

Providence Bedding: 1679-1729

Fortunately for research into colonial bedding, the early records of Providence, Rhode Island, contain all matters of legal import to the town's citizenry. Then as now, it was the custom to make an inventory of the moveable belongings of a deceased head of household so that a will could be "proved" or an estate equitably divided among heirs. In 1894 the City Council of Providence published these early records, and in Volumes 6, 7, and 16 -- commonly called the Will Books -- can be found the household inventories recorded between 1679 and 1729 (1). Except for the nine years between 1685 and 1694, where the original book has not been found, the inventories are complete for a period of fifty years.

These records shed important light on the way people of early Providence lived, through consideration of the things they owned. In particular, the inventories of bedding between 1679 and 1729 may call for a reevaluation of what we thought we knew about colonial quilts.

The population of Providence during this period ranged between one thousand and three thousand people, according to the best estimates available (2). The total number of inventories being considered here is 158. As inventories were made only when a head of household died, the number of inventories do not by any means coincide with the actual number of deaths during that period. The death of a wife or child did not call forth an inventory. However, heads of households were sometimes widows, occasionally unmarried women or single men. Two of the inventories -- rather sparse -- were of the belongings of men living away from home; one apparently a traveling salesman with a horse and a stock of pins, needles, ribbons, laces, silk thread, and etc., the other a seaman who died of smallpox on a ship in the harbor.

In almost all of the inventories the most valuable single item in the house was the bed. But here definitions must be established. In the 17th and 18th centuries "bed" meant the stuffed sack one slept on top of, as in "feather bed," "flock bed," "wool bed," etc. The wooden platform or frame which held the bed was called a "bedstead." In the latter part of the period in consideration, the term "under-bed" or "matt" occasionally appeared; But as it was accompanied by a bed, it would seem to be a firmer pallet between bed and bedstead.

"Bedding," a frequent term in these inventories, is harder to define. Often the designation of "bed, bedstead and bedding" is used as a single unit with a total value listed. But fairly frequently the bedding is broken down to its component parts of blankets, coverlets, sheets, pillows, pillowcases, bolsters, bolster covers, and bed curtains. So it can be concluded that "bedding" in old inventories include any or all of these things.

The inventories represent a great variety of household types. Some list only the belongings in a single room, generally of a widow or widower. Some represent farmsteads and include animals and farm tools among the moveables. A few represent craftsmen and include specialized craft tools, while others represent storekeepers who had a variety of general goods in their storerooms. At least one family of merchants is represented, consisting of Gideon Crawford who died in 1707, his widow Freelove who died in 1712, their two daughters and two adult sons, John, a merchant and sea captain who died in 1719, and William, a merchant, who died in 1720. All had coastal ships in their inventories, plus large stocks of goods in several warehouses.

There is also considerable variation in the way these records were made. Some of the persons appointed by the Town Council to compile them were more thorough and specific than others. Impatient compilers simply lumped together "things in the Great Chest" or "household goods in the south Chamber," while others carefully enumerated each pair of gloves and the titles of books.

Even with all these variations throughout the fifty year period, there was scarcely an inventory which did not include some mention of bed, bedding and bedstead. Taken all together -- as they often were -- the value of a bed, bedding and bedstead ranged from one pound to twenty pounds, the average value being ten pounds. (For comparison, during this period a horse was worth from three to thirty pounds and a large silver tankard seventeen pounds.) Where bed, bedding and bedstead were separated into their individual components, the average value of a bedstead was 8 shillings, of a feather bed 4 pounds 14 shillings, a blanket 10 shillings, a sheet 9 shillings, a coverlet 17 shillings, and a pillowcase 3 shillings. (In old style coinage, 20 shillings equaled one pound.) The bed tex-

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cont. from p. 6

tiles, or "bed furniture," are seen to have been considerably more valuable than the wooden bedsteads.

From these inventories in which the bedding components are specified, it is possible to get a reliable idea of the usual make-up of a bed in Providence in those years. A bed was usually filled with feathers although a significant minority were filled with flock, wool, or chaff. The bed might be held up by a bedstead, varying from a simple shelf on posts to a "tester" bedstead which could carry curtains. In the latter part of this period, bedsteads with cords appeared in the inventories, and also matts and underbeds. Typically a bed would be covered by a pair of linen sheets, from two to four woolen blankets, and a coverlet. It might have a bed rug, but it would not be likely to have a quilt. It would usually have a bolster and one or more pillows in pillowcases. It might also have bed curtains and related "furniture."

Many of the blankets, coverlets and sheets were undoubtedly home made - i.e., made in the colonies. Some would have been made in Providence, as inventories of weavers' and spinners' households record stocks of "blanket yarn" and "coverlet yarn." Linen yarn was also present and would probably have gone into sheets and pillowcases. By no means all of the bedding would have been of domestic manufacture, however. Providence is a seaport, and her early merchants engaged in considerable foreign trade. England's blankets were high on her list of trade goods. At least one pair of "Dutch blankets" made their way to Providence and, at one pound each, were the most valuable of any in the inventories.

Generally, blankets were not described. Some were listed as "much worn" or "old" or "small". But there was no reference to color or design, which suggests that they were undyed and of plain weave.

Over the fifty year period, twenty five bed rugs were included. They seem more likely to have been decorative, as their color was sometimes mentioned -- green, blue, "whitish" and "blackish." One -- in the same household as the Dutch blankets -was described as "a Rugg called a smooth Rugg." As this is the only such description, it would seem that the standard for rugs was not-smooth rather than smooth. The suggestion here is that a bed rug in 1681 (the earliest mentioned in these records) was at least something like the bed rugs of a century later -- some of which are still available to be seen.

Eighty-three "coverlids" are specifically mentioned in these records, but what they were is a puzzlement. There are only three descriptive terms connected with them. In 1682 an inventory records a "brancht coverlid" and a "fringed coverlid" and in 1685 an "old red coverlid" is mentioned. They continue to appear throughout the fifty years along with references to "coverlet yarn." But there is no clue as to whether they were of wool or linen, or what is distinctive about them that makes them a coverlet and not something else. The term "brancht" is provocative. Would it be embroidered? Would it have a tree motif on it? One daren't make assumptions; the question is still open.

Of great interest is the sparseness of quilt references in these inventories. Compared with 321 references to bedding in general and 219 specific notations of blankets, there are only 5 records of quilts. All of them are after 1710. All of them are in well-to-do households. Three of the five quilts show up in the Crawford family, prominent merchants and importers. The fourth is in the inventory of William Whiteway, a ship's captain and lodger in a Crawford household. The fifth is in the household of Dr. John Jenckes, who appears to have kept a shop. He, as well as the Crawfords and Whiteway, would have had easy access to imported goods.

Only one of the quilts is described: a "callico bed quilt" in the inventory of Mrs. Free-love Crawford in 1712. The others are simply listed as "quilt" along with other bedding. (One must be cautious about the term "quilt" in this period, as it was also used to mean a quilted petticoat. But the context in the Providence inventories was definitely bedding rather than clothing.) Two quilts were given individual values, one of two pounds five shillings and the other of three pounds -- considerably higher than either blankets or coverlets.

cont. on p. 20

On page 8 of the Fall '79 issue of the JOURNAL, gremlins were at work on the title of an article about a very early quilting. It should have read: "AN 1822 QUILT." Please correct your copy. Apologies.

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cont. from p. 8

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be published by Anchor Press/Doubleday in March
1980, featuring the needlework. If you can't
see the real thing at least read the book!

Judy Mathieson
Woodland Hills, CA

PROVIDENCE BEDDING

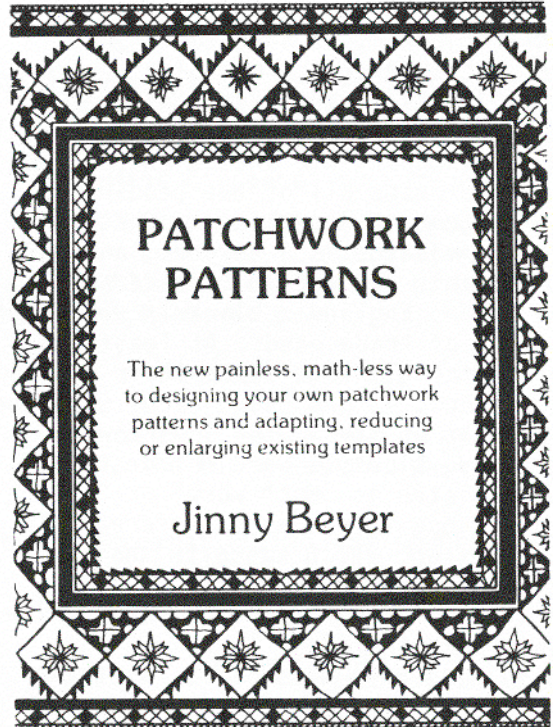
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The Providence records provide no dependable
information about American economy quilts. The
five quilts mentioned are expensive, probably
imported, and probably in the English style of
whole cloth quilts. The records do tell us that
blankets were plentiful, relatively inexpen-
sive, and readily available at home. Therefore,
before 1729, quilts were neither a necessity
nor an economy. Other motives must have been
involved in their development.

Sally Garoutte

(1) THE EARLY RECORDS OF THE TOWN OF PRO-
VIDENCE, Vols. 6, 7, 16, the City Council of
Providence, publishers, Providence, 1894.

(2) Evarts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harr-
ington, AMERICAN POPULATION BEFORE THE FEDERAL
CENSUS OF 1790, Peter Smith, Gloucester, 1966,
pp. 61-67.



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