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1. Introduction to “One American Family: A Tale of North and South”

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The Textiles, Fashion Merchandising and Design Department at the University of Rhode Island (URI) houses several family collections of textiles and clothing that span the late eighteenth century through the twentieth century. These family collections give us a view into family life in southern New England, and beyond. The Cushman collection is particularly interesting. The donors, Franklin Cushman and his siblings, could trace their heritage back to the Mayflower, Roger Williams, and the Brown family. What interests us today are the artifacts from the antebellum period that reflect the complicated web that united northern industry with the southern slave economy.

Although URI had this collection since 1952, it took a graduate student to open our eyes to its richness. In 2013, Rachel May, at that time a PhD candidate in English, enrolled in a material culture class I was teaching. The focus in that class was on objects and their interpretation. I knew Rachel was interested in quilts, so I showed her three unfinished quilt tops and two swatch books from the Cushman collection. Many of the fabrics in the quilt tops were also in the swatch books. The quilt tops were in the mosaic patchwork technique, which had paper templates on the back. The writing is still visible. Rachel fell in love with the quilt tops, but then she saw the notation for one of the fabrics in the swatch book: “probably for slave gowns.” And then it hit her. Some members of this family may have been involved with slavery.

This started a multi-year quest to better understand what these quilts represented. This quest went on long after the class ended, and after she earned her PhD and started teaching at Northern Michigan University. She spent lots of time at the Rhode Island Historical Society studying documents in the Cushman collection. She made trips to Charleston, South Carolina with funding from URI’s Council for Humanities. She went to Cuba to see sugar cane plantations. And then she spent many months with “seat applied to chair” writing *An American Quilt: Unfolding a Story of Family and Slavery* which was published last year by Pegasus books. To celebrate her book, TMD decided to mount this exhibition.

So, let me introduce you to the family. It starts in the eighteenth century when a journeyman printer by the name of Charles Crouch from South Carolina set up shop briefly in Providence where he met Mary Wilkinson. They married and returned to Charleston where he established a left-leaning newspaper called the *South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal*. This was before the Revolutionary War. The family returned to Rhode Island with their two children, summering in Newport. Charleston and Newport were two of the most important cities in colonial America, both of which were prominent in the slave trade. Many Charlestonians fled the “yellow fever” that afflicted the area because of the mosquito-infested rice swamps between June and early November. The arrival of the Crouches earned mention in the Newport papers in the 1770s. In 1775 Charles died when onboard a ship that sank. He was bound for Philadelphia where he intended to pick up printing materials for his newspaper business. Mary took over the newspaper, but moved North with her two sons just before the British invaded Charleston. Her

son Abraham attended Brown University, graduating in 1787 and continued on to earn a master's degree in 1790. At some point he returned South and became a customs officer in Charleston.

Abraham must have done well because in 1809 he bought a beautiful house, still standing, in Charleston's historic district. That same year, at 41 years of age, he married 18-year-old Sophia Withers of Wilmington, who bore him two sons before dying a month after the birth of the second son, named Hasell. A lock of her hair is on reverse of her miniature, now in the collection of the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston. Abraham sold his house in 1821. He sent both of his sons to Brown University, Hasell graduating in 1830. He himself was living in Providence at the time of his death and seemingly was already connected to the second family, the Williams, because they paid his funeral expenses.

Elijah Williams, who fought in the Revolutionary War, and his wife Abigail moved from agricultural Pomfret, Connecticut to Providence in 1795 where they built a house on George Street, right next to Brown University. He and his son Jason opened a retail store, and in the late 1790s they and other family members began participating in the burgeoning coastal Atlantic shipping trade. One son, a Brown graduate, became a supercargo on one of these vessels, but died of yellow fever in Surinam at the age of twenty. Father Elijah and son Jason got into some trouble in 1809 and lost a cargo to US Customs and ended up in bankruptcy court. Elijah, the father, then moved to upstate New York where he operated an inn. Jason went back to being a shopkeeper. Jason and his wife had eight children. They possibly took in boarders to their home which is how the Williams family may have become acquainted with the Crouches. Jason's sons became friendly with the two Crouch boys. And Jason's daughter Susan ended up marrying Hasell despite the fact the he gave a pro-slavery speech when he graduated from Brown in 1830.

Susan and Hasell returned to South Carolina. Hasell went to medical school and set up practice in Charleston. Susan's brothers were already down there establishing themselves in various businesses. Susan and Hasell owned slaves as did Hasell's parents before him. Susan wrote about them, and not in a complimentary way. She did give their names, though: Minerva, Juba, and Juba. The family struggled to meld into Charleston society by renting houses in good neighborhoods. One of the fashions in Charleston in 1830s was making mosaic quilts. Susan and her sister-in-law wanted to make one. She wrote home to her father to have him send fabric on one of the vessels that sailed from Providence to Charleston. These show up in the quilt tops that she and Hasell started piecing together. Apparently, Hasell liked to piece while working out solutions for his medical patients. Along came two children, Hasell Jr and Emily. Hassell Jr must have been a lively toddler. He fell out of bed, after which he wasn't doing so well. The second time he fell left him listless. Rachel found Susan's letters to her relatives describing the boy as "not himself." I related the symptoms to my brother, a physician, and it appears as if the little boy died from complications of a severe concussion, a swollen brain. Soon after the little boy's death, in 1836, Susan's husband became ill and died. She and her little daughter, Emily, packed up and moved north to return to the family home on George Street. Her brothers remained in the South buying and selling slaves, and shipping cotton and lumber north. They sold the slaves belonging to Hasell and Susan after she left. It seems as though Susan possessed excellent sewing skills judging by the older sections of the quilt tops and the dresses she made.

Susan died in 1902. Emily never married, but she excelled as an artist. She worked as an art teacher and remained in the George Street house until 1917. Records show she rented out rooms in the house, but finally moved in with her great nephew Franklin Cushman. Her mother's trunks, including the unfinished quilts and fabrics came with her. Franklin made up two swatch books to use in the industrial engineering classes he taught at technical high school—early

versions of textile kits that we still use today here at URI—and he continued working on the quilt top, possibly dividing it into three so that they could be used on twin-size beds. The paper templates in the quilts range in date from 1775 to 1940, and reference a range of activities including the Caribbean trade, musical scores, and penmanship practice.

I invite you to look at these quilts and related artifacts in a new light. Also, Rachel's book—*An American Quilt: Unfolding a Story of Family and Slavery*—is for sale here if you want to delve further into this story. Rachel used the historical background, but added her own musings, which characterizes this book a "creative non-fiction."