

Carlyle House

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Warming Up to Bed Rugs: John Carlyle's Mysterious Silk Bed Rug and the Rise and Fall of Bed Rugs in the Colonial Chesapeake

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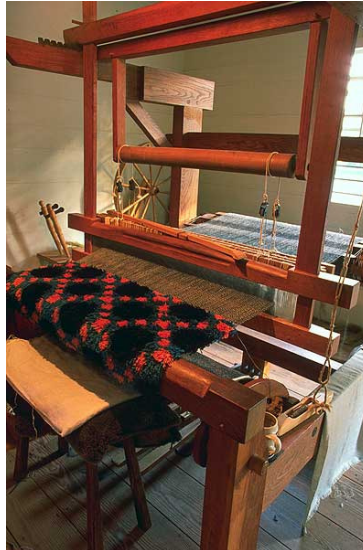
In a time when textiles were coveted and expensive, the bedding listed on John Carlyle's 1780 inventory represents a wide variety of rich fabrics. One of the most interesting items, and one that is often overlooked, is the silk bed rug.

Silk bed rugs in particular and bed rugs in general have remained a mystery to scholars. While rugs are the most common item to appear on eighteenth-century inventories, today almost no artifact-based evidence of bed rugs exists.

In her article for the "Rugs- The Colonial Chesapeake Consumer's Bed Covering of Choice," Gloria Seaman Allen takes a look at the evidence for bed rug use in the 18th-century Chesapeake region and attempts to explain how they were used and why so few exist in museums today. Her research into bed rugs gives us a glimpse of what the elusive silk rug listed on Carlyle's inventory may have looked like.

What are Bed Rugs?

The word "rug" in John Carlyle's time generally referred to a bed covering; "carpet" was the 18th-century term for a floor covering. The term "rug," can be difficult to define, but surviving artifacts and descriptions in probate inventories suggest it was a coarse pile textile, often with a shagged or "friezed" finish. Simply put, they often resemble the shag rugs of the 1970s. Six rugs of such a knotted and woven finish survive in museums in the United States. There are no known examples of the silk



A reproduction wool bed rug is made on a loom in Colonial Williamsburg

variety listed on John Carlyle's inventory.

To explore the history of bed rugs, let's begin in England. Rug ownership in Great Britain began around 1637. It peaked between 1670 and then declined sharply. By 1700, inventories list them in the "maid chamber" or "lesser chamber." Samuel Johnson, a British lexicographer, in 1755 defined them as "coarse nappy coverlet used for mean beds." Clearly by the 1750s in England, bed rugs were out of fashion.

In America, the rise and decline of bed rug use occurred later than in England. While the early colonial settlers brought bed rugs with them, it wasn't until the first part of the 1700s that they were a common household item. They were used however. In 1665, the probate inventory of Thomas Keeling of Virginia lists "one Greene Ruge." And a year later, Andrew Bodnam's inventory indicates he owned a "Shagg Ruge." Rugs were even more numerous in New England than they were in the Chesapeake region.

To trace the rise and fall of bed rug ownership in the Chesapeake region, Gloria Allen uses the

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Gunston Hall probate inventory database. This database of 325 inventories trends toward the elite households of Virginia, as it was intended to give researchers an idea of the household goods owned by Gunston Hall owner George Mason (John Carlyle’s inventory was used in this study). Allen also uses a study done of 3,000 inventories recorded prior to 1810 in Kent County, Maryland.

Many of the bed rugs in the Kent County study were silk, like the one listed in John Carlyle’s inventory. There were 46 silk bed rugs, compared to 34 worsted bed rugs (worsted is a firm-textured woolen yarn). The inventories give almost no indication of the color of silk bed rugs. While the wool rugs are described as green, blue and red, only one inventory gives a silk rug a color description. The 1751 inventory of Charles County Maryland resident Henry Hawkins lists “1 old Red Silk Rug.”

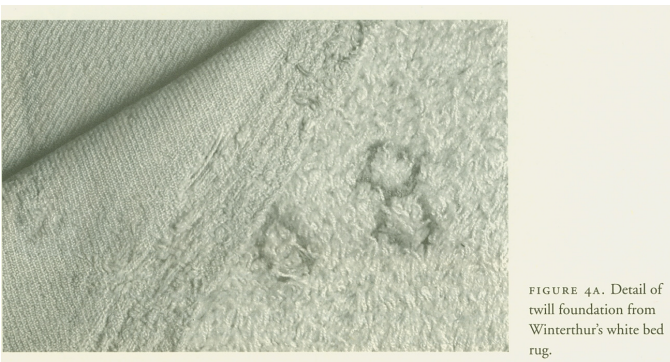


FIGURE 4A. Detail of twill foundation from Winterthur's white bed rug.

As with color, silk bed rugs are also rarely listed as being patterned. Only one “silk spotted rug” is ever listed. Allen believes that the lack of color and pattern may indicate that silk bed rugs were often made of undyed silk.

Bed rugs in the Chesapeake grew in popularity from the early 1700s. For the elite, bed rug ownership peaked between 1741 and 1750 and declined sharply after that. At its height, 85% of elite households owned bed rugs. Most households owned an average of 3 bed rugs. The elite inventories as represented by the Gunston Hall study show rug usage as widespread, but with a more rapid and decisive decline than shown in the Kent County study.

The peak of bed rug popularity in this region occurred in the early 1750s and coincides with the time when John Carlyle was getting married and moving into

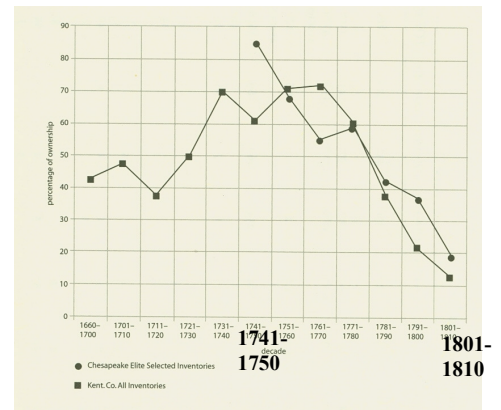


FIGURE 12. Graph of bed rug ownership in the Chesapeake, 1660-1810.

his new home on Fairfax Street. By the 1780s, only about 40% of elite households owned bed rugs, less than half the amount owned in the 1740s. The fact that he still owned a bed rug in 1780, after their decline, may indicate that John Carlyle still possessed many items from early on in his life, when he and his wife Sarah would have been purchasing goods for their large new house. If by 1780, bed rugs were unfashionable, we can assume that the bed rug on John Carlyle’s inventory was on a “lesser” or “mean” bed. Perhaps this “lesser” bed was used by a servant or an enslaved worker.

Why did Rug use decline?

According to historian Carole Shammas, in general, the colonists were moving from heavier durable goods, to lighter weight more disposable goods (i.e. ceramic plates replaced wooden and pewter plates). For bed coverings, this meant the increasing availability of lighter weight and inexpensive linens and cottons, counterpanes and quilts.

At the same time, bed rugs began to be perceived as unhygienic. They were harder to clean and provided more places for bugs to hide. It would have been almost impossible to wash the thick pile of rugs.

As the popularity of bed rugs declined, new uses were discovered for the old ones. Bed rugs were used in wartime and given to soldiers as patriotic donations. The rugs were also given to and used by slaves. Rugs were even used in burials as a shroud. In 1690, the estate settlement of a North Carolina resident named John Culle, included the claim from



a Mrs. Durant: "To the Trubell of my House and the lone of my beding; and a Ruge he was buried in."

Bed Rug Importation and Local Manufacture

Now that we know when bed rugs were being used in the Chesapeake we can now look at where they come from.

Locally made bed rugs have long been documented in New England and many fine examples appear in museums. These examples were most likely saved due to their extraordinary embroidery. There is evidence for Virginia and Maryland made bed rugs as well. One inventory lists "home made" as a description for a bed rug and three surviving Virginia rugs exist. These last may have been saved due to their multicolor patterns.

It appears, however, that many bed rugs used in the 18th-century Chesapeake region were imported. In the American colonies, merchants ordered rugs through their agents in London. Charles Carroll of Annapolis ordered "24 Strong spotted Rugs" and "6 yarn Rugs" from a London merchant in 1749.

TO BE SOLD,

By JOHN COPITHORN, at his Store in ALEXANDRIA, by Wholesale or Retail, for Cash, or Bills of Exchange, he intending for England in the Ship he is now Building,

BROAD-CLOTHS of all Sorts, with suitable Buttons and Trimmings; Duroys, Sagathies, and German Serges, with suitable Buttons and Trimmings; Irish Linens of all Sorts; Hempen and Flaxen Ofnabrigs; plain and napt Cottons; Rugs of all Sorts; Blankets; Boys and Mens Felt Hats, and Calfors, Silk lined; Shalloons, Allopecens, and Tammies; Mens, Boys, Womens, and Girls Shoes of all Sorts; Mens and Womens Silk, Cotton, and Thread Hofe; Mens Worited Hofe; 6 d. 8 d. 10 d. and 20 d. Nails; Broad and Narrow Hoes, and Axes; Scarlet-New-Market Jockey-Coats; black and buff-colour'd knit Breeches; Coopers, Carpenters, and Joiners Tools; some Ship-Chandlery; Gunpowder; Shot of all Sorts, and sundry other Goods.

In Alexandria, importer John Copithorn advertised in the Maryland Gazette in 1757 that he sold rugs. John Glassford and Co. was also active in the importing and selling rugs. In 1758, for the Glassford store, Alexander Henderson ordered three dozen "Mottled Rugs," all to be "thick shagg'd." He apparently had trouble getting his order shipped to the colonies, and in 1760 ordered white spotted rugs and complained that "Rugs of the above sort have been wrote for both the last years but never sent...."

Henderson's order in 1761 provides insight into

bed rug colors. He ordered 6 Green, 4 Blue and 2 Red. The most interesting part of this 1761 order, however, is that Henderson adds; "Mr. Talnall sends silk rugs in place of the fine white Spotted worsted rugs, which do not answer so well." While the Gunston Hall Probate Inventory database indicated silk bed rugs were found more frequently, Henderson's comment indicates that, at least in 1761, silk bed rugs did not sell as well as the worsted rugs. Could this be one reason that no known silk bed rugs exist? Did this particular bed covering become so unpopular they were used until they were destroyed?

The silk bed rug remains a mystery to scholars. The Gunston Hall Room Use Study notes that "Textile scholars can provide no insight into the appearance of a 'silk rug.' The examples recorded as part of the Gunston Hall Room Use Study raise the issue of a regional preference but as the entire topic of bed rugs is so poorly understood, it is far too early to draw such conclusions". In an e-mail to the Carlyle House staff, Kim Ivey, the Associate Curator of Textiles and Historic Interiors at Colonial Williamsburg, wrote that the reference of "a silk bed rug" in John Carlyle's inventory has puzzled her and other scholars for years. "We'd love to know what it looked like."

Works Cited:

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