside," *New England Quarterly* 64 (December 1991): 535.

Kierner, for one, has written about the changes in the lives of southern women between the colonial period and the Civil War.<sup>16</sup>

The present study complements Wilson and Kennedy's work in that it expands on what is known of the weavers of antebellum Washington County, Tennessee, and what they wove. It goes beyond Kennedy and Wilson in an attempt to explain why they wove. Chapter 2 discusses conditions in Washington County in the decades prior to the Civil War, describing the land, the people, and their lives. Chapter 3 summarizes the history of textile production in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States paying special attention to the tools and textiles of the nineteenth-century handweaver. The chapter also examines the probate inventories and wills from antebellum Washington County for evidence of domestic spinning and weaving activity. Chapter 4 discusses what that evidence tells us about the weavers of Washington County. With this background in mind, Chapter 5 describes the lives of Elizabeth Duncan and her neighbors and discusses some of the reasons they were weaving at home in the midst of a thriving market economy.

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<sup>16</sup> Cynthia Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700-1835* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998).

## CHAPTER 2

### WASHINGTON COUNTY, TENNESSEE

Washington County, Tennessee's first county, is located in northeastern Tennessee and at the time under consideration in the present study contained about five hundred square miles, including the southeastern sector, which became Unicoi County in 1875. The northern two-thirds of Washington County falls mostly within the physiogeographic Ridge and Valley Province of the Appalachians, and the southern third falls mostly within the Blue Ridge Province. In Washington County the ridges and valleys are not as strongly marked as they are to the north and west, but the pattern of parallel ridges and intervening valleys extending across the county in a northeast to southwesterly direction is still quite evident.<sup>17</sup> The ridge elevations run from about 1,800 to 2,000 feet above sea level, about 100 to 300 feet above the valley floors. In the southeastern corner, at 5,037 feet above sea level, Unaka Mountain in the Unaka Range is the highest point in the county.<sup>18</sup> The lowest point is at 1,200 feet above sea level on Horse Creek, in the upper northwest part of the county.<sup>19</sup> Jonesborough, the county seat, lies at about 1,700 feet above sea level.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Raitz and Ulack, 44-48.

<sup>18</sup> Tennessee Valley Authority Mapping Services Branch, United States Department of the Interior Geological Survey, Unicoi Quadrangle; Tennessee, North Carolina (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978).

<sup>19</sup> Watauga Association of Genealogists of Upper East Tennessee, comp., *History of Washington County, Tennessee* (hereafter cited as Watauga Association of Genealogists) (Johnson City, Tennessee: Watauga Association of Genealogists of Upper East Tennessee, 1988), 10.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Before the appearance of European settlers in the 1770s, most of Washington County was covered with chestnut, red oak, chestnut oak, white oak, and tulip poplar. White oak predominated in the valleys and chestnut on the mountains from elevations of 1,500 to 4,500 feet. Occasional balds in the Unaka Range were covered with grasses, heath shrubs, and rhododendron.<sup>21</sup> Two hundred years later the southeastern part of the county is still heavily forested. The major rivers in Washington County are the Nolichucky in the south and the Watauga in the north, both tributaries of the Tennessee River. Smaller creeks throughout the county were once important as sources of power for sawmills, gristmills, and wool carding mills.

Because of the direction of the prevailing ridges, most drainage in the region is longitudinal to the southwest. The most fertile soils are found in the northern and western sections of the county and on the upper traces of the Nolichucky and Watauga and their tributaries. The soils on the mountain slopes and in the mountain drainage systems of the southeastern section are not as productive as those in the northern and western sections.<sup>22</sup> The most valuable mineral found in the county is iron, which because of its abundance played an important part in the early commerce of the county.<sup>23</sup> Washington County's climate is temperate though humid, with an annual expected rainfall of 50.1 inches.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Raitz and Ulack, 71.

<sup>22</sup> Watauga Association of Genealogists, 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Goodspeed's History of Tennessee* (Nashville: Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1887; reprinted., Nashville: C. and R. Elder Booksellers, 1973), 892.

<sup>24</sup> William A. McGeeveran, Jr., editorial director, *The World Almanac and Book of Facts, 2001* (Mahwah, New Jersey: World Almanac Books, 2000), 244.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, the long hunters traveled south down the valleys from Virginia and Pennsylvania, and west across the Blue Ridge mountains from North Carolina into what was to become East Tennessee. Before the American Revolution, and despite the Proclamation Act of 1763 forbidding settlement by whites west of the Appalachians, the rich alluvial soils of the East Tennessee valleys drew settlers down the same trails.<sup>25</sup> Although the mountains of the southeastern part of the country severely limited agriculture and discouraged settlement during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, by 1800 the population of East Tennessee was estimated at 70,000.<sup>26</sup>

The adventurers who followed in the wake of the long hunters were the same English, Scotch-Irish, and Germans (including some German Jews) who had populated western Pennsylvania and Virginia. In addition, a few highland Scots had made their way across the mountains from coastal North Carolina.<sup>27</sup> These groups, particularly the Scotch-Irish and the Germans, were to form the basis of what has been called the “upland south” culture of the southern Appalachian region.<sup>28</sup> One of the characteristic traits of the Scotch-Irish and the Germans was a strong weaving tradition.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The first permanent white settler in Tennessee is thought to have been William Bean, who settled near the Watauga River in 1769. Samuel Cole Williams, *History of Johnson City and Its Environs* (Johnson City, Tennessee: Watauga Press, 1940), 9.

<sup>26</sup> Raitz and Ulack, 98.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth W. Keller, “What is Distinctive About the Scotch-Irish?” in *Appalachian Frontiers: Settlement, Society, and Development in the Preindustrial Era*, ed. Robert D. Mitchell (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1991), 77; Robert D. Mitchell, 17.

In 1777, the North Carolina legislature established Washington County, encompassing the area that is now the state of Tennessee. The mountain barrier and the distance from the North Carolina seat of government, however, encouraged the separation of Washington County from North Carolina. Following the American Revolution, a number of citizens of Washington County declared independence from North Carolina and formed the independent state of Franklin, which existed from 1784 to 1788. In 1798, Tennessee formally separated from North Carolina and entered the union as the sixteenth state.<sup>30</sup> The Cherokee Indians, original inhabitants of the area, had shifted their home ground south by the turn of the eighteenth century, although they still considered the area that was to become Washington County their hunting ground.<sup>31</sup> Most of those Cherokee remaining by the 1830s were moved west along the “Trail of Tears” as a result of the Indian Removal Act of 1830.<sup>32</sup>

Early nineteenth-century upper East Tennessee was well connected to the wider Appalachian region.<sup>33</sup> By 1795, the Great Wagon Road linked Knoxville and Philadelphia.<sup>34</sup> In 1826 the *Knoxville Register* announced that the Great Stagecoach Road ran down the main street

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<sup>30</sup> *Goodspeed's History of Tennessee*, 894-895.

<sup>31</sup> Robert E. Corlew, *Tennessee: A Short History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 18

<sup>32</sup> Carroll Van West, ed., *Tennessee History: The Land, the People, and the Culture* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 289.

<sup>33</sup> Dunaway, chap. 7 passim.

<sup>34</sup> Donald W. Buckwalter, “Effects of Early Nineteenth Century Transportation Disadvantage on the Agriculture of Eastern Tennessee,” *Southeastern Geographer* 27 (May 1987): 21.

of Jonesborough.<sup>35</sup> By the end of the 1820s, a stage coach that carried mail and passengers passed through Jonesborough two or three times a week as it traveled between Abingdon, Virginia, and Salem, North Carolina. Other stage coaches linked Washington County with Knoxville and Nashville.<sup>36</sup> In 1834 *Eastin Morris' Tennessee Gazetteer* reported, "bacon . . . is wagoned to Augusta in Georgia. Shoe thread, tow linen, feathers, bees' wax and ginseng are purchased by the resident merchants and hauled to Baltimore. Iron castings, nails, flour and whiskey are transported to Huntsville, Ala."<sup>37</sup> In addition, livestock droving routes crisscrossed the area.<sup>38</sup>

The rivers of East Tennessee also served as important transportation routes. Flat boats moved on the Holston and the French Broad rivers, connecting with the Tennessee and eventually New Orleans. By 1820, keel boats made regular trips up and down the Holston River to Knoxville, taking eight days to make the trip each way. Cargoes of rope and nails made the trip south; going north, the boats hauled hemp, sugar, coffee, and dry goods.<sup>39</sup>

Although agricultural products were the predominant cargoes, by 1820 a small but growing segment of the population in East Tennessee engaged in various manufacturing efforts,

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<sup>35</sup> Miriam Fink Delaney, *Humor, Rumor and Romance in Old Jonesborough*, ed. Molly MacRae Thompson (Johnson City, Tennessee: Overmountain Press, 1991), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Elery A. Lay, *An Industrial and Commercial History of the Tri-Cities in Tennessee-Virginia* (Kingsport, Tennessee: Lay Publications, 1982), 24, 33.

<sup>37</sup> Robert M. McBride and Owen Meredith, eds., *Eastin Morris' Tennessee Gazetteer 1834* (Nashville, Tennessee: The Gazetteer Press, 1971), 274.

<sup>38</sup> Buckwalter, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Lay, 45.

producing iron, whiskey, paper, linseed oil, carded wool, and spinning wheels.<sup>40</sup> In Washington County alone, by 1850 the list of manufacturing occupations had expanded to include blacksmiths, carpenters, wagon makers, saddlers, cabinet makers, nail makers, and tanners. Also operating in the county were distilleries, sawmills, gristmills, wool carding mills, and iron rolling mills.<sup>41</sup>

The North Carolina legislature in 1779 had established Jonesborough as the county seat, near the geographic center of the county. In 1780, streets, lots, and common lands were laid out.<sup>42</sup> In 1796, a United States Post Office was established in Jonesborough.<sup>43</sup> By 1847, there were seven more post offices in Washington County.<sup>44</sup> Jonesborough developed along the lines of the model courthouse town of the upland south. Though sometimes the county town just grew from a crossroad hamlet, many, such as Jonesborough, were planned communities whose arrangement of streets and public buildings “gave clear focus to civil order and concentrated the skills of the elite.”<sup>45</sup> As was the case in Jonesborough, one found the county courthouse in the center of town surrounded by banks, stores, the post office, the newspaper office, and offices of

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<sup>40</sup> Census of Manufactures, 1820, Eastern District of Tennessee (hereafter cited as Census of Manufactures, 1820).

<sup>41</sup> Census of Manufactures, 1850, pp. 321-326..

<sup>42</sup> *Historic District Plan* (Johnson City, Tennessee: Upper East Tennessee Office of the State Planning Commission, 1972), 5.

<sup>43</sup> Watauga Association of Genealogists, 184.

<sup>44</sup> Paul M. Fink, *Jonesborough: The First Century of Tennessee's First Town, 1776-1876*, 2d ed. (Johnson City, Tennessee: Overmountain Press, 1989), 154.

<sup>45</sup> Raitz and Ulack, 121.

the professional elite, who were the most likely to be involved in the growing commercial economy; further out were the churches and homes and further still the farms.<sup>46</sup> In the surrounding county, grew up numerous “kinship-linked dispersed hamlets.” As a result of this type of settlement pattern, it was the county that became the largest social unit of southern Appalachia, and each county constituted the full range of the social order from the elite to the rural farmer.<sup>47</sup>

In 1833, Jonesborough had a population of about 500, including “eleven lawyers, four physicians, two clergymen, two churches, two academies, four schools, one printing office, four carpenters, three cabinet makers, two bricklayers, one blacksmith, four tanners, two hatters, four tailors, four shoemakers, one silversmith, two tanners, two wagon makers, one mill, and a number of stores.”<sup>48</sup> Jonesborough continued to grow. In the 1840s, in addition to seven “mercantile” stores, there were Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist churches, two taverns, and “more than a score each of blacksmiths, millers and sawmill operators and a dozen tanners.”<sup>49</sup> In 1846, inspired by the court house recently built in Knox County, the citizens of Washington County built a new courthouse, complete with a dome-shaped cupola with a clock.<sup>50</sup>

In 1777, the North Carolina legislature had granted a charter for the first school in Washington County, Martin Academy, later reorganized as Washington College, a few miles

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>48</sup> McBride and Meredith, 184.

<sup>49</sup> Fink, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 22.

south of Jonesborough. The first school in Jonesborough opened in 1812.<sup>51</sup> Other schools operated at various times during the first half of the nineteenth century, including at least two in the mountainous southeastern section of the county.<sup>52</sup> In 1850, 1,625 pupils attended public schools in the county and another 250 attended academies and other schools.<sup>53</sup>

In antebellum southern Appalachia, local merchants served as intermediaries between relatively isolated customers and regional and national markets.<sup>54</sup> During the 1840s and 1850s, businesses in Jonesborough and other Washington County communities offered a wide range of goods to their customers. Tailors, printers and carriage makers advertised their services.<sup>55</sup> Stores advertised window blinds, spun cotton by the bale, clothing, shoes and boots, coffee, tobacco, queen's ware and glass ware, gun powder, paints, paint brushes, and textiles.<sup>56</sup> Joseph L. King advertised that among the "desirable goods" he could supply were looking glasses. Customers bought looking glasses; in the probate inventories of the 1840s and 1850s, they are one of the most commonly listed items after the basic household furniture.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Goodspeed's History of Tennessee*, 892.

<sup>52</sup> Pat Alderman, *Greasy Cove in Unicoi County: Authentic Folklore* (Johnson City, Tennessee: Overmountain Press, 1975), 13.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Baldwin and J. Thomas, M.D., *A New and Complete Gazetteer of the United States*. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, and Company, 1854), 1237.

<sup>54</sup> Dunaway, 303.

<sup>55</sup> *Jonesborough (Tennessee) Whig*, 9 March 1842.

<sup>56</sup> Delaney, 3; *Jonesborough (Tennessee) Whig*, 8 December 1841.

<sup>57</sup> *Knoxville Register*, 8 May 1849; *Inventory of Estates*, passim.

Store ledgers and account books document goods available for purchase and goods accepted for credit and also reveal details about the role local merchants played in antebellum East Tennessee economic life. Store ledgers record purchases of whiskey, tinned oysters and sardines, candy, cigars, snuff, wine, matches, hair oil, wax dolls, jaw harps, fiddle strings, suspenders, “pammeter” hats, and books.<sup>58</sup> Merchants extended credit for a range of country goods including rabbit, mink, raccoon, and muskrat skins, nails, tallow, butter, bacon, wood, hay, feathers, fruit, wool, tow linen, jeans, linsey, and flax linen.<sup>59</sup> In the absence of local banking facilities, merchants sometimes dispersed cash to customers.<sup>60</sup> Before the advent of prepaid franking in 1847, some merchants also accepted payment for postage.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Dyer and Mackey Daybook, 11 May 1853 - 30 December 1853, Washington County Court Records, Archives of Appalachia, Sherrod Library, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee; John Dyer’s Journal, February 1846-December 1851, Miscellaneous Washington County Records, Archives of Appalachia, Sherrod Library, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee; Jonesboro Mercantile Firm Account Book, January 1845 - May 1846, Washington County Court Records, Archives of Appalachia, Sherrod Library, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee; Landon Carter’s Daybook, 1844-1845, Washington County Court Records, Archives of Appalachia, Sherrod Library, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee; Unidentified Store Ledger, 1848-1853, Washington County Court Records, Archives of Appalachia, Sherrod Library, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee.

<sup>59</sup> The feathers were collected for export to the lower south where they were processed into mattresses and pillows. One East Tennessee store had a “feather hole” under a trap door. A bedtick caught the feathers brought in for trade. Dunaway, 143.

<sup>60</sup> Jonesboro Mercantile Firm Account Book; John Dyer’s Journal. Only one commercial bank operated in Washington County before the Civil War; the Halston Tennessee Bank (renamed the Eastern Bank of Tennessee) operated in Jonesborough from November 1815 to 1819. Larry Schweikart, “Tennessee Banks in the Antebellum Period, Part I,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 45 (summer 1986): 126.

<sup>61</sup> Lay, 49; Jonesboro Mercantile Firm Account Book.

Stores sold many kinds of commercially woven textiles.<sup>62</sup> When James H. Vance sued Jonesborough merchant James H. Jones in 1845, the court recorded a judgment against Jones and ordered an inventory of his stock so it could be sold to satisfy the more than seven-hundred-dollar debt, damages, and court costs owed by Jones. More than five pages of inventory items indicate that Jones's store stocked the normal range of dry goods usual in a "mercantile" at that time, including *more than three thousand yards of commercially woven textiles*, much obviously imported.<sup>63</sup>

From the early 1830s through the late 1850s, at least one weekly newspaper was published in Jonesborough, although most newspapers published in East Tennessee in the first half of the nineteenth century had short lives. The longest lived of these was the *Whig*, sometimes also called *The Jonesborough Tennessee Whig*, published by William G. "Parson" Brownlow from 1840 to 1849.<sup>64</sup> The *Whig* kept its subscribers in touch with events in the region and rest of the world. For instance, on May 27, 1846, the *Whig* printed a copy of the official declaration of the war with Mexico and news of the taking of Galveston.

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<sup>62</sup> *Jonesborough (Tennessee) Whig*, 8 December 1841; John Dyer's Journal; Landon Carter's Daybook; Unidentified Store Ledger.

<sup>63</sup> Included in the Jones inventory are domestic, calico, flannel, nankeen, cotton drill, gingham, silk, cotton velvet, Russian diaper, black satin, black silk velvet, Irish linen, tow linen, linsey, and Kentucky Jeans, to name just a few. Jones also stocked commonly used dye materials of the time, indigo, madder, and logwood, as well as alum and copperas, which were used as mordants, to make the dye colors more permanent. The dye materials as well as the tow linen, linsey, and Kentucky Jeans, all probably handwoven locally, indicate that women who wove were trading at his store. Inventory in the case of *James H. Vance v. James H. Jones*, Paul Fink Papers, Box 10, McClung Historical Collection, Knox County Public Library System, Knoxville, Tennessee.

<sup>64</sup> Jack Mooney, ed., *A History of Tennessee Newspapers* (Knoxville: Tennessee Press Association, 1996), 6-8.

Sometimes, however, staying in touch with the world was difficult whether it was Jonesborough or Knoxville. On September 5, 1839, an announcement in *Brownlow's Jonesborough Whig* bemoaned the fact that although the roads were fine and the weather pleasant, no mail had arrived the previous Tuesday. Wednesday's mail had been a "partial failure" with the arrival of some papers due the week before and a letter from New Orleans that had arrived by the eastern mail. Jonesborough residents may have sympathized with those of Knoxville where the eastern mail had failed three times in the past week.<sup>65</sup>

By 1850, Jonesborough's population had reached 1,160.<sup>66</sup> Washington County's population was 13,861, of whom 12,931 were free and 930 slave.<sup>67</sup> Most of the county's population were farmers, and although they practiced greater crop diversification than farmers in either Middle or West Tennessee, they had the poorest record of agricultural production in the state. Typically, East Tennessee farmers raised corn, flax, hemp, fruits, and vegetables, and some cotton, tobacco, and wheat, along with pigs, sheep and cows.<sup>68</sup> Only 60.76% of the farming families in East Tennessee owned their own land at this time, the rest resorting to tenancy, sharecropping, and squatting.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *Brownlow's Jonesborough (Tennessee) Whig*, 5 September 1839.

<sup>66</sup> *Preliminary Population Report* (Nashville: Tennessee State Planning Commission), 1935.

<sup>67</sup> Baldwin and Thomas, 1237.

<sup>68</sup> Corlew, 222, 228-229. In the 1840s there were as many sheep as cows in the Appalachian counties of Tennessee, Virginia, and South Carolina. Dunaway, 141.

<sup>69</sup> Frank L. Owsley and Harriet C. Owsley, "The Economic Structure of Rural Tennessee, 1850-1860," *Journal of Southern History* 8 (May 1942): 167; Dunaway, 100.

Antebellum Washington County farms ranged in size from less than 100 acres to more than 500 acres.<sup>70</sup> Many Washington County farmers operated grist and sawmills and black smith forges in addition to farming their land.<sup>71</sup> Although antebellum farmers of southern Appalachia are often described as self-sufficient, or subsistence farmers, this does not accurately describe the farmers of Washington County, even those in the most isolated coves of the Unaka Range, almost none of whom were entirely self-sufficient, but produced surplus crops and livestock for the market.<sup>72</sup>

At mid-century, in most respects the citizens of Jonesborough and Washington County remained active participants in the mainstream of frontier life. In 1858, the completion of the East Tennessee and Virginia Rail Road, running through Jonesborough, connected Knoxville with Bristol, Virginia. Washington County and the other counties of upper East Tennessee would at last be able to connect with national markets to their north and south on a more competitive basis.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Washington County Trustee's Office, Tax Books, 1778-1846; 1814-1850 (hereafter cited as Tax Books), Courthouse, Jonesborough, Tennessee. In 1860, in the Appalachian counties of Tennessee, 1.8% of the farms held between 1 and 99 acres, 11.3% held between 100 and 199 acres, 19.4% held between 200 and 499 acres, and 67.5% held over 500 acres. See Dunaway, 129.

<sup>71</sup> Census of Manufactures, 1850, pp. 321-326.

<sup>72</sup> A truly subsistence household is one that produces no surplus that can be used to earn money. Little more than ten percent of farmers of antebellum southern Appalachia can be described as subsistence farmers. Near subsistence farming was very scant during this period in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, more common in West Virginia, and absent in Alabama, Georgia, Maryland, and South Carolina. See Dunaway, 124-125.

<sup>73</sup> Hsiung, 158.

## CHAPTER 3

### WEAVING IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

As settlers in family groups replaced the earliest explorers to the New World during the early decades of the seventeenth century, one of the first problems they had to deal with was supplying the necessities of daily life, including textiles for clothing and other uses. English mercantilist policy intended the American colonies as a market for English export goods, including textiles, but colonial officials determined quickly not to depend on imports from England. Money was in short supply in the colonies, and a local supply of linen and woolen cloth would be an essential advantage.<sup>74</sup>

As early as 1645, leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony took steps to establish a home-based woolen industry. Colonial officials encouraged colonists to raise sheep and placed restrictions on slaughter of sheep and export of breeding ewes. By 1669, the success of New England's efforts to produce its own woolen cloth convinced the English Board of Trade to prohibit the export of "any wool or woolen manufactures" from England's American colonies.<sup>75</sup>

Colonial governments in New England also encouraged the production of linen cloth. In the 1640s and 1650s the Massachusetts General Court required towns to "inquire what seeds are necessary for growing flax, to ascertain what persons are skillful in braking, use of wheels,

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<sup>74</sup> Catherine Fennelly, *Textiles in New England, 1790 - 1840* (Sturbridge, Massachusetts: Old Sturbridge Village, 1961), 3.

<sup>75</sup> Susan M. Ouellette, "Divine Providence and Collective Endeavor: Sheep Production in Early Massachusetts," *New England Quarterly* 69 (September 1996): 357-58.

weaving, etc.” The court also ordered the selectmen of each town to see that all children, boys and girls, learned to spin.<sup>76</sup>

During the eighteenth century, colonists continued to spin and weave wool and linen, although increasingly by mid-century, many either relied on others to do their weaving or enjoyed the wide selection of locally-produced and European textiles available in all but the most isolated areas.<sup>77</sup> Access to imported textiles ended abruptly, however, with the nonimportation resolutions passed in many colonial towns in response to the Townshend duties of 1767. With patriotic feelings running high, women of all socioeconomic classes once more began to spin and weave for their families. Even fashionable ladies learned to spin, and the wearing of “homespun” became a political statement. In 1768 the senior class of Harvard voted not to wear suits of imported cloth at commencement; the graduating class at Yale followed suit in 1769.<sup>78</sup>

Following the Treaty of Paris in 1783, American merchants returned to stocking their shelves with European goods, including textiles.<sup>79</sup> In the 1790s, merchants in Jonesborough offered their customers a wide range of imported textiles including broadcloth, velvet, satin, nankeen, chintz, calico, linen, cambric, and flannel.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *All Sorts of Good Sufficient Cloth: Linen-making in New England, 1640 - 1860* (North Andover, Massachusetts: Merrimack Valley Textile Museum, 1980), 6.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>78</sup> Fennelly, 8.

<sup>79</sup> *All Sorts of Good Sufficient Cloth*, 21.

<sup>80</sup> *Knoxville Gazette*, 28 July 1792; 11 August 1792.

Many, if not most, Washington County settlers, however, wove their own cloth. In her master's thesis on material culture in Washington County, Lucy Gump reported that 66% of the probate inventories filed in Washington County, Tennessee, before 1797 included a spinning wheel and more than one third included a loom. According to Gump's study, both men and women wove in Washington County at the end of the eighteenth century. In the 1780s, several men were apprenticed to other men to learn the trade of weaving.<sup>81</sup> By the early nineteenth century, the British had made a number of advances in weaving and spinning technology which, when imported, encouraged the growth of an American commercial textile industry. In 1775, Richard Arkwright patented a carding machine that speeded up preparation of wool for spinning.<sup>82</sup> Although the carding machine appeared in the United States in 1783, hand cards continued in wide use; manufacturers in Boston produced 63,000 pairs in 1789.<sup>83</sup> In 1770, James Hargreaves developed the spinning Jenny, which could be used by a woman or child in the home, workshop, or factory to spin multiple strands of either cotton or wool.<sup>84</sup> Samuel Slater introduced Arkwright's water-powered spinning frame, patented in 1769, into the United States in 1790.<sup>85</sup> Neither Hargreaves' nor Arkwright's machines produced a strong enough cotton

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<sup>81</sup> Lucy Kennerly Gump, "Possessions and Patterns of Living in Washington County: The Twenty Years Before Tennessee Statehood" (master's thesis, East Tennessee State University, 1989), 163-165.

<sup>82</sup> Fennelly, 21.

<sup>83</sup> David J. Jeremy, *Transatlantic Industrial Revolution: The Diffusion of Textile Technologies Between Britain and America, 1790-1830s* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1981), 14.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>85</sup> Fennelly, 24.

thread to be used as warp thread. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 and the spinning mule after 1804, finally made strong cotton thread available at a reasonable price for the first time.<sup>86</sup>

Other inventions benefitted the weaving industry. In 1733, Englishman John Kay developed the fly shuttle, a device that employed a spring loaded mechanism to throw the shuttle across the width of the loom. Kay's innovation allowed a weaver to weave a much wider piece of cloth than did the traditional shuttle, which had to be thrown by one hand and caught with the other.<sup>87</sup> Edmund Cartwright patented an automatic loom in England in 1785, but fearing competition from an American textile industry, English officials forbade export of the loom, plans, or models of it.<sup>88</sup> With the eventual introduction of the mechanized power loom into the United States in 1814, the price of commercially woven cotton cloth dropped.<sup>89</sup> As a result, although the handweaving of linen reached its height in New England by 1810, subsequent decades of the early nineteenth century saw the end of home linen production in New England.<sup>90</sup> The development of a local textile industry combined with the increase of imported textiles further reduced the ranks of spinners and weavers in the American home.

In some parts of the country, professional weavers produced domestic textiles and specialty items for those who could afford to buy their textiles.<sup>91</sup> In the earlier part of the

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<sup>86</sup> *All Sort of Good Sufficient Cloth*, 23.

<sup>87</sup> Fennelly, 21.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>89</sup> Oliver and Smith, 6.

<sup>90</sup> *All Sorts of Good Sufficient Cloth*, 23.

<sup>91</sup> Walker, 4.

nineteenth century, professional weavers wove plain and fancy linens, woolens, and overshot coverlets. When inexpensive cotton fabric became available for so many household uses, many professional weavers turned to weaving coverlets using the Jacquard mechanism, which had been introduced to the United States from France by William Horstman in 1824.<sup>92</sup>

Joseph-Marie Jacquard developed the Jacquard mechanism, an automatic selective shedding device attached to the top of the loom, which by controlling individual warps allowed weavers to produce more complex weaves quickly and economically. But Jacquard's attachment was expensive and was used mainly by professional weavers, who in the years from 1830 to 1860 turned out thousands of intricately-patterned multicolored coverlets.<sup>93</sup> Then, as the century progressed, more improvements to power looms brought an even wider range of machine-woven textiles to the market, and eventually what the professional weavers offered was too old-fashioned for most buyers.<sup>94</sup>

The professional weaver of the nineteenth century was usually neither an itinerant nor a full-time weaver. Sandra Rambo Walker's research on the nearly sixteen hundred professional weavers in eight central Pennsylvania counties during the nineteenth century indicates that most had another job on the side, often farming. Her work demonstrates that the average working life of a professional weaver in the counties she studied was only 5.27 years.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Heisey, 7.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>94</sup> Carol Strickler, *American Woven Coverlets* (Loveland, Colorado: Interweave Press, 1987), 4.

<sup>95</sup> Walker, 2.

The professional weaver had to be located where there were enough potential customers but not too much competition. In his study of almost one thousand professional weavers working in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana from 1835 to 1875, John Heisey determined that “seldom did more than two of the professional weavers recorded in this survey work in the same locale.”<sup>96</sup>

Available evidence indicates that the great majority of professional weavers were men. In his study of more than 900 nineteenth-century professional weavers from Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky, Heisey was able to document only five or six who were women.<sup>97</sup> Many of the professionals operating in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Virginia during the 1840s and 1850s had been trained in the trade guilds of Great Britain and Germany and concentrated on weaving the more intricate linen patterns, overshot coverlets, and Jacquard coverlets.<sup>98</sup> Although the federal census of 1850 for Tennessee listed twenty-five people who identified themselves as weavers, none were from Washington County.<sup>99</sup> Because the jacquard coverlets of the nineteenth-century professional weaver often incorporated the weaver’s name into the border design and as business men they kept accounts of their work, much more is

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<sup>96</sup> Heisey, 9.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>98</sup> Judith Reiter Weisman and Wendy Lavitt, *Labors of Love: America’s Textiles and Needlework, 1650-1930* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 81.

<sup>99</sup> Of the Tennessee professional weavers, one-third were identified as men born in Great Britain, one-third as Southern widows, and a few as Swiss. Richard H. Hulan, “Tennessee Textiles,” *Antiques Magazine* 100 (September 1971): 387. Textile historian Kathleen Wilson has documented the work of one East Tennessee professional weaver called Crippled Jack Loughlin who worked in Sullivan County until his death in 1835. Kathleen Wilson, telephone conversation with author, 13 October 1999.

known today about their activities than about their counterparts, the women who worked at home weaving textiles for their families.

Woolen cloth, however, continued to be woven at home until the middle of the century because American wool was not strong enough for use with power looms. Different breeds of sheep produce differing qualities of wool, and up to this time, the fleece of American sheep was short and relatively coarse-stapled, capable of being spun and woven by hand, but not long enough or strong enough for use with power looms. The Merino, a Spanish breed, with strong, long and soft fleece, provided the answer to the American wool industry's problem, but the Spanish government forbade the export of Merinos. When finally in the early years of the nineteenth century, New England sheep farmers imported several thousand Merinos to breed with existing flocks, the quality of American wool began to improve.<sup>100</sup>

For several decades more, however, wool could only be used as the weft material for cotton or linen warps woven on early power looms. Cotton and linen could hold up to the action of the looms, being somewhat stronger than even the new higher quality wool. The resultant mixture of wool with cotton or linen, called satinnet, was relatively cheap, so that by 1830 it made up half of all factory-produced woolen cloth in the United States. Then in 1840, William Compton perfected a new loom that was not only gentle enough to use a wool warp, but could also produce fancy weaves. For the first time, fine woolen cloth was available at a reasonable price, but because wool had always been easier to spin, dye, and weave than linen or cotton,

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<sup>100</sup> *Manufactures of the United States in 1860 compiled from the original returns of the Eighth Census under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1865), xxvii.

home production of woolen cloth persisted later into the nineteenth century, especially away from the more heavily populated coastal regions.<sup>101</sup>

Although linen, wool, and cotton were the fibers most commonly used in nineteenth-century textile production, toward the end of the eighteenth century, some manufacturers in New England began to experiment with locally-grown silk worms. They followed this experiment with limited commercial silk production in the first decades of the nineteenth century. By 1840, however, these factories were using imported silk.<sup>102</sup> At about the same time, growers in East Tennessee began to experiment with silk worms. Frederick A. Ross operated a silk mill at Rotherwood (near Kingsport, in Sullivan County) in the 1840s. In 1841 he marketed between three and four hundred pounds of silk in Philadelphia.<sup>103</sup> By 1850, Tennessee ranked first in the United States in silk production, selling more than one thousand pounds that year. Within a few years, however, problems with cocoons caused production to fall; only seventy-one pounds of Tennessee silk were sold in 1860.<sup>104</sup>

Until inexpensive cotton cloth became available in the nineteenth century, linen remained the most common homewoven cloth.<sup>105</sup> Linen is woven from the fibers of the flax plant (*Linum*

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<sup>101</sup> *Homespun to Factory Made: Woolen Textiles in America, 1776-1876* (North Andover: Massachusetts: Merrimack Valley Textile Museum, 1977), 54, 86, and 88.

<sup>102</sup> Fennelly, 29.

<sup>103</sup> Lay, 34.

<sup>104</sup> Corlew, 230.

<sup>105</sup> *All Sorts of Good Sufficient Cloth*, 5.

*usitatissimum*) in a process that has been understood for some ten thousand years.<sup>106</sup> Flax grows two to four feet high and the fibrous stems range in color from gold to grey. They are spun after a rather lengthy preparation process. First, the stems are soaked in water for several weeks rotting the inner core and tough outer bark and dissolving the gummy material that binds the flax fibers to the rest of the stem and then dried. Next, the core and outer parts are broken up with the aid of a flax brake. The chaff is further broken and removed with a scutching knife. Finally, the fibers are straightened by drawing them over the teeth of a hackle (sometimes called a hetchel) and removing any remaining chaff, as well as the short coarse fibers known as “tow.” The long flax fibers that remain (also called line) are finally dressed, or arranged, on a distaff in preparation for spinning.<sup>107</sup>

Gump’s work indicates that during the late eighteenth century, farmers grew flax and processed it into linen in Washington County. She noted that probate inventories listed flax brakes, hackles, tow cards, and flaxseed. One third of the spinning wheels listed were flax wheels.<sup>108</sup> By mid-nineteenth century, Washington County farmers still grew and processed flax. Nine of the 177 probate inventories filed in Washington County between 1844 and 1857 included flaxseed by the bushel for a total of just under 300 bushels.<sup>109</sup> Some of the flaxseed may have been intended for the linseed oil mill of either Frederick Garst or Calvin Hoss, but some was

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<sup>106</sup> Joanne Mattera, “A History of Linen,” *Shuttle Spindle and Dyepot*. 8, no. 3 (summer 1977): 16.

<sup>107</sup> *All Sorts of Good Sufficient Cloth*, 34-49.

<sup>108</sup> Gump, 120, 163.

<sup>109</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, passim.

definitely set aside for weaving; ten percent of the inventories included a flax brake and twenty-two percent included a hackle.<sup>110</sup>

The number of sheep steadily increased in Washington County from the 1790s to the 1850s.<sup>111</sup> Gump found 473 sheep in her study of 111 late eighteenth-century probate inventories and wills.<sup>112</sup> More than one thousand sheep were found in the 177 probate inventories in the present study. Although one person, Henry Deakins, owned 80 sheep, smaller flocks predominated.<sup>113</sup> It is not possible to determine whether or not the merino strain had arrived in East Tennessee by this time since none of the sheep are defined by breed.<sup>114</sup> According to a notice in *Brownlow's Jonesborough Whig*, September 5, 1839, Mr. E. Birdseye, the owner of a flock of Saxon sheep, was to pass through Jonesborough later that month with sheep to sell on reasonable terms.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Linseed oil was and is used as a drying agent in paints and varnishes. Mattera, 24. Between them Garst and Hoss claimed to have processed 1,350 bushels of flaxseed into 2,000 gallons of linseed oil the previous year. Census of Manufactures, 1850, pp. 324-325; *Inventory of Estates*. Three customers bought flax hackles from the unidentified store. Unidentified Store Ledger, 8, 86, 158.

<sup>111</sup> Wool was cheaper to produce than cotton and brought five times what cotton did on the world market. Antebellum southern Appalachia exported 21.2 pounds of wool for each pound of cotton exported. Dunaway, 142. Furthermore, mutton was not commonly eaten in antebellum East Tennessee. Samuel B. Hilliard, "Hog Meat and Cornpone: Foodways in the Antebellum South," in *Material Life in America, 1600 - 1860*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 314.

<sup>112</sup> Gump, 230.

<sup>113</sup> When Henry Deakins died in 1845, his sheep were sold for about \$2.00 each. *Inventory of Estates*, 64.

<sup>114</sup> Some of the inventories, however, do divide sheep into first choice and second choice.

<sup>115</sup> *Brownlow's Jonesborough (Tennessee) Whig*, 5 September 1839.

The fibers that make up the fleece of the sheep are prepared and spun to make wool. Sheep are usually sheared with hand shears once a year, in the spring. After the fleece is removed from the sheep, it must be picked clean of animal and vegetable matter and washed. Then it is carded or combed to line up the fibers before spinning. Carding is usually done with a pair of wool cards, paddles that look much like large dog brushes.<sup>116</sup> Twenty-four percent of Gump's eighteenth-century inventories included shears, compared to 12 % of the mid-nineteenth-century inventories. Thirty-nine of the estates survey by Gump included cards, more than half of these for use with wool.<sup>117</sup> Only two of the nineteenth-century probate inventories included wool cards.<sup>118</sup>

The decline in the number of cards does not necessarily indicate the presence of fewer spinners. Water-powered wool carding machines or mills, capable of carding more wool faster and better, were in wide use by the early nineteenth century. In the 1820 Census of Manufactures, Carter, Greene, Hawkins, Jefferson, and Grainger Counties claimed at least one water-powered carding mill each. Michael Krouse operated the carding mill in Carter County on Buffalo Creek with the help of one employee. He reported that he had processed 2,300 pounds of raw wool in the previous year.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> *Homespun to Factory Made*, 8-16.

<sup>117</sup> Gump, 164.

<sup>118</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, 273; 324.

<sup>119</sup> Census of Manufactures, 1820. The listing for Washington County is incomplete, listing only a distillery in Jonesborough and Embree's Iron Works on the "Chucky."

Thirty-one years later, Michael Krouse's Washington County probate inventory indicated that his son-in-law Daniel Bowman bought his carding machine for \$186.28. Krouse's was one of two Washington County inventories in the present study that included carding machines. The other belonged to Lemuel Carson who died in 1850. Carson's forty-three-year-old daughter Elizabeth bought his carding mill for \$83.00.<sup>120</sup> The 1850 Census of Manufactures for Washington County listed six men as operating water-powered carding mills that produced a combined total of 26,300 rolls of wool for the year.<sup>121</sup>

Although upper East Tennessee farmers did not grow cotton commercially because of the early frosts in the region, some residents did grow it for their personal use.<sup>122</sup> Customers at local stores also bought cotton by the bale, spun and unspun.<sup>123</sup> Gump's study of probate inventories included fourteen pairs of cotton cards, half of them listed before the invention of the cotton gin in 1793.<sup>124</sup> The present study found only seven pairs of cotton cards.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, 300.

<sup>121</sup> They were Jesse Crouch, Frederick Garst, Bird Brown, William Marsh, Finley Alison, and Samuel Duglass. *Census of Manufactures, 1850*, pp. 322-324.

<sup>122</sup> McBride and Meredith, 274.

<sup>123</sup> Unidentified Store Ledger, *passim*; Jonesboro Mercantile Firm Account Book; Landon Carter's Daybook.

<sup>124</sup> Gump, 164.

<sup>125</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, 273; 327; 338; 420; 569; 599. In July 1851, a customer at the unidentified store bought a pair of cotton cards for seventy-five cents. Unidentified Store Ledger, 191.

A spinning wheel is used to produce flax, wool, and cotton thread.<sup>126</sup> Theoretically each fiber calls for a different kind of wheel, although in practice they are often used interchangeably. The wool wheel is also called the walking wheel because the spinner walks back and forth as she turns the wheel, handling the wool with one hand and turning the wheel with the other. Wool wheels are also sometimes called big wheels because the diameter of the wheel is about twice that of the small, or flax wheel. The smaller wheel is capable of faster, continuous spinning because a foot treadle powers the wheel, leaving both hands free to work with the longer strands of flax as they are spun and wound onto the bobbin held within the flyer. Wool can be spun on a flax wheel, but flax is not usually spun on a wool wheel. Both types of wheels depend on a tightly twisted linen string to move the power from the wheel to the spindle or the flyer.<sup>127</sup>

Sixty-six percent of Gump's probate inventories included at least one spinning wheel.<sup>128</sup> Only 33 % of the inventories in the present study included at least one wheel, resulting in a total of 135 spinning wheels listed in the probate inventories and wills of the 1840s and 1850s. Forty-one were defined as flax wheels, while thirty-eight were wool wheels. One was a cotton wheel and fifty-five were simply called spinning wheels.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Most, if not all, spinning and weaving equipment used by nineteenth-century handweavers was built by local craftsmen. For a detailed discussion of textile tools available to the nineteenth-century weaver see Marion L. Channing, *The Textile Tools of Colonial Homes* (Marion, Massachusetts: by the author, 1971).

<sup>127</sup> One of the mid nineteenth-century inventories includes two wheel strings. This same inventory includes four pairs of cards, a spinning wheel, a reel, some flax, two dozen sheep, and a loom. *Inventory of Estates*, 569.

<sup>128</sup> Gump, 163.

<sup>129</sup> Census of Manufactures, 1820. Greene County, just south of Washington County, lists five men who claimed to have made and sold a total of 319 flax and cotton wheels in the

The finished thread, whether linen, cotton, or wool, is usually wound into a skein for washing or dyeing. This can be done on a niddy nobby or on a reel, which is a set of rotating arms on which the thread can be wound. Some reels have a built-in clicker or counter so that the spinner can keep track of the number of revolutions and thereby the yardage of the skein.<sup>130</sup> Gump's study found 17 reels; the present study recorded 41 reels.<sup>131</sup> No niddy noddies were noted in either set of inventories.

Although cotton, flax, and wool all come in a range of natural shades, many weavers will dye either the unspun fiber or the thread to add color to their cloth. Washington County dyers in the first half of the nineteenth century had many choices of dyes available to them, although they often preferred specific dye materials. Indigo and madder were both widely available from merchants for dyeing fibers blue and red. Copperas, logwood, and chrome yellow were also available for purchase, as were the usual mordants, salts that helped to fix the color, alum and copperas.<sup>132</sup> In addition to commercially available dye materials, dyers could use traditional

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previous year. The Washington County Census of Manufactures for that year is incomplete. The Census of Manufactures for 1850 does not list spinning wheel makers in any of the five upper East Tennessee counties.

<sup>130</sup> According to her will probated in June of 1855, Elizabeth Robinson left her falling axe and her check reel to her grandson, Jacob Henry Robinson. Washington County Wills, 558.

<sup>131</sup> Gump, 235; *Inventory of Estates*, passim.

<sup>132</sup> Unidentified Store Ledger, passim; Landon Carter's Daybook; Inventory in the case of *James H. Vance v. James H. Jones*.

natural dyes. Butternut and walnut were common choices for brown, and many flowers produced yellows that could be combined with indigo for green.<sup>133</sup>

After spinning and dyeing the thread, the weaver prepares a warp for the loom. The skeins that have been washed or dyed, are now wound onto spools and the spools placed on a spool rack. From the spool rack, multiple threads can simultaneously be wound onto a warping board, warping mill, or warping bars, which allow the weaver to arrange the warp threads in order, side by side, for a warp as long and as wide as she wishes.<sup>134</sup> Gump found spools and warping equipment, as well some of the widely-used smaller pieces of equipment such as gears, tackling, shuttles, and temples.<sup>135</sup> Nine of the nineteenth-century inventories included warping equipment; in addition there were four spool racks and many instances of the smaller pieces of equipment.<sup>136</sup>

The weaver winds the weft thread onto quills or bobbins that fit inside the shuttle. She throws the shuttle back and forth across the warp with one hand and catches it with the other; the thread unwinds as needed. Many nineteenth-century weavers wound their quills on their big

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<sup>133</sup> Wool fibers accept dye more readily than the cellulose fibers of cotton and linen. As a result, handwoven cotton and linen textiles from the first half of the nineteenth century are more likely to be found in their natural shades. Mattera, 22. Nevertheless, East Tennessee store accounts from the period describe some cloth accepted for credit as “stripe linsey” or “check linsey.” Unidentified Store Ledger, 63; 89.

<sup>134</sup> Channing, 38-39.

<sup>135</sup> Gump, 165.

<sup>136</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, passim.

wheels, but some used quill wheels.<sup>137</sup> Nine quill wheels were recorded in the nineteenth-century inventories and one was bequeathed in a will.<sup>138</sup>

The largest piece of equipment used by a weaver is the loom. In rural America in the 1840s and 1850s, a typical loom was built by a local carpenter of heavy timbers in a design that had changed little for several centuries. A large rectangular frame supports two beams, one that holds the unwoven warp, the other, the finished cloth. In between hang the harnesses and heddles through which the warps pass and that determine the order in which the warps are raised and lowered and ultimately, the pattern of the cloth. Also hanging from the upper beam is a beater fitted with a reed, which both keeps the warp threads evenly spaced and packs the weft thread into place.<sup>139</sup>

In the nineteenth century, weavers called the above type of loom simply a “loom,” or sometimes a “cloth loom.” Although weavers today often refer to these looms as barn looms or frame looms, technically they should be called four-harness counterbalance looms, a reference to the action that lifts the harnesses.<sup>140</sup> Gump reported looms in 41% of the late eighteenth-century estates for a total of 30 looms; one inventory included 2 looms.<sup>141</sup> The present study shows a decrease in the number of looms with only 27% of the inventories including them. Together, the

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<sup>137</sup> Channing, 34-36.

<sup>138</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, passim; Washington County, Tennessee, Will Books, 1779-1889 (hereafter cited as Washington County Wills), Courthouse, Jonesborough, Tennessee, 324.

<sup>139</sup> Channing, 44-45.

<sup>140</sup> Burnham and Burnham, 44.

<sup>141</sup> Gump, 164.

later inventories and wills listed a total of 52 looms, including one labeled a “patent” loom that may have been a factory-made loom with a patented harness-lifting mechanism.<sup>142</sup>

The textiles of the nineteenth-century handweaver consisted both of large pieces of goods for the home such as sheets, bed ticking, blankets, counterpanes and coverlets, tablecloths, and cloth that could be fashioned into clothing. Weavers also produced carpeting and utilitarian textiles for storage use such as sacks. For all of these items, linen and wool were the primary fibers, with linen being replaced by cotton as machine-spun strong cotton yarns became available.<sup>143</sup>

Despite the imposing size of the nineteenth-century counterbalance loom, the finished width of the cloth was limited by the distance the weaver could comfortably throw and catch the shuttle, usually from about 36 to 45 inches. Large items such as sheets, tablecloths, blankets, ticking, and coverlets were almost always woven in strips and seamed into the required width. Although use of fly shuttles could increase the weaving width, handweavers seldom used them.<sup>144</sup> Some weavers worked to make the seam match on items where it would show, such as tablecloths and coverlets; others weavers were seemingly not bothered by mismatched patterns.

Overshot coverlets are perhaps the best-known and most likely to survive of nineteenth-century textiles.<sup>145</sup> Overshot refers to the colored pattern weft that floats or shoots over the warp

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<sup>142</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, passim. There is no indication, however, that there was anyone weaving with a Jacquard mechanism in East Tennessee.

<sup>143</sup> Burnham and Burnham, 13; *All Sorts of Good Sufficient Cloth*, 24-28.

<sup>144</sup> Strickler, 48.

<sup>145</sup> Coverlet probably comes from the French *couvre-lit* - to cover the bed. *Ibid.*, 9.

and basic weft threads in dazzling pattern repeats. Coverlets from the very early nineteenth century sometimes have linen warps and basic wefts, but most have cotton warps and basic wefts and wool pattern wefts. A four-harness loom is capable of seemingly endless overshot patterns, and hundreds have been recorded in surveys of nineteenth-century coverlets.<sup>146</sup> Although the high point of overshot coverlet weaving in most of the country extended from about 1810 to 1850, in some areas, including the Appalachian region, the tradition extended through the end of the century.<sup>147</sup>

Bleached, plain weave linen of varying quality was the standard for sheets. Tablecloths were also woven of bleached linen, usually finer quality than for sheets, and with a variety of traditional woven-in patterns. Bedticking, on the other hand, was often woven in checked or striped linen. The tow, left over from the production of finer linen, was woven into tow linen and put to many uses around the home and farm, particularly for towels and sacks. Tow was also used for rougher quality sheets and clothing.<sup>148</sup>

Nineteenth-century handweavers made blankets in a variety of styles and weights. Heavier blankets were all wool, usually, in a twill weave. In some areas the standard was a cotton warp with wool weft, in solids, stripes or plaids. If wool was scarce, cow hair was

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<sup>146</sup> Weavers wrote out threading and treadling instructions for intricate patterns. These “drafts, often written on long narrow strips of paper, were then pinned to one of the uprights of the loom for accessibility. *Ibid.*, 46. No Washington County drafts from the 1840s or 1850 have survived.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>148</sup> Burnham and Burnham, 85; Walker, 6; 8.

sometimes combined with wool for the weft. Most surviving antebellum Washington County blankets are plain-weave with a cotton or wool warp and a wool weft.<sup>149</sup>

Many kinds of cloth were woven for clothing. Tow linen and flax linen were used for lightweight clothing. Wool could be spun in various weights and woven as twill or plain weave, in various colors, stripes, and plaids. When wool and linen were combined in a plain weave, i.e., a wool weft woven with a linen warp, the result was referred to as linsey or linsey-woolsey. Linsey could be woven in a range of weights and had many uses.<sup>150</sup> Another combination fabric used for heavy weight clothing was called “jeans,” “Kentucky jeans,” or “janes.” Jeans was a three-harness twill woven with a linen warp and either cotton or wool weft.<sup>151</sup>

Large textiles are mentioned in many of the Washington County probate inventories, but almost never in wills. Gump found seven counterpins and coverlids, twenty-one sheets, twenty-five blankets, and four tablecloths.<sup>152</sup> Three inventories in the present study included a total of fourteen coverlets, with one estate listing nine, and two inventories each included one counterpin. The nineteenth-century inventories also included fourteen sheets, ten blankets, and a bedtick. One inventory listed two sacks, and a will bequeathed three meal bags. Inventories also

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<sup>149</sup> Carole Wahler, textile historian and collector, E-mail to author, 31 January 2000.

<sup>150</sup> Burnham and Burnham, 61-82 passim.

<sup>151</sup> Isabel B. Wingate, *Fairchild's Dictionary of Textiles*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1979), 315-316.

<sup>152</sup> Gump, 233; 235. Coverlid is an alternate term for coverlet. Counterpin may refer to a coverlet or to some other type of bedcovering. Strickler, 9.

mentioned table cloths and bedspreads, although, by the mid-nineteenth century, there is no way to know whether or not these were the product of Washington County handweavers.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, passim; Washington County Wills, 568.

## CHAPTER 4

### WEAVERS OF WASHINGTON COUNTY

“Have you marked how tidy she keeps her handsome brood – all clad in home-made of her own weaving, fashioned and patched with her own hand?”<sup>154</sup> David Hunter Strother so described Mary Foster, wife of intrepid East Tennessee mountain man, Kan Foster, in a series of essays, accompanied by his own illustrations and published in *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* during the fall and winter of 1857 and 1858.

Although commercially woven cloth was available in the stores, it is clear that the majority of women, like Mary Foster and Elizabeth Duncan, chose for variety of reasons to weave their own cloth in antebellum Washington County. A number of sources identify these weavers and shed some light on their reasons for continuing to weave. In addition to the probate inventory recording Elizabeth Duncan’s widow’s allotment, the present study has made use of other probate inventories, wills, store ledgers and accounts books, questionnaires filled out by Civil War veterans, and documented surviving textiles and equipment.

Probate inventories and wills are excellent evidence of weaving activity. Two hundred fifteen probate inventories were filed in Washington County between 1844 and 1857. Of the hundred seventy-seven that listed household and personal possessions, eighty-five - almost half - included some kind of textile producing equipment.<sup>155</sup> Far fewer wills from the period mention

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<sup>154</sup> [David Hunter Strother], “A Winter in the South,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 16, no. 92 (January 1858): 176.

<sup>155</sup> Seventy of the one hundred fifty-three men’s and fifteen of the twenty-four women’s probate inventories listed textile-producing equipment.

textile equipment or textiles. Of several hundred wills probated during the period in question, eleven bequeathed a total of ten spinning wheels and five looms.<sup>156</sup>

Spinning wheels were the most commonly listed textile producing equipment in the antebellum Washington County probate inventories. While it is tempting to conclude that the presence of a spinning wheel indicates the presence of a weaver, studies in New England for the early part of the nineteenth century, when that area was going through the same kind of transition from handweaving to commercial textiles, show that many women continued to spin either for knitting or to send yarn to someone else to weave, long after they had stopped weaving themselves.<sup>157</sup> For the same reasons, the presence of flax breaks, hackels, reels, and cards cannot be used to indicate the presence of a weaver in a household.

Looms with their various parts such as reeds, temples, shuttles, sleys, and gears, and warping equipment can be considered, however, an accurate indicator of weaving activity. More than one hundred individual weavers can be identified (many only by their husband's name) with the information in the probate inventories. It is possible in some cases to trace pieces of textile equipment as they moved through a family or neighborhood. Not all women were given their own looms as part of the widow's allotment, as was Elizabeth Duncan. Some bought them at the sale of their husband's goods, as did Lemuel Carson's widow Sarah and William Patton's widow Malinda.<sup>158</sup> Other women bought their mother's or perhaps their neighbor's loom.

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<sup>156</sup> Washington County Wills, passim.

<sup>157</sup> Larkin, 26; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Wheels, Looms, and the Gender Division of Labor in Eighteenth-Century New England," *William and Mary Quarterly* 55 (January 1998): 9.

<sup>158</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, 234; 300.

In 1852, Mary Duncan died and her estate, including a loom, was inventoried and sold. Emaline Duncan bought Mary's loom, reel, two spinning wheels, and eleven and seven-eighths yards of domestic.<sup>159</sup> In 1850, Mary Duncan had been living in tax district 10 (Knob Creek) in the Watauga River area on 177 acres valued at \$1,000.<sup>160</sup> At this time, the household consisted of Mary, aged forty-four; Emaline Duncan, thirty-six; Mary, twenty-one, Allen, twenty-five; Benjamin, eighteen; John, seventeen; Elkannah, fifteen; and James, two.<sup>161</sup> Living close by were two other Duncan families, possibly relatives; the newly widowed Elizabeth Duncan, however, lived in tax district 14 (Swanney's) on land her husband had owned.<sup>162</sup> It is tempting to speculate about Emaline's relationship to Mary. Although at thirty-six she was too old to be a daughter; she may have been a sister-in-law.

In 1850, John Kincheloe, 61, a farmer, and his wife Sarah, 64, lived in tax district 13 (Hoggarths) northwest of Jonesborough with James, 23, and Minerva Hale, 15, and John Hale, 15.<sup>163</sup> John Kincheloe owned 606 acres of land and 3 slaves.<sup>164</sup> According to the 1850 census, John claimed a personal worth of \$3,600.<sup>165</sup> His will probated in December, 1852, left to his "beloved wife Sarah Kincheloe all the household and kitchen furniture or as much thereof as she

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<sup>159</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, 376.

<sup>160</sup> See map of Washington county tax districts, page 47 of present study, Tax Books..

<sup>161</sup> Sepello, 24. The Federal Census of 1850 is useful to this study because it was the first census to list more than just the name of the head of household.

<sup>162</sup> Tax Books.

<sup>163</sup> Sepello, 105.

<sup>164</sup> Tax Books.

<sup>165</sup> Sepello, 108.

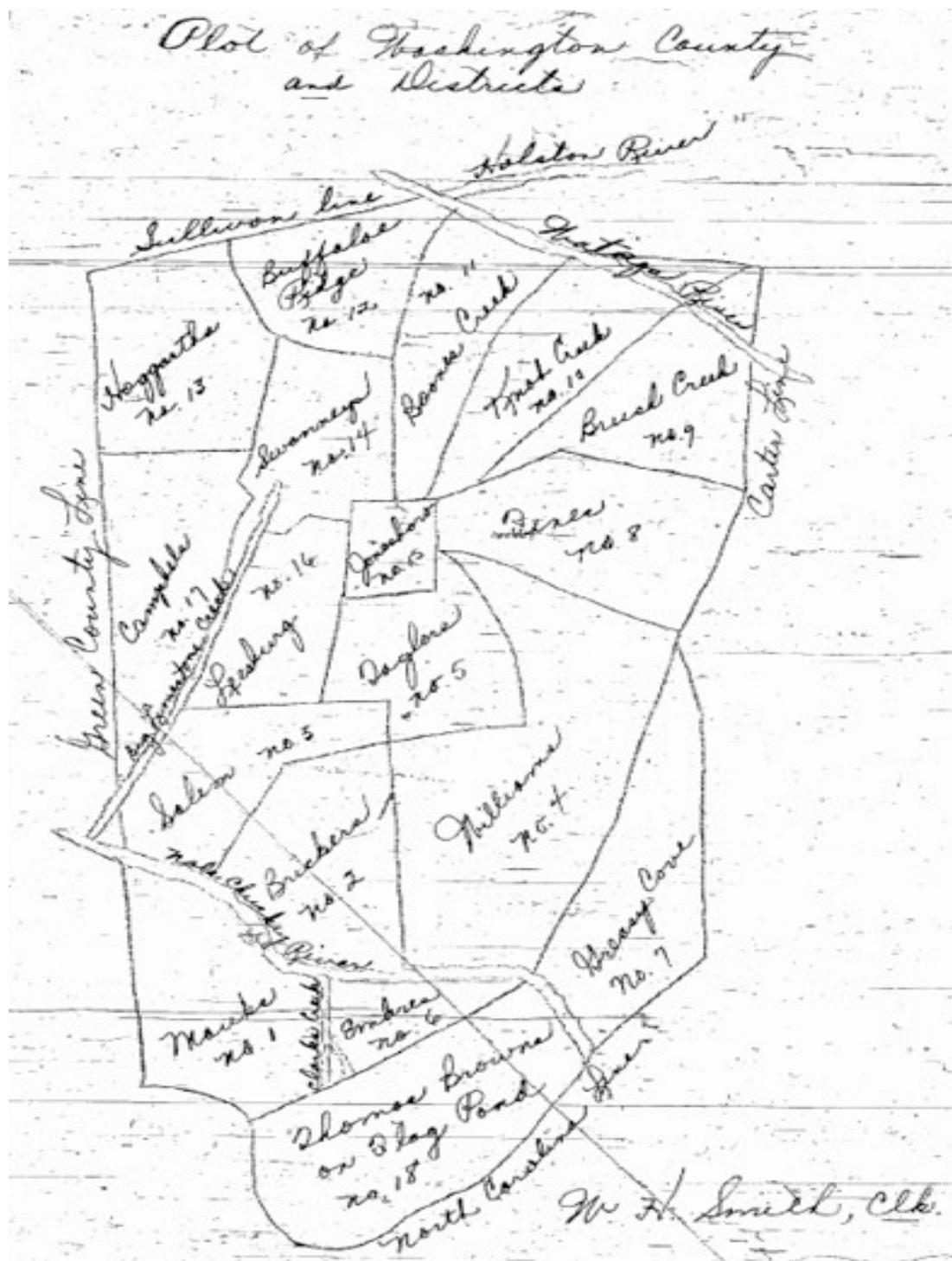


Figure 1: Washington County, Tennessee, Tax Districts, 1846

wishes.” He also left her a sow, some pigs, a choice horse, saddle and bridle, one choice cow, and “six head of the choice sheep.”<sup>166</sup> Kincheloe’s probate inventory listed a “patent loom” that probably belonged to Sarah Kincheloe. The loom was bought by Cyrus Cox who lived with his wife Lydia and three young children under the age of five just north of the Kincheloos.<sup>167</sup> Had Sarah Kincheloe grown too old to weave or was there another loom included among the household and kitchen furniture?

The numerous Bacon and Keefauver (Keephaver) families also lived in the northwest corner of the county in 1850. Nicholas Keefauver, Sr., 79, and his wife Catherine, 80, had both been born in Pennsylvania. The Keefauvers lived on the same road as Jeremiah Bacon, 76, also born in Pennsylvania. Sometime before 1850, Nicholas Keefauver, Jr., a blacksmith, married Jeremiah Bacon’s daughter Dica, or Dicey. The young couple lived in between the two sets of parents.<sup>168</sup> When Nicholas senior died in 1854, his will left the house, garden, orchard, and as much household furniture as she wanted, plus \$100 and all of his German books to his “beloved wife Catherine.”<sup>169</sup> The Keefauver probate sale included a number of textiles: one lot of broadcloth, one lot of cloth, four tablecloths, and three sheets. Catherine Keefauver had probably been the weaver of these textiles. According to the elder Keefauver’s probate inventory, Jeremiah Bacon bought Catherine Keefauver’s loom and a reed.<sup>170</sup> Jeremiah Bacon senior had

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<sup>166</sup> Washington County Wills, 424.

<sup>167</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, 508; Tax Books.

<sup>168</sup> Sepello, 87.

<sup>169</sup> Washington County Wills, 443.

<sup>170</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, 472.

died in 1851, so it was most likely Jeremiah junior who bought the loom. He lived nearby with his wife Susan and four children under the age of four. The probate inventory sale for the elder Bacon records the sale of his loom to Mina Hale, possibly the Manerva Hale who was living with John and Sarah Kincheloe in 1850.<sup>171</sup>

Several Washington County weavers can be identified through the information in wills probated during the antebellum period. In her will probated in 1847, widow Jane Hannah bequeathed to her daughters Esther and Lucinda Hannah, all of her household and kitchen furnishings including her “cloth loom.”<sup>172</sup> In 1850, Esther, then 54, and Lucinda, 49, were living with George Telford, his wife Amanda (possibly the sister of Esther and Lucinda), their eight children, and Mitchell Bashor, 20, a miller, in tax district 2 (Brickers) south of Jonesborough. Telford farmed 348 acres, valued at \$6,000 on the tax rolls although the census clerk estimated his worth at \$9650.<sup>173</sup>

Nathan Peoples lived in tax district 8 (Fines) east of Jonesborough in 1850.<sup>174</sup> Along with many bequests to his children in his will probated in February 1857, he ordered all but one of his slaves sold. The exception was Ruth, of whom Peoples directed, “I will and bequeath that Ruth choose one of the children to live with and as she has chosen Joanah S. Keplinger [his daughter], I further will and bequeath that she [Joanah] shall have her [Ruth] for one cent and that she is to treat her well and not to let her be bought or sold. I further bequeath that Ruth shall have all her

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Washington County Wills, 377.

<sup>173</sup> Sepello, 31; Tax Books.

<sup>174</sup> Tax Books.

bedding bed steds and bed clothing one chest two tables and little wheel, two boxes and fruit, the loom and tacklets, 4 pot vessels two tin Buckets and any other little article that she has bought and paid for herself.”<sup>175</sup> In her new home, Ruth found herself living next door to several generations of Joannah’s in-laws, a family with a tradition of weaving.

According to the census of 1850, Jacob Miller, Sr., was one of the wealthiest farmers in Washington County with an estimated worth of \$14,000.<sup>176</sup> Miller, age 71, lived in tax district 15 (Campbells), on the western side of the county, with his wife Hannah, 57, and three young boys ages 12, 10, and 8, who all had different surnames, indicating perhaps that they lived in the household as foster children. Miller owned 497 acres of land and 3 slaves.<sup>177</sup> When he died in 1856, his will, probated in February 1857, stipulated that his daughter was to receive his “quilted quilt” in the Rose of Sharon pattern, and that his wife Hannah was not to “interfere.”<sup>178</sup> If, as Miller’s will implies, his quilt had not been made by his wife, then it may have dated from the early part of the century and was therefore likely to have been made from handwoven cloth.<sup>179</sup>

Store ledgers and account books provide another means of identifying weavers, although few accounts from the once numerous nineteenth-century Washington County stores survive. According to its account book, the Jonesboro Mercantile Firm sold mostly cigars, twists of

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<sup>175</sup> Washington County Wills, 588.

<sup>176</sup> Sepello, 114.

<sup>177</sup> Tax Books; Sepello, 114.

<sup>178</sup> Washington County Wills, 599.

<sup>179</sup> “Rose of Sharon” is known as an applique pattern rather than a patchwork or a quilting pattern. Carol Wahler, telephone conversation with author, 30 January 2001.

tobacco, and several kinds of wool hats and accepted as country goods mostly furs, between January 1845 and May 1846. An unusual entry on May 9, 1845, records that Thomas Dunham bought two wool slouch hats and received \$1.62 ½ credit on his account for 13 yards of tow linen.<sup>180</sup> Dunham, 25, lived northwest of Jonesborough in tax district 13 (Hoggarths) with his 24 year-old wife Jane and two young children. Next door lived Mary Dunham, 62, possibly the mother of Thomas Dunham, with Sabra, 31, Elizabeth, 23, and 5 month-old Melvina.<sup>181</sup> Any one of the women in the two households could have been the weaver of the tow linen.

Another store ledger, Landon Carter's Daybook, 1844-1845, includes accounts in the names of many Jonesborough residents and may also have been located in Jonesborough. Carter's establishment sold a wide assortment of commercially woven textiles including Nanking, Irish linen, bleached domestic, and Holland. Carter also sold tow linen and ticking, both probably handwoven, and indigo, which was used for dyeing wool. Although Carter's Daybook identifies who bought the handwoven cloth and dye supplies, it does not record who wove the cloth.

The most interesting surviving store ledger used in this study is that of an unidentified store located either in northeastern Washington County or just across the border in Carter County. The ledger is useful for this study even if the store was in Carter County because of the number of Washington County residents who traded there, including Landon Carter Haynes, who lived just south of where Johnson City is now located. The ledger covers the years 1848 to 1853 and includes accounts for four hundred fifteen customers, listing both debits and credits. Forty-

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<sup>180</sup> Jonesboro Mercantile Firm Account Book.

<sup>181</sup> Sepello, 107; Tax Books.

five of the store's customers traded handwoven cloth for credit, and of these, fifteen can be identified through census or tax lists as living in Washington County. Accounts for Lydia Boyd, Margaret Chapman, Joseph Swanner, John Kuhn, Jacob Range, and others document that they received credit for lincy, jeans, kersey, and bedtick, usually in amounts of three to six yards. In addition, fourteen Washington County customers (two of whom were among those who traded cloth for credit) bought a variety of dye materials, including indigo, logwood, chrome yellow, and turkey red.<sup>182</sup>

Although the unidentified store sold calico, domestic, cambric, Irish linen, and other textiles not woven in Washington County, numerous debit entries for linsey, tow linen, and jeans indicate that at least some of the handwoven cloth taken in credit was sold to other customers. In December of 1853, for instance, John Kuhn, a resident of tax district 9 (Brush Creek) in the northwestern corner of the county, received \$1.50 in credit for nine yards of bedtick.<sup>183</sup> Another customer, not found in the Washington County census or tax list, bought a total of just under twenty yards of bedtick. Other entries record purchases of tow linen, lincy, flax and cotton janes, as the store clerk usually wrote it, and striped homespun.<sup>184</sup>

Lydia Boyd was one of the weavers who received credit for handwoven cloth at the unidentified store, where in January of 1853, and again in 1855, she traded jeans.<sup>185</sup> The census

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<sup>182</sup> Unidentified Store Ledger, *passim*. Indigo constitutes half of the dye purchases, supporting the generally accepted idea that blue and white was the most common color scheme of handweaving during this period.

<sup>183</sup> Tax Books.

<sup>184</sup> Unidentified Store Ledger, *passim*.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 194.

of 1850 records Lydia, then 37, living with 79 year-old Elizabeth Holt and three children, Margaret Weslie, 14; Nancy P. Weslie, 6; and Thomas Wesley, 17.<sup>186</sup> It seems probable that these are the heirs of Jacob Holt, who in 1850 were living in tax district number 7 (Greasy Cove), now in Unicoi County.<sup>187</sup> Jacob Holt's will was executed in February 1846, and a probate inventory for 1846 indicates that Elizabeth Holt, possibly his widow, bought his flock of sheep. Ten years later in 1856, another probate inventory documented the sale of more of his property, perhaps following the death of Elizabeth Holt. At that sale, Lydia Boyd bought Jacob Holt's loom, probably the same one she had been using for a number of years.<sup>188</sup>

Margaret Chapman was another regular customer at the unidentified store. In 1850, she was a twenty-one-year-old single woman living with Charles and Rachel Duncan, both in their thirties, and their five children under the age of nine, in tax district 10 (Knob Creek) in northern Washington County.<sup>189</sup> In May, 1850, Margaret received credit of \$2.83 for 8 ½ yards "check linsey" and she bought ½ pound copperas. The following year she bought 1 ½ yards of domestic and 2 ½ yards of gingham. In 1852, she again received credit for cloth, this time in the amount of \$1.50 for four yards of linsey, and she bought one ounce of chrome yellow for 8 1/3 cent. She made no purchases in 1853, but from August to October of that year, in a whirlwind of warping, weaving, and sewing activity she received a total of \$5.19 credit.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Sepello, 76.

<sup>187</sup> Tax Books.

<sup>188</sup> Washington County Wills, 349; *Inventory of Estates*, 398.

<sup>189</sup> Sepello, 24; Tax Books.

<sup>190</sup> Unidentified Store Ledger, 89; 181; 269.

Another source by which we can identify weavers is the Tennessee Civil War veterans questionnaires. The questionnaires were compiled between 1915 and 1922 and contain information from more than 1,600 Tennessee Civil War veterans, almost all of those still living at the time.<sup>191</sup> After being asked to identify themselves, their age, and place of birth, the respondents were asked a series of questions about their childhood. Many of the questions were open-ended: “What was the occupation of your father?” “If your parents owned land, state about how many acres.” Other questions suggested answers. The question that could be used to identify weavers said: “State clearly . . . what the duties of your mother were. State all the kinds of work done in the house as well as you can remember – that is, cooking, spinning, weaving, etc.”<sup>192</sup>

Of the 92 veterans who identified themselves as having been born in one of the five counties of upper East Tennessee, 63, or more than two-thirds, identified their mothers as weavers. Of the sixteen veterans who identified themselves as having been born in Washington County, two-thirds (eleven) said their mothers were weavers.<sup>193</sup>

Washington County Civil War veteran Franklin Sevier Leonard answered in the questionnaire that his mother was a weaver.<sup>194</sup> In 1850, Leonard, then 5, lived with his parents

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<sup>191</sup> Gustavus W. Dyer and John Trotwood Moore, comps., *The Tennessee Civil War Veterans Questionnaires* (Easley, South Carolina: The Southern Historical Press, 1985), ix.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, xi, xvi. Although there were two forms of the questionnaire, a long one and a short one; the question about mothers’ work was the same on both forms.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 273; 346; 404; 491; 599; 601; 660; 945; 1021; 1116; 1159; 1349; 1563; 1971; 1995. Most of the information for one of the sixteen veterans, including whether or not his mother was a weaver, is missing. *Ibid.*, 1902.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 1349.

Thomas, 63, and Mary Jane, 49, his twin sisters Malinda and Matilda, 16, Elkannah, 14, and Andrew, 11, northeast of Jonesborough.<sup>195</sup> Mary Jane Leonard was probably the one who wove nine yards of tow linen traded for credit at the unidentified store in April 1849. The Leonards didn't dress entirely in homespun, however. In September 1850, Thomas Leonard bought 7 ½ yards of calico.<sup>196</sup>

Another Washington County veteran whose mother wove was Henry Martin Sliger, who responded in the questionnaire that his mother “spun weaved and did many other things too numerous to mention.”<sup>197</sup> In 1850, Sliger lived with his parents and seven siblings south of Jonesborough in tax district 5 (Taylors) on 255 acres.<sup>198</sup> While it cannot be proven with either a probate inventory or store records that Sliger's mother, Katie Keplinger Sliger, was a weaver, it is likely that she came from a family of weavers. Her father was Samuel Keplinger, brother of Jacob Keplinger who died in 1851. When Jacob's estate was inventoried and sold, the textile equipment of his wife, who had died earlier, was sold. Samuel Keplinger bought his sister-in-law's reel. Katie's husband Henry Sliger bought a pair of cards.<sup>199</sup>

Few textiles woven before 1860 have survived the years and fewer still survive with the name of the weaver known. Of all the cloth handwoven in Washington County in the thirty years before the Civil War, it is the intricately patterned, brightly colored, overshot coverlets that are

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<sup>195</sup> Sepello, 16.

<sup>196</sup> Unidentified Store Ledger, 120.

<sup>197</sup> Dyer and Moore, 1971.

<sup>198</sup> Sepello, 59; Tax Books.

<sup>199</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, 338.

most likely to have survived.<sup>200</sup> In their survey of Tennessee coverlets, Sadye Tune Wilson and Doris Finch Kennedy were able to identify only one pre-Civil War, Washington County coverlet, a wool and cotton coverlet woven by Hannah Bayless Hoss.<sup>201</sup> Born in 1784, by 1850 Hoss was living with her son Calvin Hoss and his wife and family on a 602 acre farm southeast of Jonesborough.<sup>202</sup> Calvin Hoss also operated a sawmill and a linseed oil mill on his property.<sup>203</sup>

A search of regional museums and collections has located few documentable antebellum handwoven Washington County textiles. Melanie Cox, curator of the Rocky Mount Living History Museum in Piney Flats, Tennessee, has identified several coverlets that might have been made in Washington County before the Civil War. Two others, a coverlet and a coverlet fragment, can be more assuredly identified as Washington County textiles, but they probably were woven in the 1860s or early 1870s.<sup>204</sup>

These pieces were the work of Susannah Krouse Bowman, whose mother, aunts, grandmother, and great grandmother were also weavers in Washington County. The patriarch of that family was Christian Wine, who moved to Washington County with his wife, Barbara, from

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<sup>200</sup> According to Kathleen Wilson, the great period of coverlet weaving in East Tennessee and North Carolina came just after the Civil War. Kathleen Wilson, telephone conversation with author, 12 August 2000.

<sup>201</sup> Hannah Bayless Hoss died in 1859. Wilson and Kennedy, 115.

<sup>202</sup> Sepello, 58; Tax Books.

<sup>203</sup> Sepello, 58; Census of Manufactures, 1850, p. 324.

<sup>204</sup> Melanie Cox, curator of Rocky Mount Living History Museum, Piney Flats, Tennessee, interview by author, 17 August 2000.

Virginia around 1820, because her sisters were living in Washington County.<sup>205</sup> In the 1850s, the Wines' daughter Susannah married Daniel Krouse, son of Michael Krouse who ran a wool carding mill in the Knob Creek area. When Michael Krouse died in 1851, another neighbor, Daniel Bowman, bought the carding mill and Krouse's loom.<sup>206</sup> The Bowmans, Krouses, and Wines were all related by marriage and, more than likely, by a weaving tradition.<sup>207</sup>

Kathleen Wilson has documented several antebellum East Tennessee coverlets, including one from Washington County, which according to family history was woven by an itinerant weaver. Wilson believes that other original textiles survive in their families of origin. She notes, for example, that the descendants of Susannah Krouse Bowman have preserved many nineteenth-century family textiles.<sup>208</sup>

These are only some of the weavers who can be identified in antebellum Washington County. Using the above sources, some one hundred fifty antebellum Washington County weavers can be identified. There were no doubt many more whose weaving activities are not reflected in probate inventories, wills, or store ledgers.

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<sup>205</sup> Kathleen Wilson, telephone conversation with author, 12 August 2000.

<sup>206</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, 324.

<sup>207</sup> Christian Wine's loom, a large, heavy-beamed, four harness loom – the only surviving antebellum loom known to have been used in Washington County – is on display with other family textile equipment at the Carroll Reece Museum, a division of the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services, at East Tennessee State University.

<sup>208</sup> Kathleen Wilson, telephone conversation with author, 13 October 1999.

## CHAPTER 5

### WHY THEY WOVE

Increasingly through the nineteenth century, American women stopped weaving in the home, preferring instead to buy cloth from merchants or professional weavers.<sup>209</sup> Despite the availability of commercially-woven cloth in Washington County stores, however, many women in antebellum Washington County continued to weave. At least one hundred fifty Washington County weavers can be identified using antebellum probate inventories, wills, store ledgers, and known surviving textiles and equipment. Ninety-five weavers can be located in specific tax districts between 1845 and 1850. Of these, sixty, almost two-thirds, lived in the seven tax districts east and north of Jonesborough. Thirty-one lived in the eight districts south and west of Jonesborough. Four lived in the two districts later to become Unicoi County, and one may have lived in Jonesborough.<sup>210</sup>

The reasons these women continued to weave are complex and must be looked at against the background of their lives in general. Despite a growing body of recent scholarship on the activities of women during the nineteenth century, relatively few sources shed light on the daily lives of women in the southern Appalachian region in general, or antebellum Washington County, Tennessee, in particular. Although many descriptions of the area are informative, they are mostly silent when it comes to women or their activities. Historian John Morgan, for example, has described East Tennessee in the 1840s as a region in which although it had

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<sup>209</sup> Oliver and Smith, 6; Weisman and Lavitt, 5.

<sup>210</sup> Tax Books. These numbers may be skewed because the unidentified store ledger identified so many weavers in the northern section of the county. The probate inventories and wills, for their part, however, also identified far more weavers in the northern section.

“emerged from its frontier period,” conditions had not changed much for the majority of the population who were “non-slaveholding yeomen farmers who worked small farms with their families.”<sup>211</sup> “Families,” of course, implies women, but here, as in Robert D. Mitchell’s description of East Tennessee before the Civil War as “a region of relatively isolated, largely semisubsistent farmers whose main commercial outlets were small-scale cattle and wheat production,” we must imagine the women who were part of most farm households.<sup>212</sup>

In her history of housework prior to the Civil War, Jeanne Boydston deals mostly with housewives in New York and New England, but her list of the duties of a middle-class, small town, housewife in New York in the 1840s includes many of the activities of the Washington County housewife of the 1840s. Boydston lists laundry, sorting clothes, hanging them, ironing, sweeping, dusting, cleaning carpets and windows, baking, preserving, tending chickens, collecting eggs, selling berries, making candles, shopping, sewing, and childcare.<sup>213</sup> To this list we can probably add cooking, tending a garden, making soap, taking care of a horse or cow, and last but not least, spinning, and weaving.

Historian Joan M. Jensen has suggested that one of the reasons that the history of women’s household work is incomplete is the misconception about household economy, which views the early American farm as isolated from the market economy and therefore producing

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<sup>211</sup> John Morgan, “Log House Construction in Blount County, Tennessee,” in *Appalachian Frontiers: Settlement, Society, and Development in the Preindustrial Era*, ed. Robert D. Mitchell (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1991), 216.

<sup>212</sup> Mitchell, 17.

<sup>213</sup> Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 77.

almost everything the family needed.<sup>214</sup> It is easy to imagine the women of antebellum East Tennessee endlessly churning butter, dipping candles, spinning wool, and weaving cloth, because that is the picture we have of both colonial women and women on the frontier. As we have seen, however, antebellum Washington County was not isolated from the market economy, and within the region, households were free to chose varying amounts and kinds of connection to the market.<sup>215</sup> Some women made butter and wove cloth, but others chose not to.<sup>216</sup>

Clearly, the world of the antebellum Washington County housewife extended beyond the household into the community, and social and economic life often meshed. Families participated in “webs of rural exchange” of goods and services, a common situation in regions where there is not much cash in circulation.<sup>217</sup> The housewife’s economic connection with the wider community dates from much earlier than the period of this study. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, a historian of New England women, has documented a complex web of family economic activities in a late eighteenth, early nineteenth-century rural community in Maine, where both men and women were involved in a variety of activities that tied them to their neighbors. Women raised chickens for eggs, made butter and cheese, and spun and wove, bartering their produce with

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<sup>214</sup> Joan M. Jensen, *Promise to the Land: Essays on Rural Women* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 189.

<sup>215</sup> Writing about western North Carolina in the same period, Mary K. Anglin has pointed out that “individual households assumed different relationships to petty commodity production, agriculture, and merchant capital.” Anglin, 187.

<sup>216</sup> See Dunaway, 190.

<sup>217</sup> Larkin, 36.

neighbors and kin. Men, likewise, were part of this community economy, trading the produce of their farming, lumbering, or fishing activities.<sup>218</sup>

Although women's diaries, such as that of Martha Ballard, which Ulrich used to document women's economic activities, have not been found for antebellum East Tennessee women, Anglin has described the women of antebellum western North Carolina as "actively engaged in a variety of productive strategies that underwrote household subsistence."<sup>219</sup> It is safe to assume that women engaged in similar networks of economic cooperation, exchanging the products of the loom for different items produced by a neighbor or available at the country store.

If the product of the housewife's loom engaged her in the wider community, the weaving activity itself did not, however. Weaving was different from most of the housewife's other indoor duties for several reasons. Unlike spinning, which could easily become a group activity, weaving must be done alone, where the loom is located, and the nineteenth-century loom took up a relatively large amount of space.<sup>220</sup> Visitors to Jonesborough may have been impressed by its number of brick houses, but the majority of antebellum Washington County families probably still lived in log cabins where space was limited.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Martha Ballard and Her Girls: Women's Work in Eighteenth-Century Maine," in *Work and Labor in Early America* ed. Stephen Innes (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1988), 73, 82-83.

<sup>219</sup> Anglin, 198.

<sup>220</sup> The author's early nineteenth-century New England loom has a "footprint" of thirty-five square feet.

<sup>221</sup> Fink, 109; Morgan, 203; Ten of the fifteen Washington County Civil War veterans lived in log cabins, ranging in size from one to six rooms. Four reported living in frame houses, and one lived in a brick house. Dyer and Moore, 273; 346; 404; 491; 599; 601; 660; 945; 1021; 1116; 1159; 1349; 1563; 1971; 1995.

Weaving also requires skill, knowledge, and time in preparing and threading a warp and in executing any but the most elementary patterns. Weaving is not the kind of chore a housewife can pick up for a few minutes and then put down again. Weaving can also be mentally and physically tiring. One early twentieth-century weaver in Kentucky complained that “weaving makes you ache all through your chest.” Another believed weaving was “as hard as any labor a woman could do.”<sup>222</sup>

The reasons many women stopped weaving when they could are clear; the reasons many continued are not so clear. A number of possibilities for the perseverance of antebellum weavers are discussed below. Some are more likely than others and some more easily demonstrated than others. They include geographic isolation, poverty, contribution to family economy, ethnic tradition, and artistic expression.

The relative isolation of some Appalachian families was probably not one of the reasons women continued to weave. Geographic isolation, while perhaps a factor for some East Tennessee families at the turn of the eighteenth century, was no longer a problem by the 1840s, although by this time, the center of population in Tennessee had moved west.<sup>223</sup> As transportation improved in Middle and West Tennessee, there was little state funding for roads or river improvement in East Tennessee, resulting in higher transportation costs for its manufacturers and farmers.<sup>224</sup> Furthermore, although East Tennessee had been settled first, its

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<sup>222</sup> Jane S. Becker, *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 151.

<sup>223</sup> Corlew, 222.

<sup>224</sup> Hsiung, 96-97; Buckwalter, 30-31.

hilly land was not as suited for successful agriculture as the richer lands to the west, and Jonesborough, once the hub of East Tennessee, lost ground to Knoxville, only a hundred miles to the southwest.<sup>225</sup> Over the course of the next fifty years, a picture would develop of the people of southern Appalachia living as their grandparents had, in a region time forgot. Recent scholarship in Appalachian studies indicates, however, that the perception of the intense isolation of the population of southern Appalachia before the Civil War is a myth, possibly begun and perpetuated by late nineteenth-century “local color” writers.<sup>226</sup>

The southeastern section of Washington County was certainly much more rugged and difficult than the rest of the county. If anyone was isolated it would have been the residents of tax districts 7 (Greasy Cove) and 18 (Thomas Brown’s on Flag Pond), the area that later became Unicoi County. Of the weavers whose tax districts can be determined, however, only four lived in this section of the county. George Haun’s widow Mary, Jacob Holt’s widow Elizabeth, and Lydia Boyd, who bought her loom, all lived in district 7. Kan Foster, his wife Mary, and their children lived in district 18. Strother described Foster’s family as “all clad in home-made of her [Mrs. Foster’s] own weaving.”<sup>227</sup> There is no reason to doubt Strother’s report despite the fact that Foster is said to have operated a trading post at his home, which would have given his family and neighbors access to a wide assortment of trade goods.<sup>228</sup> However, in all likelihood, Mrs. Foster did make the family’s clothes.

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<sup>225</sup> Corlew, 233.

<sup>226</sup> Hsiung, 162-182 passim; Dunaway, 225-285 passim.

<sup>227</sup> Strother, 176.

<sup>228</sup> Alderman, 28.

If geographic isolation was not a reason to weave, it is worth noting that there might be a connection between living in a town, Jonesborough, and not weaving. In 1850, three of the four non-weaving mothers of veterans lived in Jonesborough.<sup>229</sup> Furthermore, it is possible that none, or only one, of the weavers identified through probate inventories, wills, or store ledgers lived in Jonesborough. William Oliver, who bought a loom in 1852, is located in 1850 in tax district 15, (Jonesborough), although he also paid tax on land in districts 8 (Fines) and 10 (Knob Creek), both of which adjoin Jonesborough.<sup>230</sup>

A second reason women may have woven was poverty, although this would be difficult to document. Residents of Washington County ranged from wealthy farmers, lawyers, and merchants to landless families who farmed rented land. Among the Washington County Civil War veterans there may be a correlation between how many acres their fathers owned, the type of house they lived in, their father's occupations, and whether or not their mothers wove.

Although all eleven of the veterans who reported mothers who wove claimed that their fathers owned land, nine reported fathers owning two hundred acres of land or less. Nine of the eleven veterans who reported their mothers as weaving also reported living in log cabins. These same nine reported that their fathers were farmers, blacksmiths, or millers. Another weaver, however, whose husband was reported s being a doctor and later a farmer, lived in a frame house. Still another, whose husband was a minister and physician lived in a log and frame house,

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<sup>229</sup> Ebenezer M.P. Moore's mother, a widow, did not weave. She probably lived in the area of Washington College. Dyer and Moore, 1563; Tax Books.

<sup>230</sup> Oliver, thirty-eight, lived with his wife Martha, thirty-five, three children under the age of seven, and sixteen-year-old Cintha Brockwell. Sepello 13; Tax Books.

weather boarded on the outside and with a ceiling inside.<sup>231</sup> T.H. Howard, whose father was a farmer and owned three hundred acres, wrote, “Our cloth was hommade Every thing” and “My Mother wove spun carded mad[e] all our cloths”<sup>232</sup>

Four veterans did not report that their mothers were weavers. One, whose father was a merchant and farmer, lived in a six-room brick house and owned 450 acres. A second, Arthur V. Deaderick, whose father was a lawyer and at one time Chief Justice of the Tennessee Supreme Court, lived in an eight-room frame house in Jonesborough. A third, whose father was a printer - and whose grandfather was the publisher of the newspaper - also lived in an eight-room frame house in Jonesborough. The fourth veteran whose mother was not a weaver reported that his family lived in a log cabin, and that his father, who had been a cooper, had died when the veteran was a young boy.<sup>233</sup> Without studying the kinds of houses, number of acres, and occupations of a large number of Washington County residents it would not be possible to determine a definite relationship between family wealth and weaving activity.

There is evidence in the probate, tax, and census records, however, that appears to indicate that not all women continued to weave because of poverty. Sarah Garst, 45 years old in 1850, and her husband Frederick Garst, 66, lived in the Telford community south of Jonesborough with a household of ten others ranging in age from twenty to one year.<sup>234</sup> Tax records indicate that Frederick Garst owned 640 acres in Telford (tax district 3 (Salem)) valued at

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<sup>231</sup> Dyer and Moore, 273; 346; 404; 491; 599; 945; 1021; 1116; 1159; 1349; 1971.

<sup>232</sup> Dyer and Moore, 1158.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 601; 660; 1563; 1995.

<sup>234</sup> Sepello, 31.

\$8,000, 370 acres in tax district 10 (Knob Creek) valued at \$3,400, and another 44 acres in tax district 9 (Brush Creek) valued at \$37.<sup>235</sup> Garst operated a carding machine that produced five thousand rolls of wool a year valued at \$2,000 and a linseed oil mill that produced 1,200 gallons of oil a year, valued at \$900 a year.<sup>236</sup>

When Frederick Garst died in the summer of 1850, the freeholders of Washington County set aside as part of his widow's portion one big wheel, one little wheel, one reel, and a loom and tacklings.<sup>237</sup> At the sale of her husband's goods, Sarah Garst bought "his" flax break, "his" hackle, and another of "his" spinning wheels. By all accounts, Frederick Garst was one of the wealthiest men in Washington County the year he died, yet Sarah Garst was a weaver while her husband was alive and community members assumed she would continue to weave after his death. A third reason women may have woven, and the easiest to document, is as a contribution to the family economy through the bartering of country goods. It was common during this period for farm women to sell surplus cloth woven during the winter to country stores in exchange for

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<sup>235</sup> Tax Books.

<sup>236</sup> County Census of Manufactures, 1850, p. 325.

<sup>237</sup> *Inventory of Estates*, 199. Also included were her mare, saddle, bridle, and blanket, three choice cows, two "beeves," ten choice hogs, all the bacon on hand and lard, the can "that contains the lard," all the soap grease on hand, what wool and rolls of wool were on hand, all the flax on hand, all the leather on hand, five choice sheep, one sow and five pigs, fifty bushels of good wheat, all the old corn on hand and 250 bushels of new corn, one hundred dozens of oats, two tons of hay, \$20 for contingencies, one shovel plow and one pair of gears, one hoe, one axe, three feather beds, bedsteads and furniture, one beestand and jar full of honey, all the cupboard furniture on hand, all the kitchen furniture on hand including pots, ovens, kettles, crocks, shovels, pothooks, wash tubs, buckets and pails, one five gallon iron hooped keg and its contents, one vinegar barrel and its contents, ten chairs, several tables, the family Bible and hymn book, all the products of the Garden and the potatoes, all the yarn and thread on hand, all the poultry on hand, three meal bags, the widow's clothes chest and one lot of buttons.

goods they could not produce themselves.<sup>238</sup> Store ledgers show that in antebellum Washington County women bartered linsey, tow linen, kersey, jeans, and bedticking.<sup>239</sup> Furthermore, scholars have noted that since the late eighteenth-century, women who wove cloth for barter often used their credit to buy commercially woven cloth, probably because they couldn't produce the colors or patterns in the colorful calicos and gingham.<sup>240</sup> Store ledgers confirm that this practice continued into the mid-nineteenth century in frontier areas including East Tennessee.<sup>241</sup> Thirty-two customers of the unidentified store bartered handwoven cloth for commercial. Eleven of these, including Margaret Chapman and Mary Jane Leonard, mother of Civil War veteran Franklin Sevier Leonard (see above), can be located in Washington County.

There is a pattern of weaving for credit at the unidentified store. Most weavers received credit for cloth once or twice a year, for relatively short pieces of cloth.<sup>242</sup> Although yardage ranged from two yards up to twenty, one-third of the pieces of cloth exchanged measured five yards or under, and two-thirds measured eight yards or under. These measurements probably indicate that the weavers were bartering surplus cloth not needed in the family, rather than entire

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<sup>238</sup> Joan M. Jensen, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1981), 33.

<sup>239</sup> Unidentified Store Ledger, passim; Landon Carter's Day Book; Jonesboro Mercantile Firm Account Book. Fifteen Washington County weavers traded handwoven cloth at the unidentified store.

<sup>240</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, interview by author, 6 January 2001, Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>241</sup> Carole Shammas, "How Self-Sufficient Was Early America?" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 13 (autumn 1982): 258; Weisman and Lavitt, 5; Unidentified Store Ledger, 36-224.

<sup>242</sup> The author believes that the usual warp length would have been at least twenty yards.

warps. Ten pieces of cloth, fifteen yards or longer, were bartered, however, and several women consistently bartered more than ten yards at a time.

Jonathan Buck's account at the unidentified store is typical of many. In January, 1850, he bought three yards of domestic; in December of that year he was given credit for six yards of jeans. In February, 1851, and again in April, he bought one ounce of indigo, and in May he bought one yard of alpaca. In October of that year, he was given credit for more jeans and some feathers. In June, 1852, he was given credit for two-and-a-half yards of flax jeans, and in August, 1853, he bought four-and-a-half yards of calico "per wife."<sup>243</sup> Buck, 41, lived northeast of Jonesborough with his wife, Eliza, 36; Mary J., 18; Peggy Ann, 18; and six younger children.<sup>244</sup> It is possible that Eliza and her teen-age daughters shared the weaving chores in what must have been a busy house.

A fourth reason for the continuation of weaving in Washington County is that of ethnic tradition, although the idea that cultural traits can be traced through time and space is controversial and difficult to prove.<sup>245</sup> Most recently David Hackett Fischer has argued that complexes of "folkways" were brought in their entirety from specific areas of Great Britain to the colonies.<sup>246</sup> Forrest McDonald and Grady McWhiney have postulated a "celtic" thesis to explain

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<sup>243</sup> Unidentified Store Ledger, 90; 213.

<sup>244</sup> Sepello, 21.

<sup>245</sup> David Colin Crass, Steven D. Smith, Martha A. Zierden, and Richard D. Brooks, eds., *The Southern Colonial Backcountry: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Frontier Communities* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), xvi.

<sup>246</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

a range of cultural traits.<sup>247</sup> Other scholars such as Allan Kulikoff and Kenneth Keller suggest that traditions and practices were held onto, modified, or abandoned as different ethnic groups encountered each other and various environments in the new world.<sup>248</sup> The “upland culture” of southern Appalachia that had evolved by the mid-nineteenth century was therefore an “amalgamation of English, Scotch-Irish, and German traditions” rather than representative of any one ethnic group.<sup>249</sup>

Both the Germans and the Scotch-Irish came to the colonies in the eighteenth century with strong weaving traditions.<sup>250</sup> In a study of weavers in early nineteenth-century Pennsylvania, Walker reported that despite the presence of professional weavers in the community, weaving continued in central Pennsylvania households of German lineage after it had all but stopped in the state’s earlier-settled southeastern counties.<sup>251</sup> The Scotch-Irish are said to have dominated linen production in western Pennsylvania. Analysis of the 1810 Census of Manufactures of Pennsylvania shows a much higher than average yardage of domestic woven cloth produced in the counties with a high Scotch-Irish population.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1988).

<sup>248</sup> Allan Kullikof, *From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2000), 6; Keller, 72; Raitz and Ulack, 121.

<sup>249</sup> Paul Salstrom, “The Agricultural Origins of Economic Dependency, 1840-1880,” in *Appalachian Frontiers: Settlement, Society, and Development in the Preindustrial Era*, ed. Robert D. Mitchell (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1991), 301.

<sup>250</sup> Raitz and Ulack, 122; Weisman and Lavitt, 4.

<sup>251</sup> Walker, 4.

<sup>252</sup> Keller, 77.

Scotch-Irish and Germans were in the majority among the eighteenth-century immigrants to East Tennessee, those from Pennsylvania via Virginia and those who came from eastern North Carolina.<sup>253</sup> Mid-nineteenth-century census records and tax lists show that they were still dominant in Washington County.<sup>254</sup> There were other ethnic groups represented in East Tennessee, however, including African Americans. Ruth, the slave of Nathan Peoples, was one.<sup>255</sup> Ethnic tradition cannot be discounted as one of the reasons women in Washington County continued to weave, but by 1850, it must be assumed that such influences had been modified by other factors.

A final reason for continuing to weave may have been as a means of artistic expression. Once a woman no longer had to produce endless yards of cloth for basic needs, she could use her time to weave more creatively if she wished. The traditional linen weaves and colorful overshot coverlets could have satisfied the artistic nature of many mid-nineteenth-century weavers.<sup>256</sup> More exacting and time-consuming to set up on the loom and weave, in many cases these are the textiles that were most prized and are the ones that have been saved and passed down to the present age.

Although it is difficult to document weaving for artistic expression, the sheer numbers of coverlets woven during the antebellum period may serve as evidence of artistic expression.

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

<sup>254</sup> Sepello; Tax Books.

<sup>255</sup> Another African American East Tennessee woman, the wife of Lewis Taylor, was probably not a weaver. An entry in the unidentified store ledger for December 10, 1853, reads: "Taylor Lewis (of colour) deb[it] bal. on linsey and shawl 3.87." Unidentified Store Ledger, 242.

<sup>256</sup> Strickler, 14.

Housewives who needed to keep their families warm in winter could have done so more quickly and easily by weaving blankets. Threading the warp and treadling the pattern for a twill blanket takes considerably less time and weaving skill than setting up and weaving an overshot coverlet. The fact that today's hobby weavers continue to weave coverlets in the nineteenth-century style may be the best argument for coverlet weaving as an artistic expression.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Strickler, 23.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Although by the end of the nineteenth century East Tennessee had become relatively isolated, during the earlier part of the century it was tied in to a wider economic region so that area residents had access to a variety of consumer goods including commercially woven textiles.<sup>258</sup> The southern craft revival at the turn of the twentieth century focused attention on the weaving tradition of Appalachia; at the same time, the Appalachian “myth of isolation” distorted the history of that tradition.

Using probate inventories, wills, and store ledgers, the present study shows that despite the availability of commercially woven textiles in local stores, many women in antebellum Washington County continued to spin and weave at home. They wove fine linen; tow linen; white, striped, and checked linsey; Kentucky jeans; kersey; and bedticking. They also wove blankets, sheets, tablecloths, and coverlets.

Few of the weavers documented in this study lived in the rugged, mountainous, southeastern section of the county; most lived in the northern area and had relatively easy access to Jonesborough. Furthermore, evidence in the probate inventories, census records, and tax lists indicates that most of these weavers were relatively well-off economically, although not among the county’s elite. The majority of weavers probably wove cloth at home as a contribution to the country goods the family bartered at the local store and with one another, activities which gave them a wider role in the southern Appalachian economy than is often acknowledged. Still other

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<sup>258</sup> Hsiung, 74-102 passim; Dunaway, 225-248 passim.

weavers may have been responding to an ethnic or family tradition or seeking an outlet for creative expression. For many, a combination of factors probably influenced them to weave.

One of the problems encountered in this study was the lack of documented surviving textiles and textile equipment. Textile historian Kathleen Wilson believes that more antebellum Washington County textiles survive in their families of origin. A thorough search for and documentation of these textiles will greatly add to the researcher's knowledge of weaving activity in Washington County. The discovery of personal records such as diaries and letters will also be of help.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has described textile production as one of the strands of a "broad and largely invisible local economy managed by women."<sup>259</sup> The present study is an attempt to make some of that history more visible. Washington County, Tennessee, is only a small segment of the wider southern Appalachian region. Each part of Appalachia has its own distinct history, but the history of each segment adds to an understanding of the region as a whole. This study of the transition from handweaving to commercial textiles in antebellum Washington County, Tennessee, adds to the history of the entire Appalachian region.

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<sup>259</sup> Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, 84.

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