

*Hoosier Homespun:*

*The Gender Division of Textile Production Labor in Early-19th Century Indiana*

**An Honors Thesis (HIST 470)**

**by**

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## **Introduction**

There exists a substantial body of research on American textile history, and on the gender dynamics of textile production that exist therein. Most of this research has been focused on New England, and other eastern states. While Indiana textiles have been studied before, no attempt has been made to directly compare the practices of spinning and weaving in the state to research on other regions. Using the analysis methods established by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and Adrienne Hood, I have conducted a formal analysis of the gender labor division in Indiana's textile production, demonstrating the complexity of the relationship between textiles and gender in the state's early history.

Writing on this relationship in *At Home in the Hoosier Hills*, Richard Nation says, “[Women’s role in the production of cloth] underlined the importance of women’s roles in the man’s achievement of independence. Leaving aside the irony of the dependence of the male on his wife in an era where dependence implied subordination and vice versa, it is important to note that women’s production— not the selling of surplus corn and pork— formed the basis of most trade essential to the household’s day-to-day survival.”<sup>1</sup> This historical minimization of the importance and status of women’s labor has contributed to the decentralization of it in academic research. Following in the footsteps of Ulrich, Hood, and the other historians working to reverse this erasure, I am joining this conversation to contribute to the study of Indiana’s unique and nuanced textile history.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard F Nation. *At Home in the Hoosier Hills: Agriculture, Politics, and Religion in Southern Indiana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005): 110

## Historiography

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, social and cultural historian, has written extensively on women, gender, and domestic labor in 18th century New England, focusing particularly on textiles in her book *The Age of Homespun* and article “Wheels, Looms, and the Gender Division of Labor in Eighteenth-Century New England”. In both of these pieces she tracks shifts that occurred over the course of the century in the “gendering”<sup>2</sup> of spinning and weaving and the forces that influenced these shifts. Ulrich finds that in late 17th and early 18th century New England, the textile industry resembled that of Europe in many ways; with a small number of specialized male weavers, supplied with yarn by a network of women spinning in their own homes. In Massachusetts in the 1670s, approximately 35% of household inventories included spinning wheels and “looms were so rare as to be virtually invisible”.<sup>3</sup> By 1700, nearly 50% of households owned spinning wheels, but the portion owning looms was only 6%.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that weaving was concentrated amongst a small group of artisans.

However, progressing further into the 18th century, this landscape changed significantly. Ulrich found that by 1730, while the rate of spinning wheel ownership had not increased significantly since 1700, 18-20% of Massachusetts households owned looms— triple the proportion of 30 years prior.<sup>5</sup> She documents similar patterns in Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. Such a dramatic change in the prevalence of loom ownership indicates change in how weaving was occurring, in the structure of the local textile economy. Ulrich writes, “If

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<sup>2</sup> “Gendering” refers to the process by which a culture or social group categorizes activities, objects, and characteristics as “masculine” or “feminine” and the ways in which these categorizations change depending on time, geography, and context.

<sup>3</sup> Data from Hampshire County, Massachusetts probate records in Ulrich, Laurel. *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, (2001): 103

<sup>4</sup> Data from Essex County Massachusetts in Ulrich, *Homespun*: 103

<sup>5</sup> Data from Essex County Massachusetts in Ulrich, *Homespun*: 103

this were the West of England or the linen precincts of Ulster, one would suspect that yarn was being gathered from miles around by merchant clothiers. But New England in this period had no markets in yarn... *In New England, a high ratio of looms to wheels meant dispersed household production. Women had begun to weave.*<sup>6</sup>

This rise of female weavers began among artisan families— that is, female relatives of male weavers working alongside their father or husband— and then spread to non-artisan families.<sup>7</sup> Ulrich explains that more changed than simply the people performing textile production labor, writing it was “a transformation in the nature of the production. Seventeenth-century weavers had been apprentice-trained village specialists; eighteenth-century weavers were dutiful daughters and industrious wives scattered among dozens of rural households.”<sup>8</sup> Accompanying this was a de-specialization of weaving labor as it moved into the domestic— rather than artisanal— sphere.<sup>9</sup> Even after this shift, weavers varied in skill, experience, and expertise, and— although the number of loom-owning households was increasing— weaving was not conducted by all families; a majority of households did *not* own looms. This is where “neighborhood exchanges” and “reciprocal exchanges” form an essential piece of the textile production system.<sup>10</sup> These exchanges of equipment, goods, knowledge, labor, and skills

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<sup>6</sup> Ulrich *Homespun*: 103

Italics added by author of paper

<sup>7</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Wheels, Looms, and the Gender Division of Labor in Eighteenth-Century New England,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (Jan, 1998): 11-12

<sup>8</sup> Ulrich, “Wheels, Looms, and Labor”: 6

<sup>9</sup> Ulrich, “Wheels, Looms, and Labor”: 12

Ulrich notes that she “cannot yet fully account for this transition” but notes both “the fragility of artisan weaving as a male occupation” and “limited opportunities for female employment” as contributing factors. She also notes that in Europe, trade (and thus to weavers, weaving) was a significant part of male identity, whereas in New England, land ownership was a core source of male identity, far more than associating one’s trade with one’s identity. She theorizes that this may be a reason that male weavers in New England were more willing to “give up” weaving and allow it to pass into the “female domain” than weavers in Europe or other regions of the American colonies.

<sup>10</sup> Ulrich, “Wheels, Looms, and Labor”: 17-18

Ulrich distinguishes between “neighborhood exchanges” and “reciprocal exchanges” based on their purpose. “Neighborhood exchanges” occur when one neighbor has particular skills or tools that another neighbor does not and performs the specialized work for the neighbor without the skill/tool— there is generally some amount of

facilitated a system in which skills could be passed on to newer weavers (in the absence of an apprenticeship system) and non-loom-owning households could also have their needs for textiles met— either by using tools owned by a neighbor or “paying” for a neighbor’s weaving labor through these exchanges.

For many years, the research into New England’s textile production in the 18th century was treated as representative of the country as a whole; however Adrienne D. Hood challenged that assumption in her article “The Gender Division of Labor in the Production of Textiles in Eighteenth-Century, Rural Pennsylvania (Rethinking the New England Model)”. Hood found that the shift in the gendering of weaving work that Ulrich identified in New England was not present in Pennsylvania. That is not to say that the state did not experience shifts to the status quo as significant as those in New England. Hood writes, “The major change over the period was not in the gender division of tasks as it appears to be in New England but a shift from the use of bound labor to free wage workers as the latter proliferated in numbers”.<sup>11</sup> According to Hood’s research, Pennsylvania’s cloth production saw a more distinct divide between the processes of spinning and weaving, with the work divided along gender lines— more similar to the system in Europe or 17th century New England than to that of 18th century New England. She found that in Chester County, Pennsylvania (the county that Hood utilizes as a case study in the article) spinning was distinctly women’s work— both when producing yarn for family use as well as spinning in a more commercial context.<sup>12</sup>

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“imbalance” between the two parties. In contrast, a “reciprocal exchange” occurs between two parties without this kind of “imbalance” in order to relieve each other of the tedium of repetitive work by taking turns going to each other’s home to help each other with carding, spinning, or whatever the task may be.

<sup>11</sup> Adrienne Hood, “The Gender Division of Labor in the Production of Textiles in Eighteenth-Century, Rural Pennsylvania (Rethinking the New England Model).” *Journal of Social History*. 27, no. 3 (1994): 540

<sup>12</sup> Hood, “The Gender Division of Labor”: 542

Like in New England, the prevalence of spinning wheel ownership in Chester County increased over the course of the 18th century, although on a slightly delayed time table compared to that observed by Ulrich. Hood notes that spinning-wheel-owning households increased from 30% in 1718 to 65% in 1795. In the same period, spinning wheel ownership that can be specifically attributed to women went from 0% in 1718 to over 50% in 1795. However, Hood makes note that this rate of wheels attributed to women is likely a low estimate both because probate records are inherently an incomplete image (with no record of property a person owned but gave away or sold prior to their death) *and* that many women's property was not inventoried at all.<sup>13</sup> Both ownership of spinning wheels and training of spinning skills passed from woman-to-woman in the community— most being taught by their mothers when they were young and others through more formal apprenticeships in which they were indentured to someone outside the family under the agreement that the apprentice would be taught spinning and other skills.<sup>14</sup> As for *why* spinning was gendered as “women’s work” (other than continuity of the gender norms of Europe), Hood hypothesizes that spinning was conducive with the other household labor performed by women, whereas weaving was less so, writing, “Free women trained to spin and with access to the appropriate equipment would have performed the work when they could fit it around other household tasks...unlike weaving, which demanded the full attention of the artisan, spinning could be done at short intervals amid such other household activities as child care, cooking, washing, etc.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Hood, “The Gender Division of Labor”: 542, 555

This caveat is consistent with my findings in the Delaware County probate records with only 14 of the 206 inventories I studied (just under 7%) being attributed to women. In the case of the Delaware County records it appears that women's inventories were only recorded when they were widows at the time of their death.

<sup>14</sup> Hood, “The Gender Division of Labor”: 542

<sup>15</sup> Hood, “The Gender Division of Labor”: 543

Dividing types of work along gender lines according to which tasks are conducive to multitasking and which are not is not exclusive to textile production. The Plough Hypothesis, introduced by Ester Boserup in 1970 and further studied by Paula Guiliano, Nathan Nunn, and Alberto Alesina in 2011, argues that a culture's traditional methods of agriculture— plough versus hand tools— contributes to the culture's gender roles in the present. The authors assert that these long-lasting differences are rooted in the fact that plough-based agriculture puts men at an advantage in farming activities whereas hand-tool-based agriculture allows women's full participation. Guiliano and co-authors write, “[hand-tool-based agriculture] is labour intensive and women actively participate in farm work. [Plough-based agriculture], in contrast, is more capital intensive, using the plough to prepare the soil. Unlike the hoe or digging stick, the plough requires significant upper body strength, grip strength, and burst of power, which are needed to either pull the plough or control the animal that pulls it,” adding, “child-care, a task almost universally performed by women, is most compatible with activities that can be stopped and resumed easily and do not put children in danger. These are characteristics that are satisfied for hoe agriculture, but not for plough agriculture since large animals are typically used to pull the plough.”<sup>16</sup> These reasons as to why ploughs favor men and hand tools favor women closely parallels the reasons Hood observed that spinning was performed primarily by women and weaving, primarily by men.

In contrast to Ulrich's findings on New England, where women were engaged in both spinning and weaving, Hood found that in Pennsylvania, weaving was performed almost exclusively by a distinct group of male artisans in a commercial, rather than domestic setting. Often the skills of weaving were passed from parent to child (as was the case for spinning) or

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<sup>16</sup> Paula Guiliano, Nathan Nunn, Alberto Alesina, “Women and the Plough,” Centre for Economic Policy Research, July 2, 2011, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/women-and-plough>

through an apprenticeship to a non-family member.<sup>17</sup> However, Hood found some evidence that women were not entirely excluded for weaving in Chester County. In the period studied, five women were identified as owning looms. In all five cases, the looms had previously belonged to a man— their husband, or in one case a son— and in all of the instances that Hood was able to find documentation of who these women bequeathed their looms to after their death, it was to a male relative.<sup>18</sup>

She explains that this alone does not prove whether or not the women who owned looms used them themselves, writing “If not, it was probably because they had too many other responsibilities or were too old to weave, Females who were daughters and/or wives of weavers were undoubtedly familiar with at least some, if not all the tasks involved in making a piece of cloth. If they had time, they would have helped their fathers and/or husbands with their work. But weaving more than just the simplest patterns demanded concentration and uninterrupted time, both of which would be difficult for women to obtain, especially those who were married and had children.”<sup>19</sup> While probate records may not provide certainty on whether or not women in Pennsylvania were weaving, there is an undeniable difference between women’s relationships with spinning tools as opposed to weaving tools. This difference can particularly be seen in the patterns of spinning tools being passed from woman-to-woman and weaving tools being passed from man-to-man or man-to-woman-to-man. It also highlights the differences between the textile production systems in Pennsylvania and New England by the end of the 18th century.

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<sup>17</sup> Hood, “The Gender Division of Labor”: 546

<sup>18</sup> Hood, “The Gender Division of Labor”: 551

<sup>19</sup> Hood, “The Gender Division of Labor”: 551



## **An Exploration of Delaware County Probate Record Data**

As Adrienne Hood writes in introducing her research on rural Pennsylvania, assuming that the “New England Model” applies universally across the United States obscures the nuanced and diverse reality of how textile production is impacted by unique regional factors. Drawing upon the methodologies used by both Hood and Ulrich, particularly the use of probate records and estate inventories, I investigated the practices of textile production in early 19th century Indiana to see how the system of a more newly established state would compare to that of states (and before— colonies) with a history of European settlement dating back to the 17th century, as well as get an idea of the state of hand-spinning and weaving as industrial production gained steam.

My analysis is drawn from a survey of the 206 estate inventories from the Delaware County probate records for the years 1838 to 1852.<sup>20</sup> From this data, we can get an idea both of changes over time in Delaware County residents’ textile production habits as well as of differences between female-headed households and male-headed households. These inventories indicate not only whether or not a household was engaged in textile production, but also the specific types/stages of production: fiber processing, spinning, weaving, or multiple.

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<sup>20</sup> Prior to 1838, probate records were too sparse to yield a sample size large enough to provide statistically significant insight. The records for 1852 conclude the second volume of estate inventory records and establishes a period that extends slightly beyond the establishment of industrialized textile production in Indiana. In addition, the year 1840 was excluded from analysis of trends over time as only 3 estate inventories were recorded that year, and therefore was an outlier.

Figure 1, “Percentage of Households Owning Textile Tools”, shows for each year the percentage of estate inventories which included textile production tools (in blue). In addition, that data is broken down further, showing the percentage of estate inventories including Spinning wheels (orange), Looms/weaving equipment (gray), and other textile production tools (gray).<sup>21</sup> On average, across the period, 64.40% of households owned at least one spinning wheel, with no individual year being lower than 40% and a peak being hit in 1849, in which 90% of estate inventories included one or more spinning wheels. On average, 26.71% of inventories included

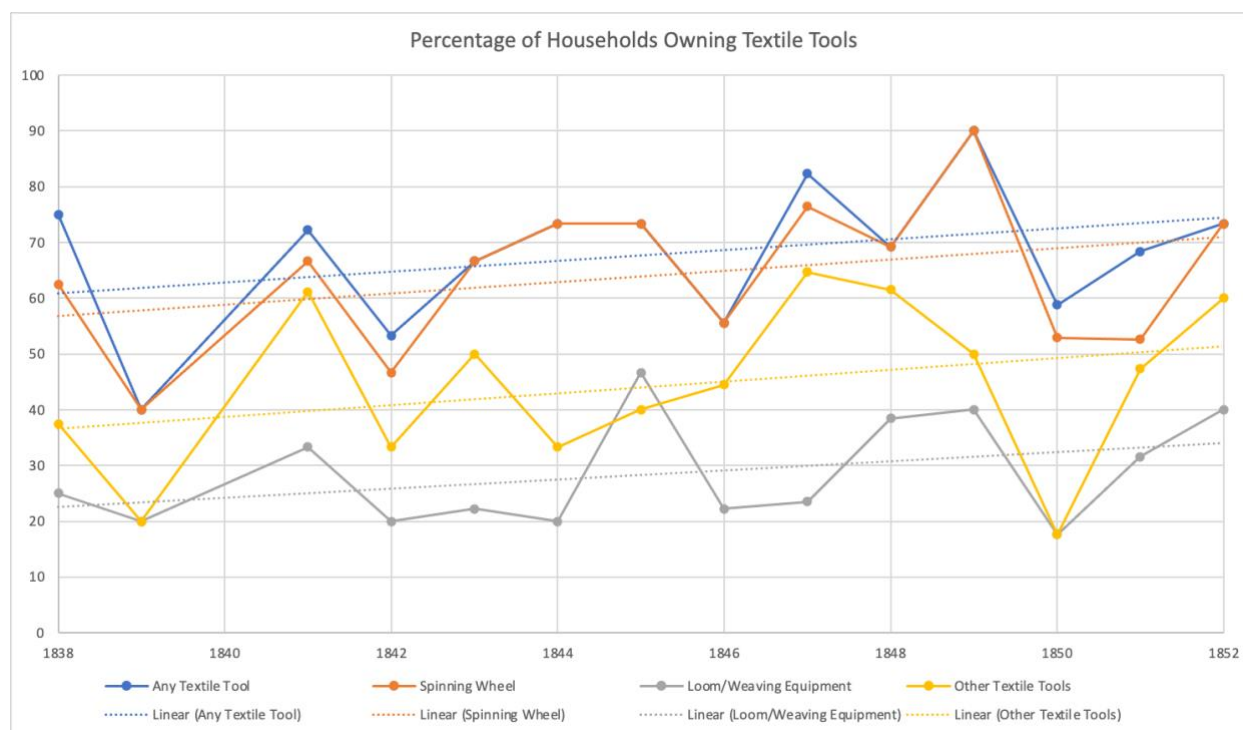


Figure 1

<sup>21</sup> “Inventories and Records of Sale 1838-1852.” Probate Court Records, Delaware County, Indiana, 1838-1852, Carnegie Library, Muncie, IN

In this case and throughout the paper, “other” textile tools refers to items listed in the inventory which showed evidence of fiber processing, spinning yarn, or weaving fabric but did not fit directly into either category of “spinning equipment” or “weaving equipment”. The majority of “other” items were flax hatchels (also called hetchels or hackles)— used in processing harvested flax into a fiber ready to be spun— and reels— used to wind and measure yarn. Sheep shears, wool cards, and flax brakes also appeared in this category, albeit less frequently— all used in processing fiber—. A handful of inventories included “1 lot of spools” which I have also categorized as “other” because it is not certain whether this refers to something used in spinning or in weaving. In the cases where the use of the spools is specified (such as “weaver’s spools” or “spool rack for warping”— both weaving usages) they were counted in the appropriate category.

looms or other items showing that the household was engaged in weaving. An average of 48.06% of households owned some other kind of textile production tool.

The data from the county's probate records show that in Delaware County between 1838 and 1852, the overall prevalence of owning textile-production tools increased slightly, rising by an average of 0.97% per year. Spinning wheel ownership increased by an average of 1.02% per year, loom ownership increased by 0.82% per year.<sup>22</sup> These differences are slight, but warrant consideration of the factors that may cause the prevalence of looms to be increasing more slowly than that of spinning wheels. In addition, the closeness of the lines representing spinning households and all textile producing households shows that nearly all households engaged in any type of textile production were engaged in spinning specifically. An average of 92.64% of textile-producing households owned at least one spinning wheel, a rate that did not increase or decrease across the period.

The Delaware County data bears a striking resemblance to some of the data Laurel Thatcher Ulrich collected on later-18th century New England. In an analysis of records circa 1774, Ulrich found that of 16 counties studied, 11 counties had spinning wheels in 70%-79% of inventories,<sup>23</sup> slightly higher than the averages found in Delaware County. In the same period, Ulrich found that New England loom ownership ranged from 9%-36%, with Connecticut seeing the lowest rates and Maine and New Hampshire with the highest. On average, 22.4% of New England households owned looms in the 1770s,<sup>24</sup> just under Delaware County's average of 26.71%. Based on this, we can expect that Indiana textile production in the second quarter of the

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<sup>22</sup> "Inventories and Records of Sale 1838-1852," Delaware County, Indiana

<sup>23</sup> Ulrich, "Wheels, Looms, and Labor": 7

<sup>24</sup> Percentages calculated using data found in Appendix tables in Ulrich, "Wheels, Looms, and Labor": 37-38

19th century more closely mirrored the system present in New England in the 1770s than at those of earlier times and other regions.

Another metric Ulrich uses to assess the relationship between spinning and weaving at a given time is the ratio of looms to wheels— which illustrates how many loom-owning-households there were for each wheel-owning-household. While in New England the loom-to-wheel ratio varies significantly depending on decade and county, Chester County, Pennsylvania had a ratio consistently between 0.12 and 0.16 between the 1730s and 1770s. In New England, the loom-to-wheel ratio averages to 0.23 in the 1730s, 0.30 in the 1750s, and 0.35 in the 1770s.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, one could expect an artisan-weaver-based textile production system— like that of rural Pennsylvania— to have a ratio less than 0.2 (or no less than 5 spinning households per 1 weaving household), and a system operating under the “New England Model” should have a ratio greater than 0.2. Figure 2 shows the loom-to-wheel ratio for each year in Delaware County. Averaging to a ratio of 0.45,<sup>26</sup> 1838-1852 Delaware County, Indiana shows a greater similarity to 18th century New England than Pennsylvania; therefore, likely more closely resembled the “New England Model” than the

European tradition carried on in Chester County. In fact, it is possible that Delaware County had an even more dispersed system of household production than that which Ulrich found in 18th century New England, with

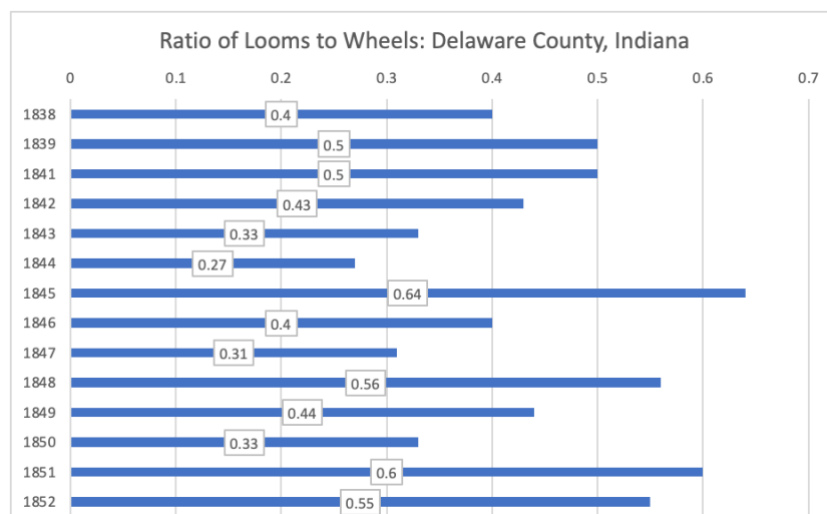


Figure 2

<sup>25</sup> Ulrich, “Wheel, Looms, and Labor”: 11

<sup>26</sup> “Inventories and Records of Sale 1838-1852,” Delaware County, Indiana

just over 2 spinning households per weaving household. Ulrich notes that some counties reached a 2-to-1 ratio at their peak. Without an analysis of other Indiana counties, it can't be certain whether this higher loom-to-wheel ratio is representative of the state and time period or if Delaware County is simply another of these unusually-high-in-looms counties.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to note that the name accompanying an inventory does not, on its own, indicate the gender of the person using the spinning wheels and looms therein. In many cases there is simply not enough information to infer anything with any degree of certainty, further complicated by the practice of coverture, by which women and girls did not have their own legal identity or “legally exist”—rather they were “covered” by their father’s legal identity and later, after marriage, by their husband’s.<sup>28</sup> Because of this, when a married man died any of his wife’s belongings were, in the eyes of the law, his property and thus included in his estate inventory. On the other hand, when a married *woman* died, in the eyes of the law she had no personal possessions—anything socially considered “hers” legally belonged to her husband, meaning no estate inventories for these women were created. In some cases, supplemental information gives some clue to which member(s) of the family most likely used a particular tool. These draw primarily from sale bills accompanying an estate inventory and records containing notes indicating which items of property were claimed by a widow.

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<sup>27</sup> As will be discussed later, there is only one professional jacquard weaver ever confirmed to have been operating in Delaware County. Possibly, the reduced access to professional weavers in the county corresponds to a greater amount of domestic weaving. This hypothesis could be studied by comparing the loom-to-wheel ratio of Delaware and other counties with 0-1 documented professional weavers to those of Wayne or Franklin Counties, both of which have more than 10 documented professional jacquard weavers.

<sup>28</sup> Catherine Allegor, “Coverture: The Word You Probably Don’t Know But Should,” National Women’s History Museum, September 4, 2012, <https://www.womenshistory.org/articles/coverture-word-you-probably-dont-know-should>

Not all records studied include specific notes on items claimed by widows in their allotment. Whether this is because these records were of unmarried men/men without widows, because their widows did not claim items of property, simply inconsistent procedures in record keeping, or another reason—any conclusion is, at best, speculative. However, looking at records in which widows *did* claim property, specifically what textile tools they did or did *not* claim provides some insight into the use of these tools within the household. Using a sample of 184 objects, 31% of textile tools were bought or claimed by the widow of the deceased, 15% were bought by a family member other than the widow. Specifically, 7% were bought by male relatives, 8% by female relatives. 54% were bought by a non-relative: 46% by men, 3% by women, and 4% by people of unknown gender (Figure 3).

Breaking it down further to look at specific types of tools, spinning wheels were claimed by widows 31% of the time, looms/weaving tools 24.39% of the time, and other fiber processing/textile production tools 37.21% of the time (Figure 4).<sup>29</sup> Notably, the portion of looms claimed by widows is considerably lower than that of spinning wheels or other

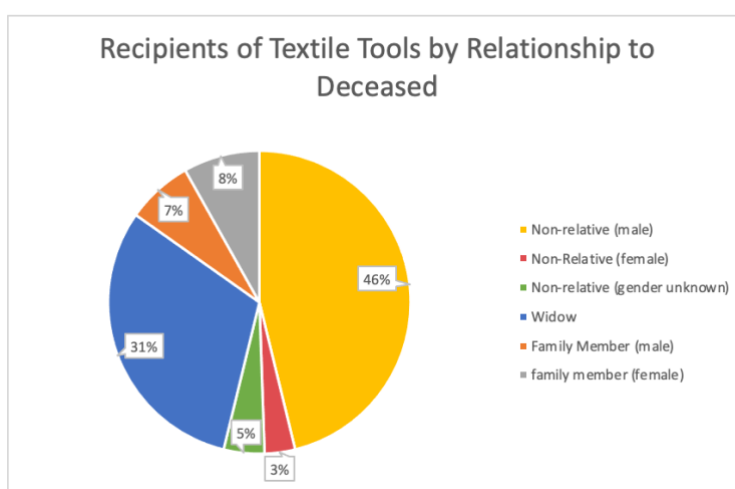


Figure 3

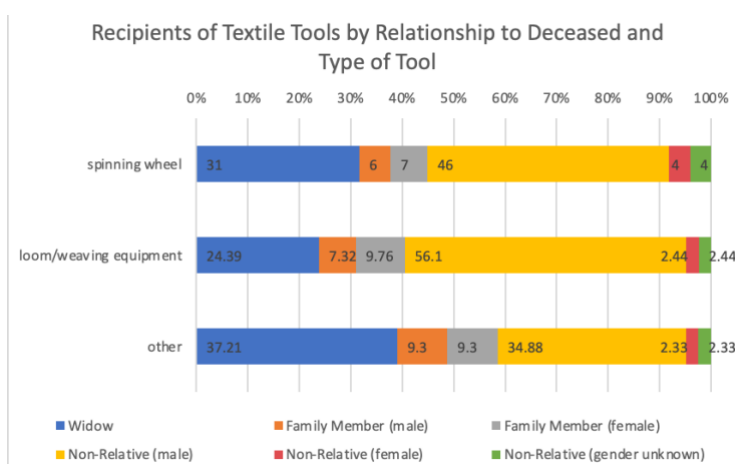


Figure 4

<sup>29</sup> "Inventories and Records of Sale 1838-1852," Delaware County, Indiana

equipment claimed by widows. This may indicate that women were somewhat less likely to weave than to spin or do fiber processing work. However, the fact that widows claimed nearly a quarter of looms, as opposed to the five total women who inherited looms in Chester County, Pennsylvania,<sup>30</sup> indicates that there were nevertheless a significant number of women to whom owning a loom was important.

Particularly when it comes to non-relatives purchasing tools at an estate sale, the same principle applies as applies to the inventories as a whole: the gender of the person whose name is in the record does not necessarily indicate the gender of the person primarily using the object. However, further insight on the gender dynamics of textile production can be drawn by comparing the inventories of female-headed households and male-headed households. In Delaware County, 14 women had their estate inventories included in the probate records between 1838 and 1852, making up approximately 7% of the inventories. All 5 of the 14 whose marital status could be confirmed were widows at the time of their death. 64.29% of female-headed households' inventories included textile production tools of some kind. 57.14% owned a

spinning wheel, compared to 64.53% of the total population. While 28.57% of all households owned looms, only 14.29% of female-headed households did.<sup>31</sup>

The difference in spinning wheel ownership between female-headed households and all households parallels

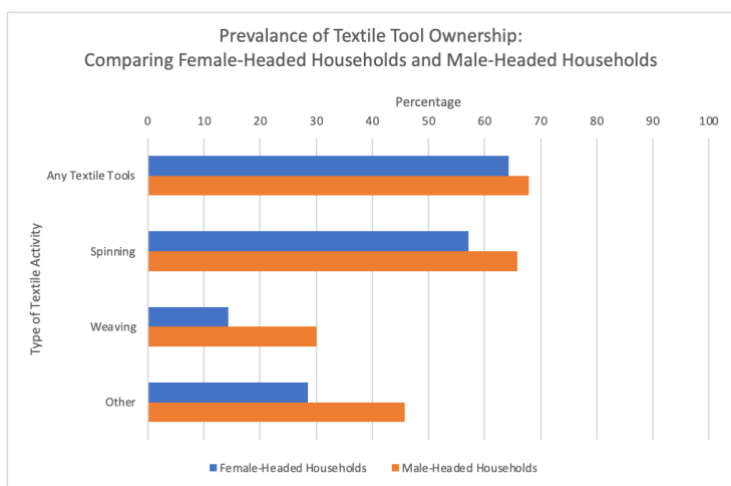


Figure 5

<sup>30</sup> Hood, "The Gender Division of Labor": 551

<sup>31</sup> "Inventories and Records of Sale 1838-1852," Delaware County, Indiana

that observed by Hood in rural Pennsylvania— 65% of all households and 50% of women in 1795— with women owning spinning wheels at a slightly lower rate than average. Regarding data concerning women’s inventories, Hood writes, “These numbers are probably low and do not account for property given away during the decedent’s lifetime or that many women’s estates were not inventoried.”<sup>32</sup> These factors may also contribute to the difference seen in Delaware County’s data, particularly considering how small of a sample 14 inventories is. Overall, this data indicates that members of female-headed households, many of which were headed by widows, were not *more* likely to be engaged in spinning than members of male-headed households.

More notable than the difference seen in spinning wheel ownership is that in ownership of weaving equipment; female-headed households were half as likely to own looms as male-headed-households. This could indicate that these men were weaving, not their wives, but it also could indicate that widowed women were less likely to weave, perhaps because of the increased other work they did managing a household. Overall, female-headed households tended to have lower total valuations than male-headed households; looms were significantly more expensive than spinning wheels (wheels valued \$1.50-\$2.50, looms valued \$5-\$7). Women who were heads of their household may have had more trouble affording a loom or found looms to be non-essential items and, if they were widows, chosen to claim their portion of their husband’s estate in other objects they considered to be more of necessities. It is possible that weaving was a less “core” task to women than spinning was or that members of female-headed households may have engaged in sharing weaving equipment with others in the community, but were not in possession

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<sup>32</sup> Hood, “The Gender Division of Labor”: 555



of looms themselves. In all, these findings are inconclusive at this time, but this pattern within the data warrants further exploration.

Further analysis, particularly looking at an estate's total valuation and how they compare between textile-tool households and non-textile-tool households, could provide insight into the relationship between economic status and home textile production; however, this is beyond the scope of this work. In the probate records examined, there were 7 people whose inventories strongly indicated a non-farming profession: 2 blacksmiths, Jeremiah Neath and Abraham Shidles; 2 store owners, likely dry goods stores, James M Laughlin and Isaac Helen; a carpenter, a reverend, and a doctor— Benjamin Herman, William Horne, and John A Clarke respectively. Interestingly, *none* of these 7 inventories included any textile tools.<sup>33</sup> This indicates a strong link between textile production and other agricultural work. Because growing flax and raising sheep were part of the operation of a farm, the processing and spinning of this fiber into yarn may have been seen as an extension of that farm labor— a possible explanation for why households not engaged in farming were also not engaged in textile production.

### **Beyond Delaware County**

In light of the data from Delaware County's probate records, how does Indiana's system of textile production compare to the systems found in New England and Pennsylvania? A throughline that exists between all three regions, and differing from the system prevalent in Europe, was the practice of women spinning yarn for fabric to be used specifically by their own family, taking their homespun to a weaver, who weaves it into fabric in exchange for a form of payment— with additional yarn sometimes used as payment. In Europe, it was also common for a dispersed group of home spinners to provide yarn to a weaver or weavers, but these "putting

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<sup>33</sup> "Inventories and Records of Sale 1838-1852," Delaware County, Indiana

out” systems were frequently managed by a clothier who oversaw the manufacture and sale of the finished fabrics.<sup>34</sup> These spinners were solely producers in the manufacturing process whereas American women who spun played a dual role of producer and consumer in the creation of these textile goods.

In Indiana, this spinner-weaver relationship sometimes played out similarly to that of late-18th century New England through an “informal female economy of neighborly exchange and reciprocity.”<sup>35</sup> In *A Home in the Woods: Pioneer Life in Indiana*, Oliver Johnson describes his childhood in Marion County, Indiana in the 1820s and 30s, recorded by his great-grandson Howard Johnson.<sup>36</sup> An entire chapter is dedicated to and titled “The Spinning Wheel”, wherein he describes the process his family— primarily his mother and sisters— went through to produce the textiles needed for clothing and other household articles. Johnson recalls the particular importance of flax (used to make linen), saying that his family grew, processed, and spun flax, all within the operations of their household, and commented that most families in the area likewise grew their own flax and made their own linen.<sup>37</sup> Within the system of families producing linen for home use, Johnson makes it clear that not everyone wove, using his own family as an example, “[The linen thread] was now ready for the weaver. We didn’t have a loom. Pap thought mother had enough to do takin’ care of a big family. So our weavin’ was done by a neighbor woman who made a business of takin’ in weavin’”.<sup>38</sup> He does not provide any further

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<sup>34</sup> Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun*: 50-51

<sup>35</sup> Hood, “The Gender Division of Labor”: 538

Written in reference to findings of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s work

<sup>36</sup>Howard Johnson, *A Home in the Woods: Pioneer Life in Indiana*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991) Authorship of this text is somewhat difficult to describe; it is, as its second subtitle states “Oliver Johnson’s Reminiscences of Early Marion County, As related by Howard Johnson.” A Publisher’s Note at the beginning of the book refers to Oliver as “the author of this narrative” and Howard as “the writer”. Howard is one putting the words to paper, but it is written in a first-person account from Oliver’s perspective based on his testimony which Howard recorded.

<sup>37</sup> Johnson, *A Home in the Woods*: 34-35

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, *A Home in the Woods*: 35

detail on how these exchanges took place or what forms of payment were used in this “neighbor woman’s” business. This account provides an example of the same type of “neighborly exchange” as Ulrich identified in New England.

A similar practice was identified elsewhere in Indiana by Richard F Nation in *At Home in the Hoosier Hills: Agriculture, Politics, and Religion in Southern Indiana, 1810-1870*. Writing about Franklin County in “Hill Country” of southern Indiana, Nation writes that while early Indiana was in great need of skilled craftspeople, weaving was one area where there was an exception. Weaving was done in the home with many families producing their own linen and wool from fiber to fabric.<sup>39</sup> Similarly to Oliver Johnson’s recollections, in Franklin County, while textile production was nearly ubiquitous, owning a loom was not. Nation found that while 11 of 18 estates probated in Franklin County (61.11%) owned spinning wheels in 1830, only 2 (11.11%) owned looms, noting that families often shared these looms— one loom being used by several different families.<sup>40</sup> Ulrich recognized a similar pattern of neighbors sharing, borrowing, or even co-owning looms and parts of looms,<sup>41</sup> indicating that the number of families owning looms may be a low estimate of the number of families *using* looms. Nation also found evidence of weaving work being outsourced and paid for through trading, quoting Mrs. Karl Tafel, ““Later I had enough wool to have our clothes woven, and I paid for the weaving with a third of the yarn.””<sup>42</sup> Clearly, this system was utilized in a variety of areas of the state and may have been a core component of the textile culture in Indiana.

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<sup>39</sup> Nation. *At Home in the Hoosier Hills*: 107

<sup>40</sup> Nation, *At Home in the Hoosier Hills*: 107

<sup>41</sup> Ulrich, “Wheels, Looms, and Labor”: 18

<sup>42</sup> Nation, *At Home in the Hoosier Hills*: 109

It is not specified whether the weaver Tafel took her homespun yarn to was a traditional tradesperson weaver (typically men) or a person who wove in their home in a domestic context (typically women), but because Nation makes no reference to records of artisan weavers in area at the time, it seems likely that Tafel was referring a paid neighborhood exchange.

Extending past the period studied in the present paper, Indiana saw the presence of both hand weaving and mechanized mills used in processing Hoosiers' wool (and flax to a progressively lesser degree) into fabric. Richard Nation records that by the early 1860s families such as the Miller family of Jackson County, Indiana, opted not to card and hand spin the wool from their sheep, rather sending the wool (175 pounds of it!) to a mill in an adjoining county. There, the wool spun, dyed, and woven into finished fabric for the family to retrieve.<sup>43</sup> Adreanna Robbins, in a diary in 1870, recorded the events of her daily life and operations of her family's farm in Orange County, Indiana, in short, matter-of-fact daily entries— including mention of a variety of textile operations: sewing, weaving, growing and processing flax, and comments indicating that the family may have done some dyeing as well.<sup>44</sup>

Robbins mentions two weaving projects she worked on during the year of 1870, and even in these brief fragmentary references, parallels emerge between her and the American women weavers who came before her. Like the unnamed neighbor or the Johnson family, she weaves for other members of her community, writing on May 27th "put in Mary A Smith's table linen", referring to setting up the warp on the loom, a few weeks later, on June 20th, writing, "...started [weaving] Mary's table linen."<sup>45</sup> Robbins has other entries about sharing parts of looms among neighbors— "...Emma went to Osborns and got the reed"<sup>46</sup>— as well as referencing another weaver, potentially a professional weaver, being hired to do the process of warping— "sent our web off to the weaver the first time I ever done the like" and "we got the web out and took the

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<sup>43</sup> Nation, *At Home in the Hoosier Hills*: 109

<sup>44</sup> Adreanna Robbins, *The Diary of Adreanna Robbins 1870*, Diary. SC 2418. Indiana Historical Society. *Diary, 1865-1870*

<sup>45</sup> Robbins, *The Diary of Adreanna Robbins*: 25, 27

<sup>46</sup> Robbins, *The Diary of Adreanna Robbins*: 24

Emma is Adreanna's daughter

loom out”.<sup>47</sup> These diary entries mirror those of New England women who shared and exchanged weaving tools and parts of looms within the community and the practice of more experienced weavers assisting with or completing the warping (setting up) of the loom<sup>48</sup>— a complex and mathematical process, arguably more technical than the weaving itself. Robbins’ situation appears to have been slightly different than the less-experienced New England weavers receiving warping help from their neighbors. She mentions that this is the first time she has “sent off” her warp to another weaver and later discusses warping the loom herself, indicating that the choice to “send off” a warp was made not because of a lack of skill or experience, but for other reasons, potentially to save labor or simply out of convenience.

By the 1860s, mechanized carding, spinning, and weaving were beginning to have a prominent position in Indiana’s textile production— even for small family farms. Simultaneously, hand weaving did not disappear, persisting (albeit to a far more limited degree) at least a full decade after the Miller family had switched to utilizing mechanized production. Even so, Robbins makes no mention of her or anyone else in her family spinning but does include several instances when she or Emma purchased yarn when they had traveled to market. In addition, mentions of buying or sewing with fabric (frequently calico) from the market exceed mentions of weaving, indicating that even among families that continued hand-weaving into the second half of the 19th century, it accounted for a minority of the fabric a family used and mechanized production was inextricably entwined in the process.

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<sup>47</sup> Robbins, *The Diary of Adreanna Robbins*: 1-2  
 “Web” in this context is a synonym of “warp”

<sup>48</sup> Ulrich, “Wheels, Looms, and Labor”: 17-18

## **The Jacquard Loom and a Rebirth of the Artisan Weaver**

Although probate data indicates a system similar to that of late-18th century New England—a high prevalence of home spinning with dispersed household weaving, each likely performed in part or largely by women—Indiana was not without an artisan-weaving economy in the 19th century, particularly with the arrival of the jacquard loom, first recorded in the state in 1838.<sup>49</sup> Coverlets make up a significant portion of surviving textile artifacts from early 19<sup>th</sup> century Indiana. Prior to 1838, these coverlets were made using overshot weaving. Overshot weaving utilizes a linen or cotton warp, usually undyed,<sup>50</sup> and two weft threads—usually one wool and one linen or cotton, matching the warp. The weaver alternates which shuttle is thrown, treadling tabby (aka plain) weave<sup>51</sup> for each throw of the linen/cotton and treadling the appropriate pattern to create the desired design when throwing the shuttle with the wool. This alternating of the shuttles causes the raised, textured look of the design when the fabric is finished. According to Pauline Montgomery’s research, these overshot coverlets were overwhelmingly made by women, weaving within their home and frequently served as an outlet for creativity in finding various combinations of coverlet designs and natural dyes.<sup>52</sup> There were some men operating as professional weavers in this period, making overshot coverlets, but far

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<sup>49</sup> Pauline Montgomery, *Indiana Coverlet Weavers and Their Coverlets* (Indianapolis, Hoosier Heritage Press: 1974): 1

<sup>50</sup> In Indiana’s early history, flax (used to make linen) was a key crop for most families. As cotton became increasingly commercially available (due in large part to the concurrent expansion of enslavement in the American South and increasing industrialization of cotton spinning and weaving in the North East) and Indiana agriculture shifted to market-oriented crops, rather than subsistence, flax cultivation decreased significantly.

<sup>51</sup> A “tabby weave” or “plain weave” refers to one of the simplest weave structures that consists of a “over one, under one” pattern

<sup>52</sup> Montgomery, *Indiana Coverlet Weavers*: 2

fewer than in the heyday of jacquard weaving. Montgomery documents Richard Nichols and Joseph Peden as two such men.<sup>53</sup>



*Figure 6: Overshot coverlet in process of being woven using an early 19th century loom- weaving done by the author in August 2023 at Conner Prairie, in Fishers, IN. Coverlet pictured is a reproduction of one owned by William Conner, now in the museum's collection*



*Figure 7: Jacquard coverlet woven by a member of the Muir family, likely John Muir, currently in the collection of the Indiana State Museum. Photo taken by the author*

Jacquard weaving was distinctly different both in appearance and production. Somewhat of a midpoint between the 2 or 4 harness handloom of Indiana's early pioneers and the power loom quickly taking over weaving in England as the century progressed, the jacquard loom utilized a system of cards with holes punched in them, similar to those used by early computers, to "program" weaving patterns and an attachment added to the top of the loom which automated

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<sup>53</sup> Montgomery, *Indiana Coverlet Weavers*: 81,84

the raising and lowering of threads to create each row. Together, this allowed weavers to create far more complex designs than were possible on older styles of loom utilized by American weavers for the past 200 years. Coverlets made on jacquard looms can be rich sources of information precisely because of these more complex designs. Each coverlet includes a “weaver’s block”, a small portion of one of the coverlet’s corners with text and/or a design that functioned as a weaver’s “signature”. Many weaver’s blocks also included the year or location in which the coverlet was made. Though seemingly small details, these pieces of verifiable information means that confirmation exists of the identities of the creators of these coverlets made 150-190 years ago— something very rare for textile items as old as these.

The majority of Indiana’s jacquard weavers were men trained in traditional apprenticeships, moving to the United States from England, Germany, Ireland, and Scotland, or their descendants moving to Indiana from more eastern states such as New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. With the onset of the industrial revolution, many artisan weavers saw that their traditional line of work and way of life were becoming obsolete. In *Indiana Coverlet Weavers and Their Coverlets*, Pauline Montgomery discusses this changing technological landscape as a factor drawing these weavers to areas, such as Indiana, with a less well-established industrial presence. She writes, “Many of the weavers, born in the period 1800 to 1810, with thorough apprenticeship training behind them, could see no future for their craft in Britain and were quite willing to risk what America might hold for them... a background of economic insecurity might explain the weavers’ eagerness to buy Indiana land as soon as they became established. Land had always seemed one of the more stable investments.”<sup>54</sup> This can further be seen in the lives of weavers such as Henry Adolf, Peter Burkherd, and others who arrived in Indiana from eastern

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<sup>54</sup> Montgomery, *Indiana Coverlet Weavers*: 3



states or abroad, worked in Indiana for a time, and then moved further west.<sup>55</sup> For many, Indiana served as a destination or stop along the way in a process of physically “outrunning” the Industrial Revolution— moving further and further west, staying geographically “ahead” of the influence of the power loom.<sup>56</sup>

The arrival of jacquard weavers to Indiana precipitated an interesting shift in the gendering of textile work. Prior to 1838, while some male professional weavers such as Joseph Peden and Richard Nichols are known to have been working in the state, records indicate that (of fabric not originating from textile mills in other states) most of the weaving was being performed by women in their homes, making fabric either for their own family’s use or paid work for other local families. Jacquard weaving was a disruption of this system and caused weaving, coverlet weaving specifically, to shift back into the realm of “men’s work”— an inversion of the shift Ulrich observed in New England over the course of the 18th century. There are a variety of factors that may have contributed to this shift, including the increased capital investment required for a jacquard loom (and the space needed to house it)— making ownership of one more accessible to men than to women— or even the dramatic difference in the speed with which one can weave on a jacquard loom. Some experienced weavers were reportedly able to complete a jacquard coverlet in a single day; describing his aunt, Sarah LaTourette (widely considered Indiana’s only professional woman weaver), Fred LaTourette said, ““If Aunt Sarah got up at daybreak, and if the loom were threaded, she could finish a coverlet before dusk.””<sup>57</sup> This sheer difference in speed may have been motivation enough for many to choose to purchase their

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<sup>55</sup> Montgomery, *Indiana Coverlet Weavers*: 9-10, 17

<sup>56</sup> Mary Figueroa (Indiana State Museum Curator of History) in discussion with the author, October 13, 2023

<sup>57</sup> Montgomery, *Indiana Coverlet Weavers*: 5

In comparison, two weeks was considered a reasonable amount of time for a skilled weaver to complete a coverlet using a standard four-harness loom.

woven goods from a jacquard weaver, rather than weave them themselves. At the same time, Indiana's economy as a whole was shifting to favor producing goods for sale, rather than purely for family use with Richard Nation commenting, "Goods, even if they were useful for subsistence, were not desirable unless they would also be turned into cash."<sup>58</sup> In this new paradigm, time spent spinning or weaving for one's own family was time that could be spent on work that could generate income for the family. While at one time homespun fabric was considered monetarily equivalent to and could be exchanged for equal yardage of factory-manufactured calico, that time had passed, and homespun fabric, particularly linen, lost value over the course of the second and third quarters of the 19th century. Because home-manufactured fabric had decreased both in necessity for family survival and monetary value, many women may have decided that the labor previously directed towards weaving could be more economically redirected elsewhere.

Broadly, the pattern holds that professional weavers were men and weavers working in a domestic context were women, but Indiana did have counterexamples to this paradigm— women working in professional weaving in a variety of capacities. Most readily known is Sarah LaTourette, one of the fourteen children of Sarah Schenck LaTourette and John LaTourette— a professional jacquard weaver who lived in Indiana from 1828 to 1849. Sarah LaTourette is widely considered "Indiana's only woman professional weaver,"<sup>59</sup> taking over her father's weaving business after his death. Montgomery writes, "Sarah was twenty-seven at the time of her father's death and fully capable of carrying on the business both as a weaver and a competent businesswoman,"<sup>60</sup> and records her brother Schuyler describing her, saying, "Sister Sarah was

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<sup>58</sup> Nation, *At Home in the Hoosier Hills*: 111

<sup>59</sup> Montgomery, *Indiana Coverlet Weavers*: 44

<sup>60</sup> Montgomery, *Indiana Coverlet Weavers*: 67

more than a weaver. She had a sprightly mind and was interested in people and had uncommonly good taste.”<sup>61</sup> Although Sarah LaTourette is considered the state’s only woman professional weaver and is certainly the only woman documented to have been a professional jacquard weaver, she was far from the only woman working in the professional weaving industry. Particularly as the size of their businesses grew, many jacquard weavers employed assistants “to card the wool, dye it, and keep the bobbins filled.”<sup>62</sup> Frequently, these assistants were women, such as Amy Harrison, an assistant of Hugh Wilson, who ended up marrying Wilson in 1828.<sup>63</sup> Although these women were not classified as weavers themselves, they undoubtedly were highly skilled— particularly if they worked with the temperamental natural dyes used at the time—, very familiar with the textile production process, and essential to their employers’ businesses continuing to run smoothly.

In answering the question “Were women professional weavers?” a key point to examine is the metric by which “professional” is defined. Historically, discussion of “professional” and “non-professional” weaving has equated professional with artisanal weaving— defined by apprenticeship, operating or being employed by a business, and being identified as a weaver in census records. These characteristics are inherently linked to how employment and life as a craftsperson could be experienced by *men*, with traditional artisan’s apprenticeships, business ownership, and inclusion in census employment records almost entirely not available to women. By this definition, “professional weaving” is being defined, perhaps implicitly, as “the contexts in which men weave”, and in contrast “domestic” or “household” weaving is defined as “the contexts in which women weave.” After deconstructing this definition, it is no wonder that so

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<sup>61</sup> Montgomery, *Indiana Coverlet Weavers*: 69

<sup>62</sup> Montgomery, *Indiana Coverlet Weavers*: 101

<sup>63</sup> Montgomery, *Indiana Coverlet Weavers*: 101

few women have been recorded as “professional weavers”; only the few outliers like Sarah LaTourette— inheriting and continuing to operate her father’s business in the same manner he had before his death— ever even had the chance to qualify.

In looking at the documentation of neighborhood exchanges of weaving in Indiana, payment is frequently mentioned. Whether the neighbor of the Johnson family in Marion County or of Mrs. Karl Tafel in southern Indiana, these women’s weaving labor is being compensated and their work is referred to as “making a business.”<sup>64</sup> In Hancock County, a woman named Ursula Snodgrass is recorded to have successfully supported her family with her weaving after the death of her husband in 1829.<sup>65</sup> If a more gender-blind understanding of “professional” weaving is being used— a person who consistently receives payment in exchange for their weaving labor— is Ursula Snodgrass any less of a professional than Joseph Peden— who also wove and sold overshot pieces at the same time that Snodgrass did?

### **Conclusion**

In Indiana, the gender barriers of spinning and weaving were more permeable than in 18th century Pennsylvania or New England, with multiple systems coexisting— reflecting the varying regional backgrounds of European and European-American settlers arriving in Indiana in the first half of the 19th century. Early in the century, a minority of male artisan weavers existed alongside a weaving system dominated by home-manufactured fabric woven by women— concentrated amongst farming families. By the late 1830s, jacquard weaving along with the increasing availability of factory-manufactured textile goods was decreasing the necessity of

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<sup>64</sup> Johnson, *A Home in the Woods*: 35

<sup>65</sup> “Geometric Coverlet by Ursula Snodgrass”. (Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana State Museum, n.d.) Museum Exhibit Label.

women to produce fabric for their families' use. However, a gradual but steady increase in the ownership of looms in Delaware County from 1838 to 1852 suggests that jacquard and factory goods did not supplant domestic weaving entirely.

Although the weaving work done by women has traditionally been considered non-professional in comparison to that done by men, evidence of exchanges between Indiana's weaving and non-weaving women suggests that many of these women could be considered "professional weavers" if the term is being defined as "a person receiving payment in exchange for their weaving labor". This reframing of the definition of "professional" should particularly be considered in light of the women like Ursula Snodgrass who used their weaving to in part or in whole support their family. Even in the realm of traditional artisanal weaving, men did not hold a complete monopoly. Whether Sarah LaTourette, a businesswoman and a weaver taking over her late father's business and continuing to produce exquisite coverlets, or the numerous woman like Amy Harrison Wilson, employed as an "assistant", facilitating the business of an artisan weaver— women were undeniably ingrained in the operations of Indiana's artisan weaving industry.

Overall, an examination of early nineteenth-century Delaware County, Indiana complicates our understanding of the relationship between gender and textile production in the early United States.

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