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A Study of “Alamance Plaids” and Their Use in North Carolina Quilts

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North Carolina, as was Gaul, is divided into three parts. These are, in order of settlement: coastal plains, Piedmont, and mountains.¹

Because the dangerous coast and poor harborage discouraged colonization directly from Europe, English people, who moved southward from the Virginia colony to tidewater North Carolina, were the first permanent settlers in North Carolina. Settlement began about 1610. A plantation system evolved, based on production of tobacco, indigo, rice, and, later, cotton. The area also produced lumber and naval stores. All of these products could be traded for money, and so, by the eighteenth century, this area of the state had developed a cash crop economy.

The Piedmont, in contrast, was made up of small farms populated by yeomen farmers, farmer craftsmen and women who produced for their own needs and traded specialized skills. Largely self sufficient, they had no aristocratic tradition but strong habits of thrift and enterprise.

The Piedmont county of Alamance was formed in 1849 from a part of Orange County, which was at that time the largest county in the state in both area and population. Alamance County took its name from either the Indian *Aramanchy* or the German *Alemanni*.

The earliest Alamance County settlers, Germans from the Rhine region, came around 1650, but the biggest influx came down the Valley of Virginia beginning around 1730. Most of the early settlers came down the Shenandoah Valley on the Great Wagon Road from

Figure 1. Map of North Carolina indicating Alamance County.

Pennsylvania: Germans (Lutherans) settled on Alamance and Stinking Quarter Creeks, Quakers on Cane Creek and the west bank of the Haw River, and Scots-Irish (Presbyterians) east and north of the Haw.

The Piedmont has no really navigable waterways, but it does have small streams which are deep and narrow and have numerous rapids and low falls. Two main waterways in Alamance County are Big (or Great) Alamance Creek and the Haw River. Both have sources in nearby Guilford County but are fed mainly by local rainfall. Although water power varied during spring floods and summer droughts, these waterways were suitable for damming and so useful for power. Not surprisingly many small mills developed along them, often in conjunction with stores. These included grist mills, sawmills, and, beginning in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, spinning mills that produced yarn for home knitting and weaving. Most homes had looms, many farms grew cotton, and what could not be used locally was sometimes shipped north to be spun and bought back (expensively) as yarn or cloth. There was a large potential market for power spun yarns and a large potential pool of textile workers in the farm families that were accustomed to spinning, weaving, and knitting their own fabrics. Eventually the mills wove the yarn into cloth for local and then wider distribution.

E. M. Holt, a pioneer in the North Carolina textile industry was born in 1807 in the area which became Alamance County. He was the

son of Michael Holt III, a farmer who owned a store, a machine shop, a grist mill, and a great deal of land. (The first Michael Holt was a German immigrant, one of the early settlers and large landholders in the area).

As a young man E.M. Holt first ran his father's store, and then in 1837 he built a cotton mill on his father's property on Big Alamance Creek. With his brother-in-law, William A. Carrigan, he operated Alamance Cotton Factory, one of the first cotton mills in the state and the first of many Alamance County mills owned by members of the Holt family. At first the mill manufactured only yarns, but in 1847 Holt and Carrigan purchased looms and in 1849 began producing cotton cloth.

In 1851 when Carrigan left the business, E. M. Holt's son, Thomas, returned from Philadelphia to help his father run the mill. Thomas Holt (who later became governor of North Carolina) describes part of his early days with the mill:

In 1853 there came to our place of business on Alamance Creek a Frenchman, who was a dyer, and who was 'hard up' and out of money, without friends. He proposed to teach me how to color cotton yarns if I would pay him the sum of one hundred dollars and give him his board. I persuaded my father to allow me to accept the proposition, and immediately went to work with such appliances as I could scrape up; these were an eighty-gallon copper boiler which my grandfather used for the purpose of boiling potatoes and turnips for his hogs; a large cast-iron wash-pot which happened to be in the store on sale at the time. With these implements I learned my A, B, C's in dyeing.

As speedily as possible we built a dye-house and acquired the necessary utensils for dyeing. The Frenchman remained with me until I thought I could manage it myself. I got along very well, with the exception of dyeing indigo blue. Afterwards an expert dyer in blue came out from Philadelphia who taught me the art of dyeing in that color. He then put two negro men to work with me, and side by side I worked with them at the dye tubs for over eight years.

We then put in some four-box looms and commenced the manufacture of the class of goods then and now known as "Alamance Plaids."

I am reliably informed that up to that time there never had been a yard of plaids or colored cotton goods woven on a power loom

south of the Potomac river. If this be true, I am entitled to the honor of having dyed with my own hands and had woven under my own supervision the first yard of colored cotton goods manufactured in the South.

While working in the dye-house I wore over-alls made of Osnaburgs and dyed in the indigo vat. It may be out of place to relate a little incident that occurred about this time. A few months after my wife and myself were married some of her lady friends from Greensboro were on a visit to her. One afternoon they drove down to the mill to see the process of dyeing yarn, it being something new. They walked into the dye-house, and I observed that my wife did not recognize me with my overalls on. So slipping up beside her I threw my arms around her and kissed her. She indignantly drew back and catching up a "wringing stick" (which is about the size of a man's wrist and made out of the best and hardest hickory wood), made for me, and but for my making myself immediately known I would have paid dearly for my kiss.²

Less is known about these early or "first generation" plaids than about the later ones that were widely used in quilts. We know that the early plaids were used for dresses and bonnets. The 1863 graduating class of Greensboro Female College dressed in cloth made in North

Carolina. According to Sallie Southall Cotten, "We called it the Homespun Commencement because all the graduates were dressed alike in homespun, made in North Carolina — known then and now as Alamance Plaids. Of course patriotism suggested the costume and we felt quite content."³ The McKissick Museum in Columbia, South Carolina has a bonnet and a dress made from Alamance Plaids, donated by a descendant of the Holt family.

Although the mills produced solely for war needs during the Civil War, they resumed the manufacture of plaids a year after the war ended. Plaids manufactured after the war are known as "second generation" plaids.

From the beginning the plaids were a big success and other mills began to produce them. In 1880 seven of nine mills in operation in the county were producing Alamance plaids, and only two were weaving any other type of cloth. Plaids were the first woven products attempted by twelve of the sixteen mills built between 1880 and 1902. In 1883 the E. M. Holt Plaid Mill was founded in West Company Shops (the town of Burlington was originally named Company Shops). Later the Plaid Mill, a small but stable unit in the county industry, became a part of Burlington Mills, which was formed in 1929 by J. Spencer Love.

In the spring of 1884 representatives from eight Alamance County mills plus seven mills in other counties met in Greensboro and organized the "Southern Plaid Manufacturers' Association." Twenty-three hundred plaid looms were represented.

Plaid weaving looms increased by more than 100 per cent during the next four years. In 1888 when the SPMA met again (5,000 looms represented) they agreed on a policy of reducing operations by one-third to relieve overproduction of plaids. Some mills discontinued plaids around this time. From 1892 when sixteen mills were manufacturing plaids, production of that fabric steadily decreased, and only eleven mills offered plaids by 1905. In 1925 two mills still manufactured plaids.⁴

Shipping records from 1891-1896 indicate that Alamance plaids were widely distributed outside North Carolina during this period. They were shipped to Virginia, South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, Texas, Florida, California, Louisiana, Arkansas, Indiana, Wisconsin,

Mississippi, New York, and even Mexico in addition to all parts of North Carolina. During that period they were sold by the factory to commission merchants for 3-5¢/yard and then marked up and sold at retail through local stores. In 1902 the mill began selling directly to stores, thus eliminating the commission merchants.⁵

Sally Stockard, in a master's thesis on the history of Alamance County in 1900, wrote: "Holt's plaids are the pride of the market. They have found their way all around the world. When the Philippine ladies begin to dress as they ought and the Chinese learn to reach forward and not backward, there will be a greater demand."⁶

Pictures and family stories indicate that plaids were widely used in garments. A turn of the century photograph of workers in one of the Holt mills shows the men and boys in plaid shirts, and many of the women in plaid dresses.⁷ Ethel Wicker Brannock, born in 1892 in Alamance County, has an Alamance plaid dress worn by her mother, Sally Simpson Wicker (1871-1901). The family story is that Sally Simpson wore this dress when she was courting Lark Wicker, whom she married in 1889.⁸

What does this fabric look like? The texture is rather coarse (it was woven from short staple cotton) and resembles that of osnaburg. Thomas Holt mentioned osnaburg as the material of his overalls and osnaburg was listed on an 1873 letterhead as one of the products of the Holt mills.

The *Dictionary of Dry Goods* in 1892 described osnaburg as: "a term used in the US to describe a coarse plain woven fabric manufactured primarily in the South plain unbleached or in fancy stripes and plaids, used largely by negroes for dresses and sheets. The word is derived from Osnaburg, the name of a district in Germany in the county of Hanover where the first heavy cotton cloth was woven."⁹

Dan River's *Dictionary of Textile Terms* defines it as "a coarse cotton cloth often made with part waste in it, plain weave, medium to heavy in weight and resembling crash. Named for a town in Germany, it serves as the base fabric for some chintz and cretonne. Also used unbleached for cement, grain, and comparable types of containers."¹⁰

In 1950 osnaburg could be ordered for a very modest price from the Bemis Bag Company out of Norfolk, Virginia, and was used by

home sewers for such household items as curtains and slip covers.

As to the appearance of the plaid fabric, 1891-1896 shipping records from the Holt Mills identify some of the plaids as brown dress, blues, tan, brown stripe, blue stripe, 4x2 brown, 4x2 blue, 4x4 brown, gilt. They are ordered as "assorted dress," "40 bales Alamance, 5 yd and 6 yd plaids," and sometimes "high colors" are specified. Widths of 25" and 27" are offered.¹¹

Information about the use of Alamance plaids in quilts recorded by the North Carolina Quilt Project is incomplete because the project did not officially note the presence of Alamance plaids. Occasionally a documentor indicated that a fabric, often that on the back of a quilt, appeared to be Alamance plaid. Examination of the records of fifteen documentation days in the north central region for evidence of Alamance plaids on either front or back of quilts turned up thirty to thirty-five possibilities. Inspection of the slides of these possibilities resulted in approximately twenty-five quilts which, on the basis of appearance, almost certainly contain Alamance plaids. Occasionally there were notes by members of the quilt documentation team to the effect that fabric in the quilt appeared to be or was identified as Alamance plaid. Quilts documented in other parts of the state also contained Alamance plaids but this information was seldom recorded. Interestingly, the dates of quilts in this sample, all fall between 1890-1910. When plaids were wholesaling at 3-4¢/yard they were popular and affordable to use for quilt backings.

In 1970 the American Cyanamid Company commissioned Mort Kunstler to do a painting featuring Thomas M. Holt and his mill. This painting was later presented to the Alamance County Historical Museum where it now hangs.¹² In connection with Kunstler's research for the painting some samples of Alamance plaids came to light. A news article by Don Bolden in the *Burlington Times-News* describes this event. Under the title "Samples of Plaids Are Located," Bolden writes that, in response to an item in a column in the *Times-News* indicating that Mr. Kunstler was seeking to determine if anyone had any surviving examples of Alamance plaids, Ray L. Grubb had responded. Mr. Grubb's wife had a brother-in-law who had worked for Ruff & Company, a general merchandise firm in Ridgeway, South Carolina, and in cleaning out the store he had come across an old

envelope with a letter dated July 29, 1873, from J. H. and W. E. Holt & Company of Graham, North Carolina. With the letter were some two-inch swatches of Alamance plaids. Knowing that Mrs. Grubb's husband was in textiles he had passed the materials on to them.

The letter mentioned in the article follows:

OFFICE OF THE CAROLINA COTTON FACTORY
J. H. & W. E. Holt & Co.
Manufacturers of Cotton Yarns, Sheetings, Checks,
Cottonades, Osnaburgs, Drills, Ticks & Ec

Graham, N.C. July 29th 1873

Messrs Ruff & Cloud
 Ridgeway, S. C.

Gentlemen:

Enclosed we hand you Price List and Samples of some of our ALAMANCE PLAIDS. We quote prices today 15¢ 30 days or less 1% for cash. We are now running one hundred looms on this class of goods. Can fill orders promptly and can give you a better assortment of Patterns than you can get in any dry goods house in New York. We have twenty years experience in the manufacture of these goods, and know that we can sell you cheaper than you can buy this class of goods in the Northern Cities. Being situated on the line of the N.C. Railroad, can fill orders the day they are received, and the expense of getting goods much less than from the North, besides you save the expense of Boxing. We solicit your orders, and would be glad to have you try our goods as we seldom fail to make a customer after the first order.

Yours truly,
 J.H. & W.E.HOLT & CO.

[hand written]: Would like to send you if but a few pcs by way of tryal.¹³

Figure 3. Portion of quilt top (63" x 70") pieced with Alamance plaids. Pictured in color in *North Carolina Quilts*, p. 23. Collection of Peggy Boswell. (Photograph courtesy of the North Carolina Quilt Project.)

Forty-four members of the Alamance County Needlepoint Guild used these samples as the basis for a 6'x6' needlepointed "quilt" which they gave to the Alamance County Historical Museum as a bicentennial gift in 1976. They photographed the swatches, by that time exhibited under glass, and spent 3,060 hours on this ambitious project which has thirty-two six-inch squares, each duplicating in needlepoint an Alamance plaid from the 1873 swatches.¹⁴

Although the Alamance plaids in quilts recorded by the North Carolina Quilt Project were from the 1890-1910 time period, there are four quilt tops with Alamance plaids which family tradition

attributes to Euphemia Mills of Iredell County, North Carolina (1837-1872). The family story is that these tops and three finished quilts were put in a trunk at the time of her death and not opened until recent years.¹⁵

The evidence is not all in. Unfortunately, there is no orderly file of samples from the mills which produced Alamance plaids. As the word spreads and consciousnesses are raised, more and more quilts with Alamance plaids are coming to light. Recently a length of "first generation" Alamance plaid which had been bought at an estate sale was presented to the Alamance County Historical Museum. As more information becomes available on Alamance plaids and their use in North Carolina and other states, we will be able to expand our knowledge of the appearance, availability, and distribution of these important and influential fabrics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Notes and References

1. The information on the history and development of the Alamance County textile industry is based largely on the following sources: Andrew W. Pierpont, "Development of the Textile Industry in Alamance County, North Carolina." (PhD thesis in Economics, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 1953); Joyce Joines Newman, "Making Do," *North Carolina Quilts*, ed. Ruth Haislip Roberson (Chapel Hill, N.C., University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Sallie W. Stockard, *The History of Alamance*, master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (Raleigh, N.C.: Capital Printing Company, 1900; Repr. Alamance County Historical Museum., 1986); Walter Whitaker, in collaboration with Staley A. Cooke and A. Howard White, *Centennial History of Alamance County 1849-1949* (n.p.: Alamance County Historical Association, 1949).
2. Stockard, 91-93.
3. William Stephenson, *Sallie Southall Cotten: A Woman's Life in North Carolina* (Greenville, N.C.: Pamlico Press, 1987), 20.
4. Pierpont, 12-14.
5. Alamance Cotton Mill Records 1839-1926, Vol. 12, Box 5: Shipping book June 1891-March 1898, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson

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6. Stockard, 123.
 7. Alamance County Historical Museum, Rt. 1, Box 71, Burlington, N.C. 27215
 8. Interview with Ethel Wicker Gant, September 1988, Burlington, N.C.
 9. George S. Cole: *Dictionary of Dry Goods*, (Chicago: W.B. Conkey Co.,1892).
 10. *A Dictionary of Textile Terms* , (New York: Dan River, Inc., 1980).
 11. Alamance Cotton Mill Records.
 12. A photograph of this painting is shown on page 24 of *North Carolina Quilts*, (Chapel Hill, N.C., University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
 13. Don Bolden, "Samples of Plaids Are Located," *Burlington Times-News* 1970 (from file of Mikki Starnes, Burlington, N.C.).
 14. Information from the file and recollection of Mikki Starnes.
 15. Information from Jan Murphy, Statesville, NC.