

UNITED STATES NATIONAL MUSEUM BULLETIN 250

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM

THE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND TECHNOLOGY

PAPER 59, PAGES 1-64

FLOOR COVERINGS IN 18TH-CENTURY AMERICA

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SMITHSONIAN PRESS

WASHINGTON, D.C.

1967



PORTRAIT OF CHIEF JUSTICE AND MRS. OLIVER ELLSWORTH
by Ralph Earl, 1792

(Courtesy of Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.)

Figure 1.—The floor shown in this room of a Connecticut house is completely covered with a bold design of large stripes and medallions in shades of black, red, orange, and white. The Ellsworths are seated in the library of their house which by artistic license is seen through the open window to be a white mansion with a red roof.

FLOOR COVERINGS IN 18th-CENTURY AMERICA

Floor coverings were the exception rather than the rule in the 18th-century house, difficult as this is to believe today. Pictures and writings of the period serve as our most direct evidence of their existence. The author fully illustrates in this paper the various kinds of floor coverings available in the 18th century and recounts the history of their use—from the Oriental or “Turkey” carpets through Brussels, Axminster, and even sand. She relates interesting accounts of their sale, maintenance, and the wide variety of colors offered, as well as their selection according to the decor of the rooms. All of this information is spiced with quotes from Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, and others, on the same subject: floor coverings. Her study in this field has extended over a period of many years, but the major research for this paper was accomplished during 1959–1961.

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Introduction

Floor coverings were the exception rather than the rule in the 18th century. Americans, however, who wanted and could afford to have floor coverings in their houses were able to choose from a variety of types. Some of the kinds available and used were Oriental or “Turkey” carpets, floorcloths, straw mats, and ingrain, Wilton, Brussels, and Axminster carpeting and carpets. Although few if any movable

floor coverings with known histories of use in this country during the 18th century exist today, evidence of the types available, and where and how they were used in domestic surroundings, survives in the writings and pictures of the period.

Carpets and rugs, of course, have an ancient history long antedating the 18th century. In the Western World, however, as even a cursory look at European paintings reveals, they were seldom to be found under any feet except those of royalty or nobility, and then

usually as a mark of rank rather than as an item of household furnishing. Until they came into general use as floor coverings in the 18th century, Oriental carpets and rugs were used as they had been since their introduction into Europe from the Near East in the 15th and 16th centuries—as covers for tables, beds, and cupboards, and as hangings on walls and at windows.¹ According to 17th-century American wills and inventories, the colonists adhered to this practice whether they lived in Massachusetts and had a “carpitt and tabell” as listed in a 1644 inventory, or in Virginia and had a “drawing [i.e., draw-top] table and Turkey Carpet” as recorded in a 1673 will.² Oriental rugs and carpets continued to be used by the colonists in these ways well into the 18th century.

Types of Floor Coverings

ORIENTAL

Oriental carpets, occasionally referred to as Persians, were called “Turkey” carpets from their place of origin or export. The homemade imitations also were known as “Turkey” or “Turkey-work” carpets. Whether called Oriental or Turkey, the carpets were used as table covers by persons of importance and wealth in the colonies until almost the middle of the 18th century. This is shown in two paintings, *George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne, and his Wife and Family* (fig. 10), painted in 1729 by John Smibert, and *Portrait of Isaac Royall and Family* (fig. 2), done in 1741 by Robert Feke. In both portraits the sitters are grouped about a table covered with an Oriental carpet.³ The fact that such carpets were recorded in oil suggests not only that they were highly valued and

that ownership of them was considered of importance, but also that their use as table covers was appropriate as well as in fashion at the time.

In fact, the word carpet was defined as “a Covering for the Table” in the 1720s and 1730s according to English dictionaries such as Nathan Bailey’s *Universal Etymological Dictionary*. It was only in subsequent editions that the added meaning of carpet appeared as “a Covering for a Table, Passage, or Floor.” This distinction in function was being made in the colonies at about the same time and is indicated by the use of the adjective “floor” to describe some carpets in the household inventories of deceased persons.

For instance, “1 Floor Carpet” valued at £7 10s. was mentioned in “An After Inventory of Sundry’s belonging to the Estate of Mrs. Margaret Claxton, late of Boston, Widow Deced.” recorded in 1746.⁴ It is difficult to say with any certainty whether Turkey carpets also were used as floor coverings in colonial houses during the earlier part of the 18th century, as they were in some of the better English houses. Oriental carpets, however, were generally thought of in terms of table and furniture coverings rather than floor coverings until about the middle of the 18th century in the colonies.

Some insight into the transition of the Oriental carpet from furniture to floor covering can be gained from inventories of household furnishings such as that of Mr. Nathaniel Cunningham, a resident of Massachusetts living in the Boston area. In the list of Cunningham’s belongings, recorded in 1748 shortly after his death, besides “1 Canvas Floor Cloth £4” located in the great chamber on the first floor, there were “2 old Turkey Carpetts £7” in the upper garret and “2 Turkey Carpetts” worth £4 in the little upstairs chamber. In contrast to these Turkey carpets were those listed in the same inventory but “At the New House” as “1 fine Large New Turkey Carpet £60 [and] 1 D[it]t[o. somewhat worn £30.”⁵ The difference in location, the new house as against the garret and an upper chamber, and the difference in the adjectives, new, fine, and large, as against old, are differences which suggest that the Turkey carpets

¹ W. G. THOMPSON, “Carpets,” rev. by G. F. Wingfield Digby in *The Dictionary of English Furniture*, edit. Percy Macquoid and Ralph Edwards (rev. ed.; London: Country Life, Ltd., 1954), vol. 1, pp. 203–204; WILHELM VON BODE and ERNST KÜHNEL, *Antique Rugs from the Near East*, transl. Charles G. Ellis (rev. ed.; Berlin: Klinkhardt and Biermann, 1958), figs. 34–35 and pp. 52–56.

² Inventory of Mrs. Joanna Cummins, Salem, Mar. 17, 1644. In *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County, Massachusetts*, edit. George Francis Dow (Salem: The Essex Institute, 1911–1921), vol. 1, pp. 66–67; Will of Mrs. Elizabeth Butler, May 17, 1673, on record at Essex Court House. In W. G. STANDARD, “Abstracts of Virginia Land Patents,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (July 1895), vol. 3, p. 64.

³ JOSEPH V. MCMULLAN, “The Turkey Carpet in Early America,” *Antiques* (March 1954), vol. 65, p. 221.

⁴ After Inventory of Mrs. Margaret Claxton, March 13, 1746. MS, Suffolk County, Massachusetts, Probate Court Record Books, vol. 39, p. 428; seen on microfilm, United States National Museum. Hereinafter cited as Suffolk Probate Books.

⁵ Inventory of Nathaniel Cunningham, Feb. 6, 1748. In Suffolk Probate Books, vol. 42, pp. 155–164.



PORTRAIT OF ISAAC ROYALL AND FAMILY
 by Robert Feke, 1741
 (Courtesy of Harvard University and The Fogg Art Museum.)

Figure 2.—A Turkey carpet used as a table cover is a prominent feature of this colonial painting which resembles the earlier portrait of the Berkeley family by Smibert.

at the new house were probably used as floor coverings while the others, no longer in fashion as furniture coverings, had been relegated to the attic or a room upstairs.

Further proof that Oriental carpets underwent a change in function about the middle of the 18th century is found in a newspaper advertisement in the *Boston Gazette* of March 26, 1754.⁶ It announced the sale of "a Pareel of valuable Household Stuff," among which was "a very large *Turkey Carpet*,

measuring Eleven and an half by Eighteen and an half Feet." From the size of the carpet there can be little doubt that it was intended for any use other than as a floor covering. A carpet of such ample proportions must have been very valuable when one realizes that a *Turkey carpet* measuring only four and a half by three feet was so prized by its owner as to warrant the following advertisement in the *Boston News-Letter* of February 20, 1755, that mentions items stolen from a house, including "a *Turkey Carpet* of various Colours, about a yard and half in length, and a Yard wide, fring'd on each End" for which there was a reward of three dollars. Some 25 years later "1 P[iece]s *Turkey Carpet*," presumably of small dimension, was valued at £4 in a Boston inventory, that of

⁶ This and most other Boston newspaper references have been taken from GEORGE FRANCIS DOW, *The Arts and Crafts in New England, 1704-1775* (Topsfield, Mass.: The Wayside Press, 1927).

Captain Fortesque Vernon, recorded on February 19, 1779.⁷ Obviously, Oriental carpets whatever their size, were greatly esteemed in the colonies.

Turkey carpets were highly prized because of their beauty, but undoubtedly rarity and cost also were factors that influenced their desirability. Even in an age when most things were made by hand, the time and labor involved in the manufacture of Oriental carpets were great. This was especially so if the surface was a pile one because each of the short pieces of yarn standing up on the surface that made the pile was knotted by hand to the warp or lengthwise threads. This was done a row at a time. After a row of pile had been knotted, a weft or crosswise thread was woven through the warp threads. Then another row of pile was knotted and a thread woven across in front of it, and so on, until the carpet was finished. The so-called Turkey-work, the western imitation of Oriental pile rugs, also involved hand knotting. This home product of amateur needlewomen was made by threading yarns through a coarse fabric, then knotting and cutting them. Nevertheless, the fine, tight-knotting characteristic of the imported Turkey rugs and the resulting long-wearing, firm construction was seldom matched by the hand-knotted pile carpets made in the West. Durability, therefore, was another factor that accounted for the high value placed on Orientals. In addition to the considerable time and labor involved in producing Oriental carpets, the methods of transporting them from the Near East were slow and uncertain. As a result, Turkey carpets were expensive, and the number available at any one time was limited. Consequently, their use in the colonies was determined to a great extent by the quantity on hand and the size of one's pocketbook.

This seems to be verified by the newspaper advertisements of the period. The Oriental carpets offered for sale seldom appear in notices of recently arrived imports, but rather in advertisements for an auction or "Public Vendue" of household furniture. Many of the Turkey carpets available at the time were not new but used, presumably because the supply was limited. Or they may have been part of the booty obtained from a captured ship or "prize" and, not being legally imported, were sold at public auction as part of the furnishings of a household. They

also may have been part of some merchandise being sold at auction by a shopkeeper or merchant needing cash or wishing to dispose quickly of surplus or dated goods. This situation was not restricted to any one area, but was common to all the colonies, northern, mid-Atlantic, and southern. According to an advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette* of September 5, 1751, Turkey carpets were among a "Great Variety of fashionable Furniture" which was "to be SOLD, for ready Money or short Credit."⁸ A year later in the *Maryland Gazette* of June 25, an Annapolis merchant announced that he had just imported from London and had for sale, secondhand, "a compleat set of household and kitchen Furniture" that included "Turkey and English Carpets."⁹ Northern colonists, too, were informed of the sale of Oriental carpets in a similar manner. Notices listing "a Turkey Carpet" among household items to be sold by public vendue appeared in the *Boston Gazette* of January 8, 1754, and April 17, 1758. Shoppers reading the *Boston News-Letter* found similar announcements of sale by public vendue. "Sundry Turkey Carpets" were part of the "Very good Household Furniture" advertised on August 7, 1760; "Turkey . . . Carpets" were part of the "various articles of household furniture" advertised on June 16, 1763; and "Turkey and other Carpets" were part of "the genteel House Furniture" advertised on August 30, 1770—all to be sold at auctions. Notices of this type were the rule, and advertisements like the following two of William Greenleaf were the exception. One in the *Boston News-Letter* of January 29, 1761, announced that Mr. Greenleaf had imported from London and Bristol and had on sale at his store a number of items including "Rich Persian carpets, 3, 4, and 4 by 5 yards square." The other advertisement which appeared a few years later in the *Boston Gazette* of December 12, 1763, mentioned "a few very handsome Persia Carpets 4 yards and 3 yards square." In general, advertisements such as these two were

⁸ This and most other Virginia newspaper references have been taken from the *Virginia Gazette* on microfilm accompanying LESTER J. CAPPON and STELLA F. DUFF, *Virginia Gazette Index, 1736-1780* (Williamsburg: The Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1950).

⁹ This and most other Maryland, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina newspaper references have been taken from ALFRED COXE PRIME, *The Arts and Crafts in Philadelphia, Maryland and South Carolina, 1721-1785* (Topsfield, Mass.: The Walpole Society, 1929), and *The Arts and Crafts in Philadelphia, Maryland and South Carolina, 1786-1800* (Topsfield, Mass.: The Walpole Society, 1932).

⁷ Inventory of Fortesque Vernon, Feb. 19, 1779. In Suffolk Probate Books, vol. 78, pp. 45-49.

rare, and it seems safe to assume that the market for secondhand or used Turkey carpets existed because few new Orientals were available.

Since the supply was limited, the use of Turkey carpets in colonial houses was also limited. For example, a survey of inventories recorded in 1758 from the Boston area, that is to say Suffolk County, Massachusetts, reveals the presence of floor coverings in only 3 out of some 75 listings of household furnishings registered that year. Of the three inventories which listed floor coverings, that of Mr. Edward Jackson of Boston was alone in including Orientals. In the "Front Room" of the Jackson house were "2 Turk & 2 homspn. Carpets 61/4."¹⁰ Among the Suffolk County inventories recorded in the two preceding years, 1757 and 1756, a single entry for Turkey carpets was found. This was for "1 large Turkey Carpet 40/ [and] 1 small Do. 24/" listed in the inventory of Edward Tyng, Esq., of Boston, dated May 28, 1756, but taken the preceding September.¹¹ Some 20 years later, ownership of Orientals was still limited. Nine inventories with entries for underfoot furnishings of various kinds were found among the Suffolk County, Massachusetts, inventories recorded in 1777, but only one, that of Samuel Sewell, "late of Boston, an Absentee," listed "1 large Turkey Carpet."¹² The following year 4 out of about 115 inventories listed floor coverings. Turkey carpets, however, appeared in only one inventory, that of Joshua Winslow, Esq., of Boston, recorded November 6, 1778. Located in the "Front Chamber" downstairs of Winslow's house was "a Turkey Carpet £9" and upstairs a "Turkey Carpet 42/"—aside from the other kinds of floor coverings elsewhere in the house.¹³ From the inventories studied, it appears that few households were graced with Turkey carpets. Also, it is significant that the above inventories with entries for Turkey carpets were among those with high total monetary valuations for the years in which they were recorded. Clearly, ownership of an Oriental was dependent upon one's wealth as well as upon the number of Turkey carpets available.

No doubt fashion and prestige also played a part

in the purchase of a Turkey carpet. Then as now Oriental carpets provided a harmonious background for the numerous chairs and tables of mahogany or walnut, the objects of glass, ceramic, and silver, the rich and colorful fabrics, and the paintings and prints that constituted the furnishings of the principal rooms in the houses of well-to-do colonists. It may have been just such a setting Charles Carroll, barrister, had in mind when, in 1760, he wrote to Mr. William Anderson, merchant, in London. Among the various household furnishings ordered by this Maryland gentleman were "One Turkey Carpet suitable for a Room 25 feet Long and twenty Broad at about Ten Guineas one Ditto for a Room Twenty feet Long and Eighteen Broad at about six Guineas."¹⁴ Oriental carpets also were the choice of other colonists. In a letter of 1765 addressed to her husband in London, Mrs. Benjamin Franklin gave the following description of the underfoot furnishings in their Philadelphia house and requested the addition of a Turkey carpet:

The little south room . . . [has] on the floor, a carpet I bought cheap for the goodness; it is not quite new. The large carpet is in the blue room. . . . In the parlour there is a Scotch carpet which was found much fault found [*sic*] with. . . . As to curtains, I leave it to you to do as you like yourself; or if, as we talked before you went away, if you could meet with a Turkey carpet I should like it. . . . In the north room . . . [is] a small Scotch carpet on the floor.¹⁵

Happily, Mrs. Franklin's wish was granted. Benjamin Franklin, still in London in April of the following year, wrote to his wife that he was sending "A Large true Turkey Carpet cost 10 Guineas, for the Dining Parlour."¹⁶ The desire of the Franklins for a Turkey carpet in addition to the other floor coverings already in the house is indicative of the value placed on this particular type of carpet in the 18th century. It further implies that Orientals were considered a good investment. And the decision that Franklin

¹⁴ Invoice of goods enclosed in a letter from Charles Carroll, barrister, Annapolis, to Mr. William Anderson, London, September 1760. In "Letters of Charles Carroll, Barrister," *Maryland Historical Magazine* (December 1937), vol. 32, p. 367.

¹⁵ Letter to Benjamin Franklin, London, from Mrs. Deborah Franklin, Philadelphia, fall of 1765. In EDWARD RILEY, "Franklin's Home," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* (1953), new ser., vol. 43, part 1, p. 153.

¹⁶ Letter from Benjamin Franklin, London, to Mrs. Deborah Franklin, Philadelphia, April 1766. In *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, edit. Albert Henry Smyth (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1905-1907), vol. 4, p. 450.

¹⁰ Inventory of Edward Jackson, Feb. 10, 1758. In Suffolk Probate Books, vol. 53, pp. 123-141.

¹¹ Inventory of Edward Tyng, September 1755 (sworn to May 28, 1756). *Ibid.*, vol. 51, pp. 384-390.

¹² Inventory of Samuel Sewell, Aug. 29, 1777. *Ibid.*, vol. 76, pp. 312-313.

¹³ Inventory of Joshua Winslow, Nov. 6, 1778. *Ibid.*, vol. 77, pp. 600-604.



MR. JEREMIAH LEE
by John Singleton Copley, 1769
(Courtesy of Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn.)

Figure 3.—The Turkey carpet with fringed ends shown in this portrait was presumably used in Colonel Lee's newly built, three-story mansion in Marblehead, Massachusetts. Other indications of the merchant's wealth and importance are the ornate gilded table, gleaming silver inkstand, and drapery of elegant fabric.

obtain one in London reveals clearly that the supply of Oriental carpets in the colonies was limited.

While it is not certain whether fashion, prestige, or prudent investment accounted for the desires of Charles Carroll and Benjamin Franklin to have Turkey carpets, the fact that these carpets appear in both American and English portraits suggests that a certain amount of prestige was associated with the

ownership of such a floor covering. A case in point is the portrait *Mr. Jeremiah Lee* (fig. 3), painted in 1769 by John Singleton Copley, in which the prosperous merchant of Marblehead, Massachusetts, is shown standing on a Turkey carpet.¹⁷ Presumably the carpet was a possession of which Lee was proud and which he considered appropriate to his position in society.

Most Turkey carpets used as floor coverings seem to have been of a considerable size. The actual dimensions of Oriental carpets given in a few instances in newspaper advertisements already cited tend to confirm this and to indicate that there were two categories of sizes, "large" and "very large." A Turkey carpet measuring 11½ by 18½ feet was described as "very large." The previously mentioned "Rich Persian carpets" with dimensions 12 by 12, and 12 by 15 feet also would be in the "very large" category. A few of the Orientals used at "Richmond Hill," Aaron Burr's residence in New York City, fit this category since two for which dimensions were given were over 12 feet long. Besides the "1 Elegant Turkey carpet & 2 recess pieces" located in the "Blue or drawing room," the garret storeroom contained the following floor coverings according to the "Inventory of Furniture"¹⁸ taken in 1797:

- 1 Turkey Carpet 12.6 by 11.6
- 1 ditto ditto 12 by 11.6
- 1 Turkey Carpet 10.6 by 6.6
- 1 Small carpet green and White.

While carpets measuring over 12 feet were described as "very large," those with dimensions under 12 feet were usually termed, simply, "large." For instance, the "one handsome large Carpet" that was advertised to be sold by public vendue in the *Boston News-Letter* of May 8, 1735, measured "9 Foot 6 Inches by 6 Foot 6 Inches." Consequently, the previously cited Persians with 9- by 9- foot dimensions would have been considered "large," also. The "large Carpets" that were advertised for sale in the *Boston News-Letter* on June 5, 1735, and April 15 of the following year were probably of corresponding proportions and perhaps of Near Eastern origin, too,

¹⁷ JOSEPH V. McMULLAN, "The Oriental 'Carpitt' in Colonial America," *The Concise Encyclopedia of American Antiques*, edit. Helen Comstock (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., [1958]), vol. 1, p. 209.

¹⁸ "The Furnishings of Richmond Hill in 1797. The Home of Aaron Burr in New York City," *The New-York Historical Society Quarterly Bulletin* (April 1927), vol. 11, pp. 17-23.



THE STRONG FAMILY
by Charles Phillips, 1732

(Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Robert Lehman, 1944.)

Figure 4.—A very large carpet, thickly fringed at either end, adds to the atmosphere of comfort and sociability that surrounds this English family, captured by the artist in the midst of their card games and tea preparations.

although they may have been used to cover furniture rather than the floor at that early date. The Turkey carpets described as “large” in the previously cited inventories presumably had similar dimensions, that is, under 12 feet.

The pictures of the period provide further proof that the proportions of Oriental carpets were ample. “Large” or “very large” carpets of the size and type seen in the Lee portrait appear in a number of the English group or conversation-piece pictures of the

period (see the Chronological List of Pictures, p. 61). These paintings also give us a good idea of the customary use and placement of Turkey as well as other kinds of carpets in domestic settings. The carpet is usually shown in the center of the room surrounded by a border of polished wood flooring. The furniture is set against the walls and only the pieces in use, such as chairs and a tea or card table, are placed on the carpet, usually well toward if not actually at its center or in line with the fireplace.

Occasionally, the carpet might be moved toward one side of the room if the social activities of the day included dancing or some similar frolic (fig. 5). Or the carpet might be removed completely. During a visit to Baltimore in 1785, a young Englishman, Robert Hunter, reported of one social gathering he attended: "After tea the carpet was taken up, and we danced away to some charming music till eleven o'clock . . . [when] we retired to supper, and went home in our wagon at twelve."¹⁹

The paintings also reveal that Turkey carpets were used in the principal rooms of the house where they provided a background of color and comfort against which activities such as tea drinking, card playing, and conversation were enjoyed by polite society in the 18th century. The household inventories already mentioned provide further proof that Turkey carpets were usually to be found in the principal rooms. In the Jackson household, the Turkey carpets were located in the "Front Room" and in the Winslow residence in the "Front Chamber" upstairs as well as downstairs, while Aaron Burr had covered the floor of his drawing room with "1 Elegant Turkey Carpet & 2 recess pieces." Furthermore, the Franklins had obtained a Turkey carpet for their dining parlor. The description of the Boston house of Mr. Boylston that appears in the diary of a rising New England lawyer, John Adams, reveals how elegant the settings could be in which Oriental carpets were to be found in 18th-century America. It also indicates that carpet owners were proud of their possessions and had taste as well as wealth and social status. Of his visit to Mr. Boylston's Boston house on January 16, 1766, the future President of the United States wrote:

Dined at Mr. Nick Boylstones, with the two Mr. Boylstones, two Mr. Smiths, Mr. Hallowel and the Ladies. An elegant Dinner indeed! Went over the House to view the Furniture, which alone cost a thousand Pounds sterling. A Seat it is for a noble Man, a Prince. The Turkey Carpets, the painted Hangings, the Marble Tables, the rich Beds with crimson Damask Curtains and Counterpins, the beautiful Chimny Clock, the Spacious Garden, are the most magnificent of any Thing I have ever seen.²⁰

¹⁹ *Quebec to Carolina in 1785-1786, Being the Travel Diary and Observations of Robert Hunter, Jr., a Young Merchant of London*, edit. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library, 1943), p. 185.

²⁰ *Diary of John Adams*. In *The Adams Papers*, edit. L. H. Butterfield (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1961), vol. 1, p. 294.

Oriental carpets, which at the beginning of the 18th century were customarily spread on tables and other pieces of furniture, had by the second half of the century become established as an underfoot furnishing.

FLOORCLOTH

Floorcloths were simply canvas or some other sturdy cloth material covered with several coats of paint for durability. When the smooth hard surface was ornamented with a design, as often was the case, a floorcloth was as decorative as any carpet.

In colonial houses floorcloths were used as floor coverings somewhat earlier than Oriental carpets. In the early 18th century when Turkey carpets were being laid on the tops of tables, floorcloths already were being spread underneath. When William Burnet, governor first of New York and New Jersey and then of Massachusetts, died in 1729, he is reported to have had "two old chequered canvases to lay under a table" and "a large painted canvas square as the room."²¹ This was the same year Smibert painted Bishop Berkeley and his entourage grouped about a table covered with a Turkey carpet (fig. 10). Floorcloths also were used in the South at about the same date by the wealthy Virginia landowner Robert "King" Carter of "Corotoman." "1 large Floor oyl" was listed among the contents of the "Dining Room Clossett" in the "Old house" and "1 large oyle cloth to lay under a Table" was listed among the contents of the "Brick House Loft" in the inventory of Carter's home plantation in Lancaster County taken after his death in 1732.²² Painted canvas and oilcloth were but two of the many synonyms for a floorcloth, variously referred to as canvas carpets, canvas floorcloths, fancy pattern cloths for the floor, oil floorcloths, painted floorcloths, painted-duck floorcloths, painted carpets, and painted canvas.

Floorcloths were both imported and made in this country. "Painted floor cloths" were among the items "Just Imported" offered for sale in the *Virginia Gazette* of July 25, 1766. And they continued to be imported. Some 33 years later an advertisement in

²¹ R. T. H. HALSEY and CHARLES O. CORNELIUS, *A Handbook of the American Wing* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1924), p. 132.

²² An Inventory of all the S— and personal property of the Hon'ble Robert Carter of the county Lancaster Esq., Deceased, taken as directed in his last will. In "Carter Papers," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (October 1898 and January 1899), vol. 6, pp. 145 and 262.



A FAMILY GROUP
 English, about 1740
 (Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg.)

Figure 5.—The rich pattern of the large Oriental carpet seen in this informal study of a dancing couple is emphasized by the surrounding bare wood floor. Dancing and music were as much a part of sociability in both England and the colonies as were tea drinking and card playing.

the *New-York Gazette* of May 22, 1799, included in a list of imported carpets and carpeting “a variety of Patent Oil Floor Cloths for rooms, 1–2 yd. 3–4 and 4–4 do. for Entries.”²³ Besides being imported

²³ This and most other New York newspaper references have been taken from RITA SUSSWEIN GOTTESMAN, *The Arts and Crafts in New York, 1726–1776* (New York: The New-York Historical Society, 1938), and *The Arts and Crafts in New York, 1777–1799* (New York: The New-York Historical Society, 1954).

by merchants for sale, floorcloths were imported by individuals for their own use. Residents of Virginia, because they sold their tobacco and consequently established credit in the British Isles, usually “shopped” in the British Isles by way of letters to friends and agents there. Martha Jacquelin writing to her agents in London on August 14, 1769, requested “some necessaries for House keeping” as well as items for sale in the colony to be sent “by the first Ship for York River,” Virginia. Included in the list were “1 painted duck Floor Cloth” as well as “2 Kilmarnock

Carpets, 1 large & 1 small.”²⁴ Such transatlantic shopping was accompanied by both delights and disappointments as revealed in feelings expressed by Thomas Nelson, Jr., of Virginia, in a letter dated August 7, 1773, addressed to Messrs. John Norton and Son, in London.

Gentlemen. Capt. Robertson delivered your Letter of the 29th May enclosing a Bill of Loading for the floor Cloth and Anchovies. The Cloth is injur'd by being rol'd before the paint was dry; the Anchovies are very fine, for which Mrs. Nelson returns you her particular thanks.²⁵

Foresight, clearly, was needed when shopping by mail. Both Charles Carroll, barrister, and his wife were well aware of this. Their order for floorcloths was accompanied by the following packing suggestions in a letter written by the barrister on February 24, 1767, and addressed to Mr. William Anderson, a London merchant. “My wife would have some slight woolen Rolled up with the floor Cloths to Prevent their Rubbing so as to be Defaced by Getting the Paint off, if any Danger without it.” In addition to taking this precautionary measure, Carroll sent explicit directions with his order for floorcloths about what he desired in durability as well as dimensions:

2 Good Painted floor Cloths, one of them to be 18 feet Long by 16 feet wide the other 16 feet wide by 12 feet Long, both made of the best and strongest Duck and Painted so as to bear mopping over with a wet mop and Put up Dry and so as not to be Cracked or to have the Paint Rubbed off[f].²⁶

Most of the floorcloths made in this country were the work of professionals who combined the business of carpet painting with that of coach, house, and sign painting, and the sale of paints and supplies. Upholsterers and paperhangers also manufactured and sold floorcloths. Indentured apprentices were employed in this craft as is shown in a notice that

appeared in the Annapolis *Maryland Gazette* of June 26, 1760: “Run away from the Subscriber, a convict servant man named John Winters, a very compleat House Painter; he can imitate marble or mahogany very exactly, and can paint Floor Cloths as neat as any imported from Britain.”

A young man “completely bred to the different Branches of Painting and Gilding” was engaged by the proprietor of a paint shop in “Baltimore-Town,” according to an advertisement in the *Maryland Gazette* of August 2, 1764. Whether he was also an indentured servant is uncertain. In any case, by securing the young painter the paint-shop proprietor was able to offer for sale “all Sorts of painted Oil Cloths for Rooms Passages, and Stairs, of various Sizes and Patterns.” The manufacture and sale of floorcloths in Boston was carried on in conjunction with the sale of paints and related items. In the *Boston News-Letter* of 1767, competing craftsmen John Gore and Thomas Craft, Jr., advertised on May 7 and 21, respectively, the one offering a variety of paints and supplies at his shop at the “Sign of the PAINTER’S-ARMS” as well as “Coach & Carpet Painting done in the best and cheapest Manner” while the other at his shop near the “Liberty Tree” was offering “Painter’s Oyl and Colours, also Carpet and all Sorts of Painting.” By a notice on October 13, 1768, in the same newspaper, John Gore reminded Bostonians that they could have “Coach and carpet painting done in the best and Cheapest manner” at his shop or, as his advertisement on December 21 of the following year stated, “in the best and neatest Manner.” In the same advertisement Mr. Gore announced that he had some Wilton carpets for sale, an indication of the growing interest and business in underfoot furnishings in the colonies. George Killcup, Jr., also used the *Boston News-Letter* to call attention to his floorcloths with an advertisement on March 17, 1768, informing “the Gentlemen and Ladies in Town and Country, That he Paints Carpets & other Articles, and Papers Rooms in the neatest Manner.”

In Charleston, South Carolina, as in the other large coastal ports, homeowners and homemakers were encouraged to patronize local artisans when purchasing floorcloths. On May 10, 1768, the following advertisement appeared in the Charleston *South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal*:

WAYNE & RUGER, Painters & Glaziers, Take this Method of informing the Public, that they have opened a Shop on the Bay . . . where they carry on the House and Ship-Painting Business, in all its Branches; Signs

²⁴ Letter to Mr. John Norton, London, from Martha Jacquelin, York, Va., Aug. 14, 1769. In *John Norton and Sons, Merchants of London and Virginia, Being the Papers from Their Counting House for the Years 1750 to 1795*, edit. Frances Norton Mason (Richmond: The Dietz Press, 1937), p. 103.

²⁵ Letter to Messrs. John Norton and Son, London, from Thomas Nelson, Jr., Virginia, Aug. 7, 1773. *Ibid.*, pp. 348-49.

²⁶ Letter from and enclosed invoice of goods ordered by Charles Carroll, barrister, Annapolis, to Mr. William Anderson, London, Feb. 24 and Mar. 26, 1767. In “Letters of Charles Carroll, Barrister,” *op. cit.* (footnote 14), (March 1942), vol. 37, pp. 60-61.

and Floor Cloths, painted as neat as any from London, Gilding, Japanning, Glazing, etc., etc.

And no doubt, the floorcloths made in the colonies were as "neat" and stylish as any of the imported ones. After the American Revolution, as before, the manufacture and sale of floorcloths continued to be carried on in conjunction with the painting and glazing trades. According to an advertisement in the Baltimore *Maryland Journal* of April 13, 1792, Hugh Barkley and Patrick O'Meara did painting and glazing "together with many other Things relating to the Decorations of elegant Rooms—such as Fancy Pattern-Cloths for Floors and Passages."

On occasion, floorcloths also were obtained at public auctions of household goods. A "worsted carpet, and painted floor-cloth" were among the items offered at an auction sale advertised in the *Boston News-Letter* of April 28, 1768, and "a Scotch carpet, and Painted Canvass Floor-Cloths" were listed in a notice of a public vendue that appeared in the November 11, 1773, issue of the same paper. The instances of floorcloths included in such sales were few, however, in contrast to the number of advertisements for new floorcloths of either domestic or foreign origin.

The account and daybooks covering the years from about 1762 to 1802 of the Boston firm of Daniel Rea and Son and its predecessor, the partnership of Rea and Johnston, reveal, however, that not all of the floorcloths decorated by these painters were new. In a number of instances, both before and after the American Revolution, the entries in the daybooks "To Painting your Floor Cloth" suggest that some customers had their worn or used floorcloths repainted. The durability of painted canvas floor coverings is confirmed by orders such as those on November 30, 1787, "To Painting an Old Floor Cloath" and on March 31, 1796, "to a Second hand Floor Cloath Painted for Your Entry." In fact, one customer planned to get double the wear from his purchase. An order dated September 20, 1788, reads: "To painting a Floor Cloath both Sides."²⁷

Both written and pictorial sources reveal that the appearance of some floorcloths was perfectly plain, while some were ornamented with a border or figures,

²⁷ Account Books of Daniel Rea and Son, of Boston. (MS, Baker Library, Harvard University, Graduate School of Business Administration; seen on microfilm, Downs Library, Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Del.); see also MABEL M. SWAN, "The Johnstons and The Reas—Japanners," *Antiques* (May 1943), vol. 43, pp. 211–13.

and others were covered with an all-over pattern. A painted floorcloth, the property of a York County, Virginia, resident in 1769, referred to simply as "red" was probably plain.²⁸ Presumably, the "painted Green" ones that Thomas Jefferson used in the White House during his residence were also plain. In the "Small Dining Room—S[outh] front" of the White House was "a canvas floor cloth, painted Green" according to Jefferson's inventory taken in 1809. And in "The Great Hall of entrance" it was noted, "the whole floor covered with Canvass painted Green." These were not the first floorcloths in the White House. When President and Mrs. John Adams vacated the Executive Mansion there was "1 Painted Cloth floor, not in use," stored in a basement room, according to the inventory taken February 26, 1801, of "the Furniture in the President's House, the property of the United States."²⁹

Both plain and figured floorcloths were painted for Bostonians by the Reas and by Johnston, according to these painters' accounts and daybooks. For instance, there are orders on September 7, 1791, for "Painting a Floor Cloath Plain Yellow" and on August 5, 1794, for "Painting a Floor Cloath Olive Colour with Border and Center piece Corners &c." Besides painting plain floorcloths and ones with "Borders, Center & Corner pieces," these Boston decorators were able to offer to their customers, or to comply with the requests for, both simple and elaborate patterns. An entry in the daybooks for September 3, 1771, reads: "To Paintg. 4 yds of Canvas, Turkey Fatchion . . . To do. yds. Stair Case & Entry." Other listings for patterned floorcloths include one on October 14, 1791, "To painting a Room and Entry Floor Cloath in Straw Work & Borders," another on November 30, 1792, "To Painting a Floor Cloath for your Parlour in Cubes" and on April 12, 1794, "To Painting a Floor Cloath Yellow & Black Diamonds Border &c." Among the

²⁸ HELEN COWSTOCK, "Eighteenth-Century Floorcloths," *Antiques* (January 1955), vol. 67, p. 49.

²⁹ Inventory of Furnishings of President's House, Feb. 18, 1809. (MS, Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division.) Thomas Jefferson Papers, 1809. Reprinted in MARIE G. KIMBALL, "The Original Furnishings of the White House, Part I," *Antiques* (June 1929), vol. 15, pp. 485–86; Inventory of the Furniture in the President's House, the property of the United States, taken February 26th, 1801. In MARGARET BROWN KLAPHOR, "A First Lady and a New Frontier, 1800," *Historic Preservation* (1963), vol. 15, pp. 90–93.

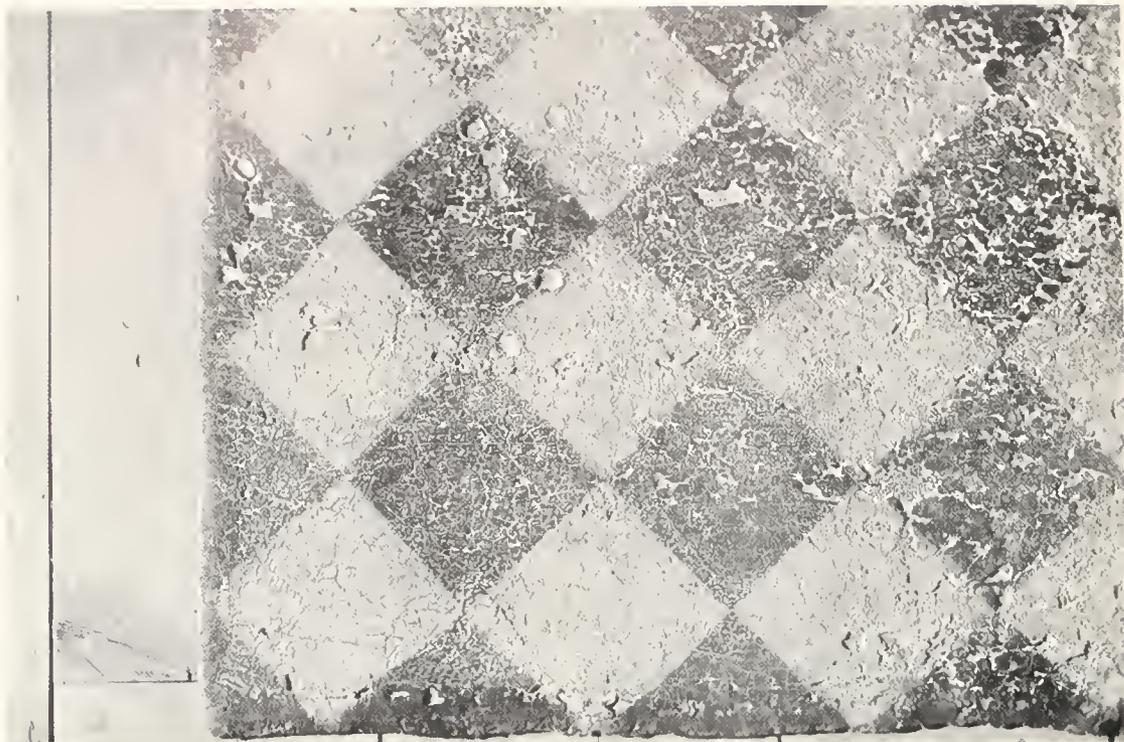


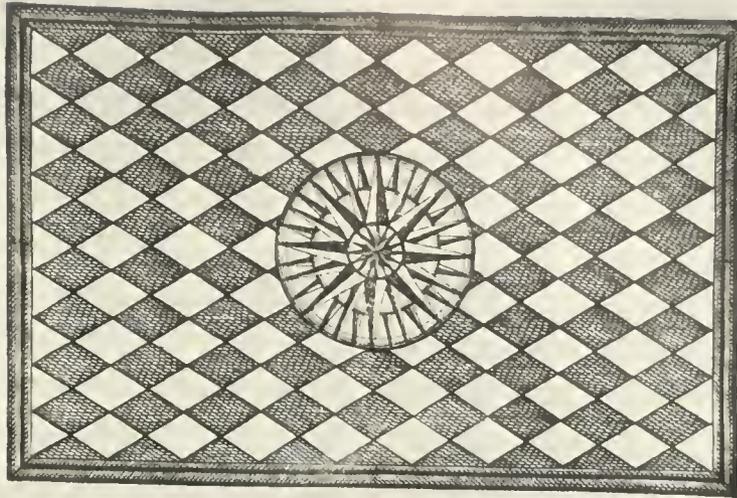
Figure 6.—DETAIL OF A FLOORCLOTH. This painted-canvas floor covering, which measures 40 by 108 inches, is decorated with yellow and brown lozenges. (Courtesy of Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum.)

more picturesque and decorative of the floorcloths made by Daniel Rea and Son were those described in the daybooks on October 28, 1788. "To Painting a Room and Entry Floor Cloath 35 yds. @ 2/8 with a Poosey-Cat on One Cloath and a Leetel Spannill on ye. Other Frenchman Like [£]4.13.4." Related to these floor coverings is the one listed in May 1793. Under the heading "Memo. of Floor Cloaths, where they are and how to be done," appears the notation for a floorcloth in "Mr. Barys's Barn to be painted a Border, Corner Posey & Dogg in the Center."³⁰

Geometric shapes such as squares, octagons, and diamonds form one category of allover design favored in the 18th century (fig. 6). A single shape or a combination of shapes might be repeated over the entire surface of the floorcloth. With the application

of color an endless number of patterns was possible. A design of squares could be transformed into a "checquered" pattern by the simple device of alternating the colors of the shapes. In much the same way, cubes, pyramids, and other three-dimensional effects might be created for underfoot use. Variety also could be achieved by the addition of a single figure or device to a standard geometric repeat pattern. For example, a floorcloth of striking appearance was created by Alexander Wetherstone from an otherwise ordinary diamond design by placing a compass-like star exactly in the center (fig. 7). Some of the allover designs made up of geometric shapes were essentially imaginary creations. Others were closely akin to marble and tile floors; and copies on canvas of such flooring provided a similar appearance and served a like purpose, but at considerably less cost. Mrs. Anne Grant suggests that this was the case in Colonel and Mrs. Schuyler's New York house, the "Flats," because she recalled in her reminiscences of pre-Revolutionary America that "the lobby had oilcloth painted in

³⁰ For an 18th-century English pile carpet with a "Leetel" dog "in the Center," see THOMPSON, *op. cit.* (footnote 1), fig. 15, p. 213.



Alex^r Wetherstone
 CARPENTER JOYNER and TURNER,

at y^e painted Floor Cloth & Brush in Portugal Street,
 Near Lincolns Inn Back Gate.

Sells all sorts of Floor Cloths, Hair Cloths, List Carpets, Royal
& other Matting, Mahogany Cisterns with Brass hoops, Dish &
other Stands, Winders, hand boards, Sea Boards, Sea Trays,
Sea Chests, Back Gammon Tables & Draught Boards, Child
Bed China Plate & other Baskets, Cradles & Chairs, Cruit frames,
gall sorts of Lignum Vita & Tunbridge Wares, Mops, Brooms,
Brushes, Sieves, Hampers, Bellows, Wood Platters, Bowls, Pails,
Washing Tubbs, Coal & Corn Measures, Sponge, Iron and Tin
Coal Scoops, Sind Scuttles & Floors for Cloths, Fire Screens,
Plate Racks, Umbrellas, Cotton & Wool for Quilting, Hair Lines,
Cords, pack Thread, Black Balls & Turnery Wares of all Sorts,
 Likewise English & Dutch Toys, wholesale and Retail at the
 most Reasonable Rates.

Figure 7.—TRADE CARD OF ALEXANDER WETHERSTONE, English, about 1760. The floor coverings sold by Wetherstone were haircloths, list carpets, and matting as well as floorcloths. (Courtesy of The British Museum, Sir Ambrose Heal Collection.)

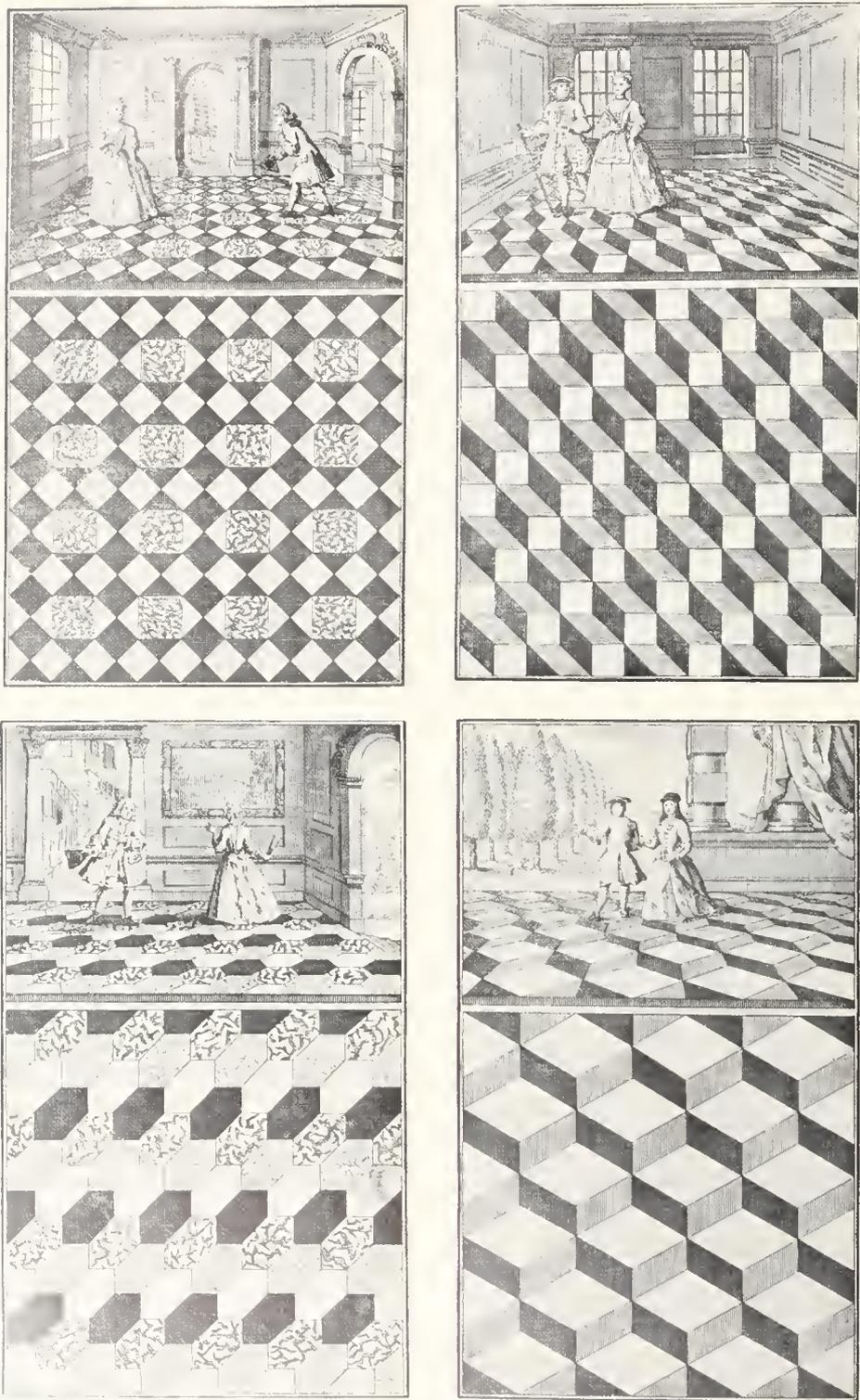


Figure 8. *Floor-Decorations of Various Kinds . . . Adapted to the Ornamenting of Halls, Rooms, Summer-houses, &c. . . .* Designed and engraved by John Carwitham, London, 1739, plates 4, 6, 8, and 11. (Courtesy of Library of Congress.)

lozenges, to imitate blue and white marble.”³¹

One source that provides some idea of what these floorcloths looked like is patterned marble flooring dating from the 18th century. Another source and one that may well have been used by floorecloth painters is an English book of designs for floors. Inscribed on each of the design plates is “I. Carwitham Inv[entor] et sc[ulptor] 1739.” There is no text aside from the following self-explanatory title page:

Floor-Decorations of Various Kinds, Both in Plano & Perspective Adapted to the Ornamenting of Halls, Rooms, Summer-houses &c. in XXIV Copper Plates. A Work intirely new, & as Serviceable to Gentlemen & Workmen by the Perspective-Views in ye. several Head-pieces as entertaining to the Ladies in Colouring them.

Designed, Engraved & Published, according to Act of Parliament, by Jno. Carwitham Sold by R. Caldwell at Mercers-Hall Cheapside & at his House in King Street. Humbly Inscribed to the Rt. Honble. the Ld. Darnley, Grand Master of ye. Ancient & Honourable Society of Free and accepted Masons.

all sorts of Water Colours, Black-lead Pencils, Indian Ink, &c. Sold.

Although floorcloths are not mentioned in the above title page, a specific reference to the suitability of such designs for them appears in another copy of the book. This edition has the same plates but a different title page:

Various kinds of FLOOR DECORATIONS represented both in Plano and Perspective Being useful Designs for Ornamenting the Floors of Halls Rooms, Summer Houses, &c. whither in Pavements of Stone, or Marble, or wth. Painted Floor Cloths, in Twenty four Copper Plates.

Design'd and Engrav'd by John Carwitham, London. Printed for John Bowles at the Black Horse in Cornhill.³²

The 24 designs offered by John Carwitham and depicted in such settings as outside terraces, paneled rooms, and entrance halls range from simple patterns of squares to intricate compositions involving a variety of shapes and textures (fig. 8). Any one of the designs could have been transferred to a floorcloth

³¹ ANNE GRANT, *Memoirs of an American Lady, with Sketches of Manners and Scenery in America, as They Existed Previous to the Revolution* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1846), p. 86.

³² The edition published by Carwitham, of which the Library of Congress possesses a copy, differs only in the wording on the title page from the one printed for John Bowles, of which the copy owned by Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., is reproduced in COMSTOCK, op. cit. (footnote 28), p. 48.



CHILD WITH DOG

American, about 1800

(Courtesy of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection, Williamsburg.)

Figure 9.—The cubed pattern surrounded by a border of vines which covers the floor in this portrait reveals the artist's skill at simulating marble.

by “carpet painting done in the best and neatest manner.” A comparison of one of Carwitham's designs with the cube pattern depicted in the American portrait *Child with Dog* (fig. 9), painted about 1800, suggests that such copying was done. Whether such floors were actually copied from Carwitham's book, a marble floor, or some other source is unknown, but it is apparent that floorcloths or painted floors did in fact resemble marble flooring.

Another type of flooring reproduced on canvas was that made of tiles. Mrs. John Adams, describing



GEORGE BERKELEY, BISHOP OF CLOYNE, AND HIS WIFE AND FAMILY
by John Smibert, 1729
(Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland.)

Figure 10.—The table covered with a Turkey carpet seen in this group portrait—a record of an English family's sojourn in Newport, Rhode Island—suggests that such usage was both appropriate and fashionable in this period.

the house she and her ambassador husband were renting at Auteuil, near Paris, wrote to her sister in Massachusetts on September 5, 1784, that there was not "a carpet belonging to the house. The floors I abhor, made of red tiles in the shape of Mrs. Quincy's floorcloth tiles."³³ On the same day in a letter to

her niece, Mrs. Adams again explained that the room in which she was writing "wants only the addition of a carpet to give it all an air of elegance; but in lieu of this is a tile floor in the shape of Mrs. Quincy's carpet."³⁴ Since the tile floors would "by no means bear water" but had to be dusted and waxed, and repainted when defaced, it seems unlikely that they

³³ Letter from Mrs. Abigail Adams, Auteuil, France, to Mrs. Mary Cranch, Braintree, Mass., Sept. 5, 1784. In *The Letters of Mrs. Adams, The Wife of John Adams*, edit. Charles Francis Adams (4th ed.; Boston: Wilkins, Carter, and Co., 1848), p. 189.

³⁴ Letter from Mrs. Abigail Adams, Auteuil, France, to Miss Elizabeth Cranch, Braintree, Mass., Sept. 5, 1784. *Ibid.*, pp. 194–95.



JOHN PHILLIPS
 by Joseph Steward, 1793
 (Courtesy of Dartmouth College, photo
 courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago.)

Figure 11.—Floral-patterned surfaces characterize the wall-to-wall floor coverings of these two rooms. They are in shades of russet, olive-green, and yellow.

were of marble. Neither were they of wood nor of “small stones, like the red tiles for size and shape,” the two other types of flooring which Mrs. Adams makes note of in the letters. In all probability, the tiles were some type of ceramic material and their shape, which had prompted the comparison with Mrs. Quincy’s floorcloth, may have been hexagonal, square, or diamond. Whatever the material and appearance of the floors, it is interesting to note the unique method of cleaning them described by Mrs. Adams. In the letters to her sister and niece cited above, she explained that the floors were waxed and “then a man-servant with foot brushes [i.e., brushes upon which he set his feet] drives round your room dancing here and there like a Merry Andrew. This is calculated to take from your foot every atom of dirt, and leave the room in a few moments as he found it.” Mrs. Adams also wrote that this man who “with his arms akimbo . . . goes driving round your room

. . . is called a *frotteur*, and is a servant kept on purpose for the business.”

Carpeting, too, was imitated, as the reference to a floorcloth painted in the Turkey fashion, already cited, indicates. Wilton carpeting was another type of pile floor covering copied on canvas carpets, because “Wilton or Marble Cloths” for floors were advertised in the *Boston Gazette* of January 26, 1761. Since the resiliency, warmth, and sound absorption inherent in pile carpets could not be reproduced in a floorcloth, it is unlikely that Turkey or Wilton floorcloths were ever intended to deceive the eye and foot, as was most surely the case with “Marble Cloths.” Instead, floorcloths were presumably so designated because the designs painted on them resembled those of the pile carpets. It is uncertain whether the floor covering seen in the portrait *Chief Justice and Mrs. Oliver Ellsworth* (fig. 1), painted in 1792 by Ralph Earl, was a woven or embroidered



BOY WITH FINCH

attributed to John Brewster, Jr., about 1800

(Courtesy of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection, Williamsburg.)

Figure 12.—The floor area in this portrait is decorated with a diaper design of blue, orange, and yellow on a brown background.

carpet, or an imitation of one. There can be little doubt, however, that the bold pattern of stripes and medallions rendered in strong shades of black, red, orange, and white was striking. The alternating wide and narrow stripes on a black background are surrounded by a broad border of the same red circles that are dotted diagonally across the horizontal red lines of the wide stripes and between the medallions. The latter are white, crossed with orange strokes, and enclose red and—in alternate rows—black circular centers.

A similar floor covering with a large-scale pattern of medallion-filled stripes and a vivid color scheme of white, red, greenish black, and orange appears in another portrait painted in 1798 by Ralph Earl, *Mrs. Noah Smith and Her Children*. It is of course possible that the decorated floors in these or any of the other pictures illustrated were imaginary creations of the artists rather than actual belongings of the persons portrayed. Certainly, the underfoot furnishings depicted in the portraits of Connecticut citizens done by Ralph Earl bear a marked resemblance, one to the other, which would seem to suggest a common source. On the one hand, this may have been a local craftsman or floorcloth manufactory or, on the other hand, the portrait painter's imagination. Even allowing for artistic license, however, it seems most likely that the floor coverings which appear in 18th-century pictures were based on actual examples which the artist may have seen under the feet of the people portrayed or in shops or elsewhere.

While some carpet painters provided imitation carpeting on canvas, others, like the already mentioned John Gore of Boston, preferred to sell the actual carpeting and to continue the manufacture of floorcloths, presumably of their own design. The two painted carpets owned by John Phillips (fig. 11), that are so carefully delineated in his portrait painted in 1793 by Joseph Steward, reveal how successful were some of the creations of these 18th-century craftsmen. Floral rather than geometric motifs characterize the allover designs on these two floorcloths. Flowers—ranging from simple stylized blossoms of four petals to complex conventionalized roses—have been marshaled into an orderly arrangement of squares. No doubt both of Mr. Phillips' floorcloths were as practical as they were pleasing because allover repeat patterns, particularly of this scale, tend to camouflage soil and wear. The choice of colors, too, seems to have been utilitarian as well as decorative, for the background is brown and the motifs are olive green, yellow, and russet. Another example of allover repeat patterns based on floral motifs that were either stenciled or painted on floorcloths or floors is shown in the portrait *Boy with Finch* (fig. 12), painted about 1800. Again floral forms have been treated in a two-dimensional and essentially nonrepresentational manner, and colors have been used that are both pleasing and practical. Against a brown background, multi-petaled flowers of blue with centers of yellow are enclosed by orange- and yellow-leaf vines forming a diamond design.



NATHAN HAWLEY, and FAMILY, Nov. 3, 1801

NATHAN HAWLEY, AND FAMILY
 by William Wilkie, 1801
 (Courtesy of Albany Institute of History and Art.)

Figure 13.—The floor of the first room illustrated in this watercolor is partly covered with a painted-canvas carpet which has a cream background with blue and tan motifs, while the floor of the other room, as seen through the doorway, is bare.

Although the canvas carpet seen in the watercolor portrait *Nathan Hawley, and Family*, dated November 3, 1801 (fig. 13), differs in scale and color from the floorcloths just mentioned, the total effect is, nevertheless, still one of regularly arranged floral motifs. The pattern is formed of large squares with leaf sprays at the crossing superimposed on flower-filled diamonds. It emphasizes rather than obscures the floral theme, since each flower is tidily enclosed in a diamond which in turn is neatly enclosed in a square. The colors of this carefully worked out arrangement are blue and brown on a cream ground.

Designs also might be created by homemakers themselves and then be reproduced by professional

floorcloth painters. In reference to their future house and its furnishings, David Spear, Jr., wrote from Boston early in 1787 to his fiancée, Miss Marcy Higgins, in Eastham: "My Father means to afford us a painted Carpet for the Room and likes our plan in the Figure we proposed having if the Painters can do it, and they approve of it also."³⁵

The season as well as the design, however, was a

³⁵ Letter from David Spear, Jr., Boston, to Miss Marcy Higgins, Eastham, Mass., 1787. In ROBERT BARTLETT HAAS, "The Forgotten Courtship of David and Marcy Spear, 1785-1787," *Old Time New England* (January-March 1962), vol. 52, p. 69.

factor to be taken into consideration when ordering a floorcloth. In his letter to Marcy on February 1, David wrote: "The Carpet cannot be painted in the Winter Season, but in the Spring I hope to have it done."³⁶ Hopefully the young couple did not have to wait too long after their April wedding for the floorcloth with which their first parlor was furnished.

Besides creating their own designs, some homemakers went a step further and applied them to floorcloths they had manufactured themselves. This was what Lyman Beecher's bride had done. Recalling for his children something of family life in East Hampton, Long Island, around 1800, Lyman Beecher related the following incident:

We had no carpets; there was not a carpet from end to end of the town. All had sanded floors, some of them worn through. Your mother introduced the first carpet. Uncle Lot gave me some money, and I had an itch to spend it. Went to a vendue, and bought a bale of cotton. She spun it, and had it woven; then she laid it down, sized it, and painted it in oils, with a border all around it, and bunches of roses and other flowers over the centre. She sent to New York for her colors, and ground and mixed them herself. The carpet was nailed down on the garret floor, and she used to go up there and paint.³⁷

The fact that floorcloths do appear in portraits suggests that they were by no means regarded as an inferior or humble type of underfoot furnishing. On the contrary, a pride of ownership is implied. The owners of the floorcloths were often prominent persons; floorcloths were used by a colonial governor, William Burnet, by one of the wealthiest of Virginia gentlemen, Robert "King" Carter, and by a President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. The Ellsworths, outstanding residents of Connecticut whose portrait by Earl was referred to in a preceding paragraph, might be included in this list too. Mr. Ellsworth was a lawyer, delegate to the Continental Congress, participant in the Constitutional Convention, and, at the time the portrait (fig. 1) was painted, a United States Senator. He later became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. John Phillips is

another person of importance who used floorcloths. After acquiring great wealth and holding several public offices, he turned to philanthropy, giving substantial gifts to Dartmouth College, being instrumental in the founding of Phillips Academy, Andover, and establishing Phillips Exeter Academy. When his portrait (fig. 11) was painted for Dartmouth College in 1793, Phillips was shown in a domestic setting complete with canvas carpets. That such persons owned and were sometimes portrayed with floorcloths is evidence that, as symbols of affluence and status, floorcloths were as acceptable as other types of underfoot furnishings.

Inventories appear to verify this, for among those studied from Suffolk County, Massachusetts, few in proportion to the total number recorded in any one year list floorcloths. Thus, floor coverings including floorcloths were owned by only a small segment of the total population and were a status symbol because of their limited ownership. If only inventories with entries for underfoot furnishings are considered, however, floorcloths appear more often than other types of floor coverings. In other words, although floorcloths were a fairly common type of underfoot furnishing, they were a rather uncommon item of household furnishing in 18th-century America. For example, out of some 75 inventories recorded in 1758, 3 were found in which underfoot furnishings were mentioned. Of these three, one, the Jackson inventory of 1758, listed "2 Turk & 2 homspn. Carpets," while the other two listed floorcloths. The inventory of Mr. Thomas Pain included an entry for "1 floor Cloth."³⁸ Mrs. Hannah Pemberton's inventory revealed that this Boston widow had "a painted floor Cloth 9'" in the parlor as well as "a floor Cloth 40'" in the great room.³⁹ A similar pattern of ownership emerges from inventories registered two decades later. Among the more than 100 inventories recorded in 1778, only 4 listed floor coverings, and of these only 2 had entries for floorcloths. One, that of Thomas Leverett of Boston, listed "1 floor Cloth 12'" as well as "2 large floor Carpets £6."⁴⁰ The other inventory was Joshua Winslow's, already mentioned in connection

³⁶ Letter from David Spear, Jr., Boston, to Miss Marcy Higgins, Eastham, Mass., Feb. 1, 1787. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁷ *The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*, edit. Barbara M. Cross (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1961), vol. 1, p. 86; for directions for making floorcloths, see NINA FLETCHER LITTLE, *American Decorative Wall Painting, 1700-1850* (Sturbridge, Mass.: Old Sturbridge Village, 1952), pp. 76-77.

³⁸ Inventory of Thomas Pain, May 19, 1758. In Suffolk Probate Books, vol. 53, pp. 359-61.

³⁹ Inventory of Mrs. Hannah Pemberton, June 22, 1758. *Ibid.*, vol. 53, pp. 445-47.

⁴⁰ Inventory of Thomas Leverett, May 22, 1778. *Ibid.*, vol. 77, pp. 410-21.

with Turkey carpets. Besides the Turkey carpets in both the downstairs and upstairs front chambers and a "Scotch carpet 8." in the upstairs back chamber, there were two floorcloths recorded in the inventory. In the back parlor was "1 Canvas floor Cloth," probably valued at 14 shillings, and in the "Entry and Stair Case" a "painted floor Cloth 12/" along with an unidentified carpet. Approximately the same relationship of floorcloths to other types of coverings for floors appears again in the inventories for 1777, when 9 out of about 75 inventories had entries for underfoot furnishings of which 4 included floorcloths. These inventories also indicate, as do those already cited, that floorcloths might be but one type in a variety of movable floor coverings used in a household.

Of the four Boston inventories of 1777 in which floorcloths were mentioned, that of Samuel Emmes listed a "Floor Cloth 12/" and "3 painted floor Cloths 9/" as well as "2 small Carpets 4/." ⁴¹ The other three inventories also showed at least one other type of floor covering besides canvas carpets. "2 Carpets 30/" and "1 floor Cloth 4/" were listed in the inventory of Captain Benjamin Homer.⁴² "Two Wilton Carpets £80" and "two painted Carpets £14 one Do. £6 two ditto £4.10/" were listed in the inventory of Dr. Joseph Warren.⁴³ The inventories reveal that in the case of Mr. Robert Gould, a Boston merchant, nearly every room in his residence had some type of floor covering. There were Scotch, Wilton, and unnamed carpets as well as floorcloths. In the back sitting room was "1 painted Floor Cloth old 4/." And a few rooms even had two kinds of floor coverings. In the parlor were "1 Scotts Carpet 16 " alongside "1 painted Floor-Cloth 30/." This combination appeared again in the "chamber Entry" where there were "1 Floor Cloth 3" and "1 Scotch Carpet 12/" as well as "2 Strips Carpet 4/ [and] 1 Stair Carpet 18/." ⁴⁴ Floorcloths were the sole type of underfoot furnishings in some households, while in others they were but one of two or more kinds of floor coverings in use. The 1776 inventory of a Boston

merchant, Mr. William Whitwell, provides an example of a household in which the movable floor coverings were limited to floorcloths, namely "1 Canvas floor Cloth 6/." ⁴⁵ The inventory of a Cohasset merchant, Mr. Thomas Stevenson, listed both a "Canvas Carpet 15/" and a "Woolen Carpet 16/8." ⁴⁶ The inventory of William Burch, "an Absentee," recorded January 29, 1779, listed a single item of underfoot furnishing, "1 Canvas Carpet £4." ⁴⁷

Although some idea of prices can be derived from inventories, it is difficult to say whether floorcloths were less or more expensive than other types of floor coverings—or if they were on the whole comparable in value to Scotch carpets, for instance. Indeed, it is almost impossible to make such evaluations because age, size, and decoration—factors that influenced the price of floor coverings and that are necessary for comparisons—are seldom recorded. Nevertheless, floorcloths probably were available in a wider range of prices than most other types of floor coverings, since they were simply painted canvas which easily could be adjusted in quality and design to fit the consumer's purse.

Inventories, pictures, and writings of the period reveal, however, that floorcloths were used throughout the house. Floors in the major rooms as well as those in passages, entries, and stairways were covered with this type of underfoot furnishing. For example, the inventory of Mr. Joseph Blake, "late of Boston," taken in 1745 but not recorded until 1746, listed "a Painted Floor Cloth" worth £3 in the "Closett" of the front room.⁴⁸ James Pemberton's inventory, taken 2 years later, had entries for "1 painted floor Cloth 80/" in the parlor and "1 floor Cloth 200/" in the "Great Room." ⁴⁹ In the Cunningham inventory of 1748, there was "1 Canvas Floor Cloth £4" in the "Great Chamber first floor." Suffolk County, Massachusetts, inventories of 1757 and 1758 show little variance with those of a decade earlier in the placement of floorcloths. In one house-

⁴¹ Inventory of Samuel Emmes, Nov. 7, 1777. *Ibid.*, vol. 76, pp. 504-506.

⁴² Inventory of Benjamin Homer, Jan. 24, 1777. *Ibid.*, vol. 75, pp. 393-96.

⁴³ Inventory of Joseph Warren, Dec. 9, 1777. *Ibid.*, vol. 76, pp. 645-49.

⁴⁴ Inventory of Robert Gould, Mar. 14, 1777. *Ibid.*, vol. 76, pp. 209-22.

⁴⁵ Inventory of William Whitwell, July 8, 1776. *Ibid.*, vol. 75, pp. 539-40.

⁴⁶ Inventory of Thomas Stevenson, Dec. 2, 1776. *Ibid.*, vol. 76, pp. 188-91.

⁴⁷ Inventory of William Burch, Jan. 29, 1779. *Ibid.*, vol. 78, pp. 125-26.

⁴⁸ Inventory of Joseph Blake, Jan. 7, 1745 (sworn to Sept. 18, 1746). *Ibid.*, vol. 39, pp. 184-86.

⁴⁹ Inventory of James Pemberton, Mar. 31, 1747. *Ibid.*, vol. 39, pp. 497-505.

hold, in fact, two were still in the same place. James Pemberton's widow Hannah, according to her inventory of 1758, had left the "painted floor Cloth" in the parlor and "a floor Cloth" still covered the floor of the great room. Whether called great room, parlor, great chamber, or front room—the latter was the location of "1 Small floor Cloth 60," mentioned in the 1757 inventory of Reverend Charles Brockwell—it is clear that the rooms in which floorcloths were used were among the important ones in a house.⁵⁰

The presence of japanned and mahogany tea tables with china tea sets, family pictures, candle sconces with arms, and a spinet as well as a couch and chairs in a room where the underfoot furnishing was a floorcloth, as was the case in the Pemberton's "Great Room," is an indication that painted-canvas cloths were held in much higher regard in the mid-18th century than is realized today. Floorcloths were hardly less esteemed in the 1770s than they had been 20 years earlier. A "Canvas Carpet 15," in the "Next front Chamber" is listed in the Stevenson inventory of 1776. The floors in the "Back Sitting Room" in Robert Gould's house and the "back parlor" of Joshua Winslow's house were each covered with floorcloths, the one with a "painted Floor Cloth old" and the other with "1 Canvas floor Cloth." According to the inventories of these two Bostonians recorded in 1777 and 1778, respectively, floorcloths also were used in the entries at both residences along with other types of floor and stair carpeting. The plain and patterned floorcloths, both new and used, painted by Daniel Rea and Son for the homemakers and householders of Boston also were used in rooms—middle rooms, front rooms, parlors, back parlors, and dining parlors—as well as entries.

Floorcloths for entries and hallways may have been of hardier construction than those used in rooms, since a differentiation was made in their use, as the newspaper advertisements already cited indicate. For example, "painted Oil Cloths" were made for passages as well as rooms, as were "Fancy Pattern-Cloths." And the "Patent Oil Floor Cloths" available for rooms also were manufactured in "1-2 yd. 3-4 and 4-4 do." sizes for entries. According to the 1797 inventory of furniture at "Richmond Hill," both the "Hall below Stairs" and the "Hall entry below Stairs" were covered with a "Patent Oil Cloth" and

in the staircase there was "1 Oil Cloth (stair foot)." Stairs, too, were sometimes covered with painted canvas. The "painted Oil Cloths" just mentioned were made for stairs, and a sale of furnishings from a Baltimore residence that was announced in the *Maryland Journal and Baltimore Daily Advertiser* of June 24, 1777, included "a staircloth, with iron rods and holdfasts."

When used in the principal rooms of a house, floorcloths might cover the entire floor from wall to wall, as shown in the portraits of the Ellsworths and of Mr. Phillips (figs. 1 and 11), or a good part of the floor, as in the Hawley family portrait (fig. 13). Presumably Governor Burnet's "large painted canvas square as the room" was of similar proportions. Floorcloths also seem to have been made in all sizes because the Brockwell inventory of 1757 listed a "Small floor cloth" in the front room. The size of a "Small floor cloth" is not known, though obviously it would have to cover less floor than the large carpet depicted in the painting of the Hawley family. The placement and use of small floorcloths are, unfortunately, not known either. Another puzzle in the location and use of floorcloths is presented by the Gould inventory of 1777 which listed as part of the parlor furnishings "1 Scotts Carpet" and "1 painted Floor-Cloth." Perhaps one floor covering was laid on top of the other or placed in the center of the room, and the other one used by the fireplace or just inside the doorway to the parlor. Another possibility, and one for which there is evidence, is that the floorcloth was placed under a table at mealtime. The "two old checquered canvases to lay under a table" owned by Governor Burnet and Robert "King" Carter's "large oyle cloth to lay under a Table" are proof that floorcloths had been used in this way in the colonies since the early part of the 18th century.

This use of floorcloths also may explain why the oil-cloth carpet in Carter's inventory was listed among the contents of the dining-room closet which included such things as a teapot, cups, saucers, plates, glasses, decanter, knives, backgammon table, and candlesticks; and why the painted floorcloth in Blake's inventory of 1745 was located in the closet of the front room along with such china items as plates, bowls, cups, and saucers. Perhaps the floorcloths, like the china and related paraphernalia with which they were stored, were used only at tea or mealtime.

The practice of placing a carpet under the table was still followed in the early 19th century when Thomas

⁵⁰ Inventory of Charles Brockwell, May 13, 1757. *Ibid.*, vol. 52, pp. 327-37.



THE SARGENT FAMILY
American, about 1800

(Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., from the Collection of American Primitive Paintings given by Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch.)

Figure 14.—The floors in these rooms are completely covered, the principal one with a large checkered pattern of brown, tan, and cream. The tan woodwork and lower portion of the wall as well as the brown-and-cream striped upholstery of the armchair repeat the color scheme of the floor covering. In the adjoining room, the floor covering has a diamond pattern in two shades of greenish blue.

Jefferson was furnishing the White House. In a letter concerning the purchase of straw carpets, to be discussed presently, Jefferson explained that he wanted a floorcloth "to lay down on the floor of a dining room when the table is set and be taken up when the table is removed, merely to secure a very handsome floor from grease and the scouring which that necessitates." The purchase of a floorcloth for the Presidential Mansion, however, was delayed for the time being because

the prices of "English painted cloth" prompted Jefferson to note in the same letter that "at 3 dollars a square yard the floor cloth would cost me 100 D[ollars], which is far beyond the worth of the object." Nevertheless, one seems to have been obtained because the previously cited inventory of the "President's house" taken in 1809 lists "a canvas floor cloth, painted Green" in the small dining room, south front.

Another function of the floorcloth appears to have

been as a summer floor covering. Mrs. Abigail Adams, returning home from Philadelphia where she had been residing during her husband's term as Vice President of the United States, wrote on May 6, 1791, to her sister concerning household matters in Quincy, Massachusetts: "I think my dear Sister that as it is coming Hot weather my oil cloth will do best for my parlour. I would wish to have it put down. What would be the expence of a New Tack. If ten or 12 dollors would put one up, tis so great a comfort that I should be glad to have one put up."⁵¹ It is not known whether the oilcloth was laid on the bare floor or over a carpet. Both oilcloth and straw matting, however, were sometimes used in the 19th century as floor covering in the summer. The fact that Mrs. Adams wished the oilcloth to be tacked in place, although not answering the question of whether on the bare floor or over a carpet, does indicate one way of laying floorcloths.

In entries or halls, as in front rooms, great chambers, and parlors, the floor might be either partially or completely covered with a floorcloth. In the entrance hall of the White House the "whole floor" was covered with a "canvas painted Green." The advertisement in the *New-York Gazette and General Advertiser* of 1799, previously mentioned, listed floorcloths for entries in widths of 18, 24, and 36 inches. Such a range of sizes from small to large would have provided for either area or wall-to-wall protection depending upon the size of the entry.

Utilitarian as well as ornamental, floorcloths were highly regarded as underfoot furnishings throughout the 18th century, and their use in American houses to cover, protect, and decorate floors, based on the sources studied, was much more extensive than is recognized today.

STRAW

Straw carpets and matting also were used on household floors in 18th-century America, but very little is known about them. The use of straw and straw-like materials for covering floors, however, was not new. In the Middle Ages, loose straw, hay, and rushes were strewed on floors. Later, mats of braided rush

were made.⁵² In England, mats appear in paintings dating from the second half of the 16th century, and their use extended well into the 17th century, as shown in the portrait *Sir Thomas Aston at Death Bed of his First Wife*, painted in 1635 by John Souch, for the floor of the room depicted is covered with a braided rush mat. Although the use of mats in England at this time raises the possibility that they also may have been used in the colonies, a check of 17th-century inventories recorded in Essex County, Massachusetts, does not reveal any mention of floor mats or matting.⁵³ Their use on the floor, moreover, was not included in the definition of mat as a "contexture of rushes" or "rushes plated or woven together" in Bailey's *Dictionary* until the late 1730s when a mat was defined as "rushes interwoven to lay on floors, and for various other uses."

The straw carpets and matting available in 18th-century America, then, were not closely associated with the earlier floor coverings of straw or rush. Rather, their use in the colonies seems to date from the mid-18th century. During his sojourn in this country as Commissary to the Swedish congregation on the Delaware River in the 1750s, Israel Acrelius observed: "Straw carpets have lately been introduced in the towns. But the inconvenience of this is that they must soon be cleansed from flyspots, and a multitude of vermin, which harbor in such things, and from the kitchen smoke, which is universal."⁵⁴

Despite these disadvantages, straw carpets and matting did meet with the approval of some of the colonists. In May 1759, no less a person than George Washington, recently married to the widow Mrs. Martha Custis, ordered "50 yards of best Floor Matting" for use at Mount Vernon.⁵⁵ That the use of straw floor coverings was not limited to the Middle Atlantic Colonies and the South is proved by both

⁵² ALBERT FRANK KENDRICK, "English Carpets," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* (Jan. 24, 1919), vol. 67, pp. 136-37.

⁵³ *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County, Massachusetts*, op. cit. (footnote 2), vols. 1-8, covering the years from 1636 to 1683.

⁵⁴ ISRAEL ACRELIUS, *A History of New Sweden; or, The Settlements on the River Delaware*, trans. and edit. William M. Reynolds (Philadelphia: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1874), p. 157.

⁵⁵ Invoice of goods ordered by George Washington, Williamsburg, from Robert Cary, London, May 1759. In *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Source, 1745-1799*, edit. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931-1944), vol. 2, p. 320.

inventories and newspaper advertisements. “3 floor Matts” valued at 60 shillings were listed among items located “In the Chambers” in the 1749 inventory of a Boston widow, Sarah Trecothick.⁵⁶ Mrs. Elizabeth Pecker’s inventory recorded in 1757 included “a Straw matt” among the chamber furnishings.⁵⁷ And a “handsome Floor Straw Carpet” was mentioned in an auction notice which appeared in the *Boston Gazette* of January 28, 1760. The fact that straw carpets and matting were available in New England at this time coincides with their appearance elsewhere in the colonies. Thus, it seems probable that their use on this side of the Atlantic dates from the middle of the 18th century.

References to straw floor coverings later in the century include “a large matt for entry 6/” listed in the 1778 inventory of Peter Chardon, Esq., of Boston.⁵⁸ At Mount Vernon, the straw mats ordered in 1759 apparently had proved satisfactory for in July 1772 an order of goods “for the Use of George Washington, Potomack River, Virginia,” included “30 yards of yard wide Floor Matt’g.”⁵⁹ Since straw is among the less durable of materials for underfoot use, it is likely that the order may have been for replacing worn-out portions. Wear and tear also may have accounted for the fact that matting was ordered again in the late 1780s. In a letter dated Mount Vernon, January 15, 1789, and addressed to Robert Morris, Washington wrote: “I pray you to receive my thanks for your favor of the 5th. and for the obliging attention which you have given to the Floor matting from China. The latter is not yet arrived at the Port of Alexandria nor is the navigation of the River at this time open for the Passage of any Vessel; while, the frost has much the appearance of encreasing and continuing.”⁶⁰ Floor matting seems to have been in continuous use at Mount Vernon during the second half of the 18th century on the basis of Washington’s correspondence and orders for goods.

Washington’s letters also reveal that the Orient was

⁵⁶ Inventory of Mrs. Sarah Trecothick, Feb. 22, 1749. In *Suffolk Probate Books*, vol. 43, pp. 397–400.

⁵⁷ Inventory of Mrs. Elizabeth Pecker, May 6, 1757. *Ibid.*, vol. 52, pp. 317–19.

⁵⁸ Inventory of Peter Chardon, June 5, 1778. *Ibid.*, vol. 77, pp. 145–49.

⁵⁹ Invoice of goods ordered by George Washington, Mount Vernon, from Robert Cary, London, July 1772. In *Writings of George Washington*, op. cit. (footnote 55), vol. 3, p. 92.

⁶⁰ Letter from George Washington, Mount Vernon, to Robert Morris, Philadelphia, Jan. 15, 1789. *Ibid.*, vol. 30, p. 179.

one source of supply for underfoot furnishings of straw. The correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and his assistant, Thomas Claxton, concerning the purchase of floor coverings for the White House mentions floor matting of oriental origin, too. In a letter to Jefferson, dated Philadelphia, June 13, 1802, Claxton wrote:

Before I left the city of Washington you mentioned a floor cloth which you wished to have painted on canvas. Since I have been here, I have seen a kind of grass matting which is used by the genteel people,—it is, in my estimation very handsome and comes cheaper even than the common painted cloths of this country. Inclosed, sir, you will have a specimen of the stuff. It is a yard and a half wide and costs 7/6 pr. yard. I believe a square yard of canvas, that is good, will cost before any paint is put on, nearly as much as a yard of this, which is yd. & ½ wide. If you should fancy it, I can procure that which is variegated in colour white and red, and by forwarding to me the plan of your floor, Sir, I can have it made immediately. The making is an exclusive charge. English painted cloth costs about 3 dollars pr. square yd and American I am told is scarcely ever used.⁶¹

In a postscript, Claxton added: “When these cloths are made they are strongly bound and are said to wear well.” There need be no question about the origin of the matting because Jefferson’s notation of Claxton’s letter provides the answer. The memorandum by Jefferson, written on a piece of paper halved lengthwise, reads:

Prices
 floor cloth, English painted canvas costs 3d[ollars].
 pr. sq. yard
 the canvas itself painted costs 1d. pr. sq. yard
 Chinese straw floor cloth costs 67 cents pr. sq. yard
 See Claxton’s letter[?] from Phila. June 13, 1802⁶²

The matting was not purchased, however, for as Jefferson explained in his reply of June 18 to Claxton:

The samples of straw floor cloth are beautiful, especially the finest one, but would not answer for the purpose I have in view which is to lay down on the floor of a dining

⁶¹ Letter to Thomas Jefferson, Washington, from Thomas Claxton, Philadelphia, June 13, 1802. (MS, Massachusetts Historical Society.) The straw-matting samples are no longer with the letter. Reprinted in MARIE G. KIMBALL, “The Original Furnishings of the White House, Part II,” *Antiques* (July 1929), vol. 16, p. 36.

⁶² Memorandum by Thomas Jefferson from Thomas Claxton’s letter of June 13, 1802. (MS, Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division.) Thomas Jefferson papers, 1802.

room when the table is set and be taken up when the table is removed, merely to secure a very handsome floor from grease and the scouring which that necessitates. The straw would turn up with the grease itself and would also wear with such repeated rolling and unrolling, but I thank you much for your information of the cost of English painted cloth. At 3 dollars a square yard the floor cloth would cost me 100 D, which is far beyond the worth of the object.⁶³

Nevertheless, as pointed out earlier, a floorcloth eventually was obtained for use in the south dining room of the White House.

Further proof that the straw carpets and matting available in this country were often products of the Far East are the "Canton mats for floors," India and East India floormats, and East India straw carpeting advertised for sale in the *Federal Gazette and Baltimore Daily Advertiser* on June 6 and September 7, 1803, and May 12 and June 20, 1808. At "Richmond Hill," according to the 1797 inventory, Aaron Burr was using "India Matts" in the "Hall up Stairs," the "Garret Bed Room," and the "Garret Hall." Spain may have been another source of supply of straw floor coverings. In 1797, one Baltimore merchant advertised in the *City Gazette and Daily Telegraph* of March 17 that he had received from Rotterdam a general assortment of goods including "15 bales Spanish Matts for Carpeting." Although the name implies that the mats were of Spanish origin, it is possible that they were Spanish only because of transshipment through that country from the Far East and therefore were not a product of Spain. Or, what seems the more likely explanation is that the name was derived from the material used in their manufacture, Spanish rush. In the 1767 edition of Bailey's *Dictionary*, "mat-weed" is defined as "an herb or plant called also feather grass, and Spanish rush of which mats . . . are made."

Jefferson's reasons for rejecting the matting and the criticism voiced by Israel Acrelius at an earlier date suggest that straw floor coverings probably had limited use. The "large Matt for entry" mentioned before, as well as those in use at "Richmond Hill," point to the use of straw matting in both entrances and passages or hallways. In 1766, Charles Carroll ordered "1 piece of Matting for Passages" among other

goods from his London merchant.⁶⁴ The inventory entries cited previously reveal that underfoot furnishings of straw were also used in chambers or bedrooms. In addition, straw matting may have been used under carpets as padding, or on top as a protective coating, or else as either a temporary or summertime floor covering. It is interesting to note that the use of matting in these ways seems to have been common in the 19th century. According to Thomas Webster's *An Encyclopaedia of Domestic Economy*, published in New York in 1845: "Matting is used in some cases instead of carpets. The best are India mats, which are used to lay over carpets, particularly in summer, from their being cool. They are durable."

Baize also was used in this way at an earlier date but for a different reason according to Thomas Sheraton's *The Cabinet Dictionary*, published in London in 1803. Described as "a sort of open woollen stuff, having a long nap, sometimes frized, and sometimes not," baize was stated to be used by upholsterers "to cover over carpets, and made to fit round the room, to save them." This would seem to have been the practice at "Richmond Hill," Aaron Burr's residence in New York City. In the "Blue or drawing Room" was "1 Elegant Turkey carpet" and "a Carpet of Blue Bays to cover the turkey ditto." Also listed among the contents of this room in the 1797 inventory was "the green Margin to the Carpet (of cloth)." Both the choice of blue as the color of the baize to suit the color of the room and the addition of a border suggest a stylish scheme of decor. A baize carpet cover was used in the dining room, too. The inventory listed "1 Brussels Carpet" and "1 Green bays Carpet."

This custom of using carpet covers also was followed by Mrs. Abigail Adams during her brief stay in the White House. The inventory taken in 1801 lists among the contents of the dining room, "1 Brussels Carpet with Green Baize Cover." It is possible that this also was the intent of Mrs. Adams in laying a floorcloth during the summer season at her house in Massachusetts. Or perhaps it was simply her custom to change the underfoot furnishings in the spring, putting the winter carpets away until fall. According to early 19th-century practice as reported in Webster's *Encyclopaedia*, carpets were taken up in the spring,

⁶³ Letter from Thomas Jefferson, Washington, to Thomas Claxton, Philadelphia, June 18, 1802. (MS, Massachusetts Historical Society). Reprinted in KIMBALL, loc. cit. (footnote 61).

⁶⁴ Invoice of goods enclosed in a letter from Charles Carroll, barrister, Maryland, to Mr. William Anderson, London, Oct. 29, 1766. In "Letters of Charles Carroll, Barrister," op. cit. (footnote 14) (September 1941), vol. 36, p. 340.

cleaned and stored for the duration of the warm weather, "the floors in the mean time being only partially covered with oil cloth or matting." That this was also an 18th-century practice in America, if not in Europe, is indicated by the surprise foreign travelers expressed at finding carpeted rather than bare floors in some American homes during the summertime. Brissot de Warville, for instance, apparently was shocked somewhat by the summertime use of floor coverings in this country which he visited in 1788. Indeed, he seems to have viewed the entire subject of underfoot furnishings in America as a moral issue. In reference to luxury, the Frenchman wrote:

It already appears: they have carpets, elegant carpets; it is a favourite taste with the Americans; they receive it from the interested avarice of their old masters the English.

A carpet in summer is an absurdity; yet they spread them in this season, and from vanity: this vanity excuses itself by saying that the carpet is an ornament; that is to say, they sacrifice reason and utility to show.⁶⁵

Moreau de Saint Méry, a countryman of Brissot's who visited America in the 1790s held a more tolerant view of floor-covering customs in this country. Nevertheless, Moreau, too, seems to have raised his eyebrows when it came to the summertime use of carpets. "[The Americans] have carpets imported from England, and these are kept laid even during the summer, except in Charleston, where they are unrolled only during the winter and after noon, and kept rolled the rest of the time."⁶⁶ Despite Moreau's observations it seems possible that some Northerners also limited their use of floor coverings to the winter months. This is suggested by Mrs. Anne Grant's description of the Schuyler's house in New York, the "Flats." Recalling its appearance prior to the Revolutionary War she noted that the "winter-rooms had carpets."⁶⁷ This quotation seems to imply that rooms used in the summer were without carpets.

No doubt, Moreau de Saint Méry who disapproved of the use of carpets in the summer was well aware of the need for floor coverings in the winter. During his

American sojourn, he observed that "good carpeting tends to concentrate the heat, which is an advantage in a country where, as I have said, rooms are drafty."⁶⁸ That this function of floor coverings was indeed appreciated by Americans, too, is proved by Benjamin Henry Latrobe's correspondence concerning the designs he submitted in 1803 for Dickinson College at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. In reference to the "distribution, and arrangements of apartments," he explained that the rooms used the most were on the south since the north side of the building would be subjected to cold winds, rain, and sleet. This talented and thoughtful architect then went on to note: "There are indeed two Chambers in the N.E. wing on each story.—If these Chambers be inhabited by Preceptors, the one as a study, the other as a Bedchamber, the disadvantages of the Aspect must be overcome by such means, of Curtains & Carpets, as a Student does not so easily acquire."⁶⁹ Indeed, even straw carpeting would have been of some help in a cold north room "to concentrate the heat." Perhaps it was for this reason that straw mats were found in bedchambers where they may have served as bedside rugs.

As to the appearance of straw floor coverings, it is evident from Claxton's mention of red and white variegated matting that some were patterned and colored. Possibly some of the straw mats and carpets of the 18th century also were very much like the present-day imports of plain weave and natural color from the Orient.

Although their exact construction and purpose remain problematical, it is clear that carpets and matting of straw were available and used at least in a limited way on floors in this country during the second half of the 18th and on into the 19th century.

INGRAIN

Ingrain as well as Scotch, Kilmarnock, Kidderminster, and English were all names employed in the 18th century for pileless, loom-woven floor coverings of double construction. These carpets were made, as were two-ply coverlets for beds, by simultaneously weaving and interweaving two cloths of different colors in such a way as to allow first one cloth

⁶⁵ JACQUES PIERRE BRISSOT DE WARVILLE, *New Travels in the United States of America, Performed in 1788* (2d. ed.; London: I. S. Jordan, 1794), vol. 1, p. 270.

⁶⁶ *Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey [1793-1798]*, trans. and edit. Kenneth Roberts and Anna M. Roberts (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1947), p. 264.

⁶⁷ GRANT, loc. cit. (footnote 31).

⁶⁸ *Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey*, op. cit. (footnote 66), p. 326.

⁶⁹ TALBOT HAMLIN, *Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 193.

and then the other to appear on the surface. The result was a smooth-faced or flat material of double construction with a pattern, commonly of two colors, on both sides. In other words, it was reversible, an advantage of ingrain over other types of carpeting.

These double-woven floor coverings were manufactured in various places after which they were often named either specifically as to town or generally as to country. There were "English" carpets as well as those from Kidderminster, a town in England that had been associated with carpets in the 17th century and where the manufacture of double-cloth carpets is generally believed to date from about 1735. In Scotland, Kilmarnock was similarly associated with carpets although double-cloth weaving in that town is not believed to have started until the 1780s. Nevertheless, the manufacture of woven carpeting in Scotland would appear to have begun much earlier because in the middle of the 18th century it was well enough known to serve as an example to explain the type of carpet made at Kidderminster. The comparison was made in 1751 by an Englishman, Bishop Pococke, who wrote of his earlier visit to Kidderminster:

That place is famous for carpets made without nap, like the Scotch, but now they make the same as at Wilton, and it is said they are attempting to weave 'em in one piece.⁷⁰

Clearly, loom-woven carpets without pile were closely identified with Scotland at this date. And before long, "Scotch" seems to have become a synonym for this type of carpet, whatever its origin. "Ingrain" also was synonymous with pileless carpets. Of all the names used, this one is, perhaps, the most accurate since the threads were actually ingrained into each other. Ingrain also may mean dyed in the fiber or yarn and therefore might be applied to any carpet made of colored threads dyed before being woven. One or the other of the definitions or both of course could have been intended when the word ingrain was used. The word "Scotch" is subject to the same double meaning. It might denote either type or place of origin. Nevertheless, the terms "ingrain" and "Scotch" seem to have been associated more often than not with pileless, double-cloth weavings for floors in both the 18th and the 19th centuries.

⁷⁰ *The Travels Through England of Dr. Richard Pococke, successively Bishop of Meath and of Ossory, During 1750, 1751, and later years*, edit. James Joel Cartwright, *Camden Society* (1888), new ser., vol. 42, part 1, p. 230.

On this side of the Atlantic, double-woven carpets were available in most of the large port cities during the second half of the 18th century. "English Carpets," for example, were listed among a complete set of household furniture "just imported . . . from London" that was advertised for sale in the Annapolis *Maryland Gazette* of June 25, 1752. Earlier in the same year, a notice in the *Boston Evening Post* of February 24 mentioned "2 small English Carpets for Bed sides" among the stolen goods "Taken off a Shop Window at Noon." In 1766, Charles Carroll ordered among other items from London, "1 Good English Carpet wth. Lively Colours 12/4 by 14."⁷¹

English was still being used as one name for pileless, two-ply carpets a quarter of a century later when a merchant announced in the *New-York Daily Advertiser* of June 16, 1791, that he had "just received by the last Spring vessels" and had for sale "Carpets & Carpeting, English ingrained, of superior quality, both black & green grounds." And in 1798, New Yorkers could buy "Cheap for Cash English ingrain and Brussels Carpeting," according to an advertisement in the August 27 issue of the *New-York Gazette and General Advertiser*. An advertisement in the same newspaper on May 22 of the following year for the sale of floor coverings included "English ingrained" carpeting, 36 inches wide.

These carpets were sometimes ordered by a specific name such as the "2 Kilmarnock Carpets, 1 large and 1 small" listed in the Jacquelin invoice of 1769, previously cited. But the general designation "Scotch" was usually employed. For instance, among the goods which a New York merchant, James Beekman, requested from Peach and Pierce of Bristol, England, in a "memorandum for sundries," dated December 12, 1770, were "1 piece Scotch Carpetting yard wide quantity about 30 yard" as well as the same amount of this type of carpeting in each of the following widths: yard and a half, three-fourths, and half yard. A marginal note accompanying this portion of Beekman's order read: "bright colours cheapest Sort for tryal."⁷² Earlier in the same year a Virginian,

⁷¹ Invoice of goods enclosed in a letter from Charles Carroll, barrister, Maryland, to Mr. William Anderson, London, Oct. 29, 1766. In "Letters of Charles Carroll, Barrister," op. cit. (footnote 14) (September 1941), vol. 36, p. 339.

⁷² Letter from James Beekman, New York, to Peach and Pierce, Bristol, England, Dec. 12, 1770. In *The Beekman Mercantile Papers, 1746-1790*, transcribed and edit. Philip L. White (New York: The New-York Historical Society, 1956), vol. 2, p. 883.

Mann Page, in a letter of February 22, 1770, instructed his London agents, John Norton and Son, to buy "1 large Scotch Carpet" besides other "Goods for my Family, which please to send by the first safe Opportunity, to be landed where I live near Fredericksburg."⁷³ And Robert Carter, refurbishing his Virginia plantation, "Nomini Hall," in 1772, after residing in Williamsburg for a number of years, directed James Gildart of Liverpool to ship him a number of items including "2 Scotch Carpets, 1 of them 15 feet square, the other 18 feet by 20."⁷⁴

Scotch also was the name that usually appeared in the inventories and newspaper advertisements of the period. In fact, it was the one name of the four or five used for two-ply carpets in the 18th century that was found in the inventories studied. Although this may not seem unusual, it is surprising that the inventories in which there were entries for Scotch carpets numbered no more than three. In other words, only three inventories listed double-woven carpets by any of the recognized names. Such limited ownership is difficult to explain, although some of the unidentified carpets listed in the inventories, of course, may have been of this type. Possibly the "2 homspn. Carpets" mentioned in the Jackson inventory of 1758 or the "Woolen Carpet" valued at 16 shillings 8 pence mentioned in the Stevenson inventory of 1776 were of two-ply construction. To be sure, Mrs. Franklin had found fault with the Scotch carpet in her parlor, though not with the one in the small room; and Sheraton in his *Cabinet Dictionary* of 1803 stated: "Scots carpet . . . is one of the most inferior kind." In spite of the poor quality implied by the dearth of inventory entries, double-woven carpets were mentioned often enough in the advertisements of American newspapers studied to suggest that the supply was fairly adequate and the demand reasonably steady during the second half of the 18th century. Indeed, in 1790 when Tobias Lear was attempting to purchase floor coverings in New York for President Washington, there seemed to be nothing available but Scotch carpets. In a letter addressed to Clement Biddle, which will be referred to in connection with Wilton carpets, Lear complained: "We can get no Carpet in New York to suit the Room,

nor Carpeting of the best kind. Scotch Carpeting is almost the only kind to be found here."

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the name "Scotch" did not appear in any of the Suffolk County, Massachusetts, inventories studied except those of Mr. Robert Gould and Dr. Pemberton, both recorded in 1777, and that of Joshua Winslow recorded in 1778. One of the Scotch carpets listed in the Gould inventory has already been mentioned in reference to its possible use with a floorcloth. Besides this "Scotts Carpet," valued at 16 shillings, that was located in the parlor of the Boston merchant's house, there were "6 yd. Scotch Carpet 6/" along with a Wilton carpet and stair carpeting in the front chamber, "1 large Scotch Carpet 30/ 1 Small Do. /12 3 pr. Wilton Do. 9/" in the second chamber, "Scotch Carpet 12/" and 3 pieces of unidentified carpet in the kitchen chamber, and in the chamber entry "1 Scotch Carpet 12/" as well as a stair carpet and floorcloth. The total for the Gould household was five Scotch carpets plus six yards of Scotch carpeting. In addition to the carpet in the entryway, Scotch carpets appeared in four rooms of the Gould house. These rooms were the parlor, and the front, second, and kitchen chambers. The carpets noted as Scotch in the "Inventory of Furniture etc. belonging to Dr. Pemberton's Estate" totaled four and a piece. The listings were for "Scotch carpet 100 -piece do. 10/" and "3 Scotch Carpets 30/" besides an unidentified "Small Carpet 6/."⁷⁵ The Winslow inventory of 1778 included a "Scotch Carpet 8" in the back chamber over the parlor, in addition to the previously mentioned canvas floorcloth and Turkey carpets.

The newspaper references in which the name "Scotch" appeared were more numerous than the inventory entries. In 1760 they included sale notices in the *Boston Gazette* which listed on September 1 "Scotch Floor Carpets" and in the *Boston News-Letter* which listed on December 18 "Scotch carpets" along with other importations. In the same year "Scot's Carpets" also were being sold by J. Alexander and Company according to their advertisement in the *New-York Gazette* of June 30. The "Carpets and Carpeting" that were among items to be sold such as Kilmarnock and Stewarton blue caps "just imported from Glasgow," mentioned in the *Boston Gazette* of July 5, 1762, were undoubtedly Scotch in origin and presumably also in type if not in name. In New York

⁷³ Letter to John Norton, Esq., London, from Mann Page, Virginia, Feb. 22, 1770. In *John Norton and Sons*, op. cit. (footnote 24), pp. 125 and 123.

⁷⁴ LOUIS MORTON, *Robert Carter of Nomini Hall, A Virginia Tobacco Planter of the Eighteenth Century* (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., 1941), p. 208.

⁷⁵ Inventory of Ebenezer Pemberton, Oct. 19, 1777. In *Suffolk Probate Books*, vol. 76, pp. 419-23.

a year later J. Alexander and Company was offering for sale "English and Scot's carpets and Hair Cloth for Stairs." Colonists in Williamsburg, too, could purchase "Scotch carpets and carpeting of almost all sizes" according to an advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette* of September 23, 1773. The following year a merchant in New York announced on May 12 in *Rivington's New-York Gazetteer* that he had "Scotch carpets and carpeting, to be sold very low" in price. After the Revolutionary War, as before, the name "Scotch" continued to appear frequently in the newspaper advertisements. In 1791, "Scotch Carpets" were part of a "fresh Assortment" of goods imported from London and offered for sale on January 1 in the *New-York Daily Advertiser* and on June 16 there was a notice for the sale of imported carpets and carpeting including "common Scotch" ingrain. Among the goods received by the "late arrivals from Europe" being offered for sale in 1796 by a Philadelphia upholsterer and paperhanger, who advertised in the *Pennsylvania Packet* of October 31, were "Ingrain Scotch Carpeting" as well as Brussels and Wilton "of excellent quality." An upholsterer in New York City, also, sold carpets and carpeting of European origin according to his advertisement in the *New-York Gazette and General Advertiser* of May 22, 1799, which mentioned both "Scotch ingrained" and "4-4 [yards] common Scotch."

Although the name "ingrain" usually appeared in conjunction with the locality name employed for double-woven floor coverings, it was used alone in an occasional advertisement. For example, a sale notice in the *New-York Daily Advertiser* of January 1, 1791, listed "Ingrain'd Carpeting and Scotch Carpets."

Not all carpets of this type offered for sale were new or imported. Among the advertisements examined, some were found in which the carpets were part of some "elegant and valuable household furniture" that was to be sold at "public Vendue." English carpets were sold in this way in Annapolis in 1752, and in Boston in 1763, according to an advertisement on June 16, in the *Boston News-Letter*. Another advertisement in that newspaper on November 11, 1773, and one in the *New-York Gazette and the Weekly Mercury* of June 29, 1772, indicate that second-hand or used Scotch carpets were available in New York City as well as in Boston. And in Philadelphia, "a Scotch carpet and 2 bed[-side] ditto, new" were listed among the "Furniture and Goods of the Hon. John Penn, Senr." which were to be "exposed to

Sale . . . at his House in Chestnut-street," in May 1788.⁷⁶

Advertisements further indicate, as do other sources, that pileless, loom-woven floor coverings were made in this country in the 18th century. Perhaps this was the type meant by Joseph Cherry in his advertisement of October 26, 1796, in the *Herald of New York*, which read: "The subscriber respectfully informs his friends and the public in general, that he has commenced the weaving business in Division Street . . . where he carries on the Weaving of linen, lawns, Diapers of different kinds, Bedticks of all kinds, flowered Bedspreads of different kinds, carpeting of all kinds, from the highest to the lowest degree."

On June 13, 1797, another New York weaver, Thomas Thompson, placed a notice in the *Goshen Repository* stating that he had taken a shop in Blooming Grove where he intended to "carry on the weaving of Carpets, double and single Coverlids of the newest fashion." No doubt there were other professional weavers in other communities who also made carpets for whoever wanted and could afford them. The "homsn." and "Woolen" carpets listed in inventories previously mentioned may have been such products. But it is doubtful that this work of handicrafts men was of much importance in providing a domestic supply of wool floor coverings in 18th-century America.⁷⁷

The pileless wool carpeting originally owned and used by the Copp family of Stonington, Connecticut (fig. 15), also could have been the work of professional weavers. According to tradition, however, it was made by two spinster sisters of the family in the early 19th century. Proof that such carpets were on occasion made in the home by amateur but skilled weavers is provided by Dr. William Bentley, a diarist and pastor of the East Church in Salem, Massachusetts. Of his activities on November 22, 1790, Bentley wrote:

Had an opportunity this evening of viewing a Carpet woven after the manner of the Scotch Carpet, with admirable execution. The Lady's name is Roche, who executed it in her own private family.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ MARIE G. KIMBALL, "The Furnishings of Governor Penn's Town House." *Antiques* (May 1931), vol. 19, p. 378.

⁷⁷ ARTHUR HARRISON COLE, "The Rise of the Factory in the American Carpet Manufacture," *Facts and Factors in Economic History by Former Students of Edwin Francis Gay* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1932), pp. 382-86.

⁷⁸ *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D., Pastor of the East Church, Salem, Massachusetts* (Salem: The Essex Institute, 1905-1914), vol. 1, p. 214.

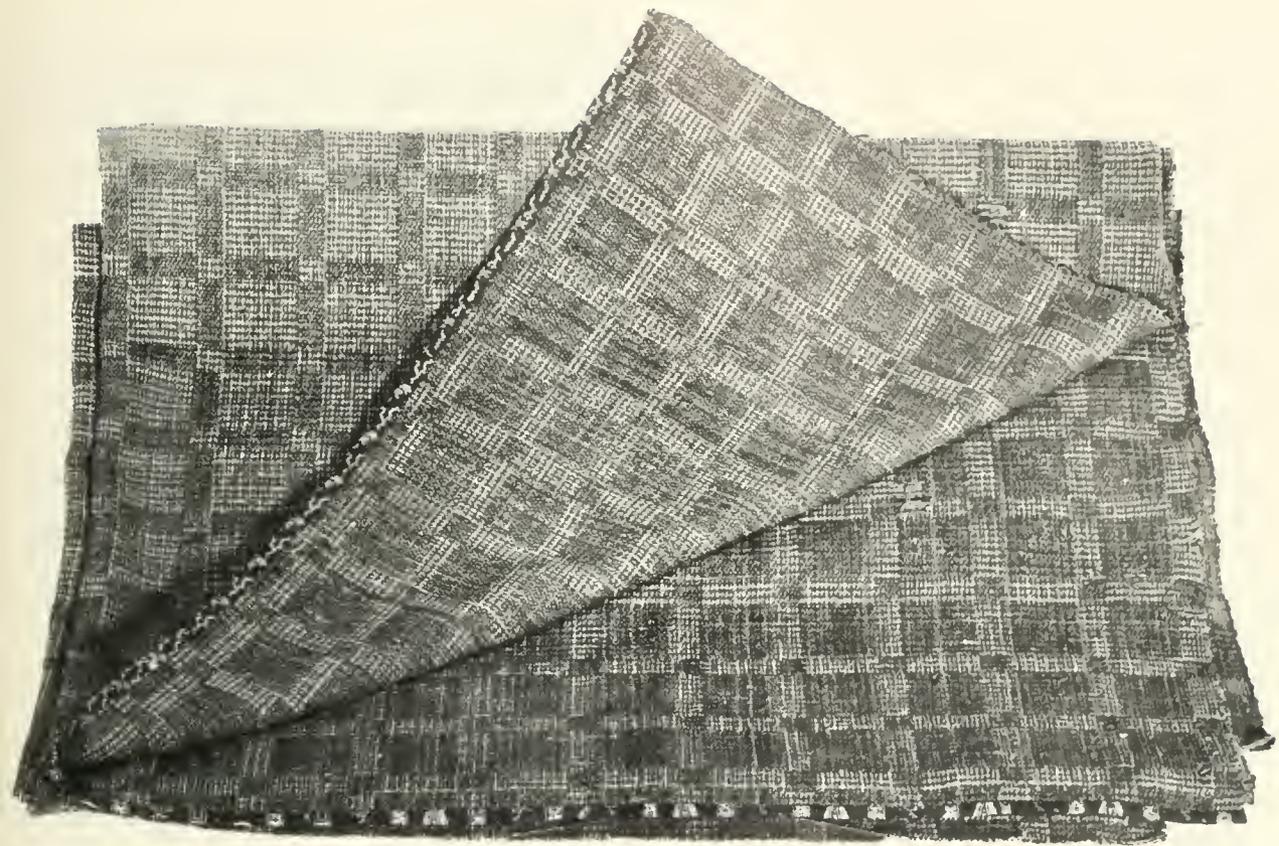


Figure 15.—FLOOR COVERING, AMERICAN, early 19th century. This woven wool carpeting used by the Copp family of Stonington, Connecticut, consists of two 36-inch pieces sewed together and bound at one end with printed cotton fabric. On one side of the carpeting the large and small squares are green; the dividing bars are a mixture of yellow and orange. On the other side, the colors are reversed. (USNM 28810; Smithsonian photo 47090-C.)

The Copp family carpet is of single-cloth construction woven in 36-inch widths and has a reversible pattern of squares in shades of grayed greens and dulled yellows and oranges. Some of it is in individual pieces and some is sewed together, indicating that at one time it was a large or room-size carpet. This carpeting cannot, of course, be considered ingrain in the strictest sense of the name since it is of single-rather than double-cloth construction. Nevertheless, the fact that the carpeting is reversible is of interest insofar as it may provide a clue to a type of pattern that might have been made in a two-ply construction and was intended for use underfoot. Since the carpet is reversible, the ground color might be either green or yellow and orange according to one's desire. Similarly, the predominant color of the carpets already mentioned with "black & green grounds" would have

been dependent upon which surface faced up at a given time. Other colors that might have been used for ingrain carpets in the 18th century are suggested by two references from Irish newspapers. One, an advertisement in the *Dublin Gazette* of 1762, mentioned scarlet and madder-red Scotch carpeting.⁷⁹ The other, a notice of 1764 in the *Freeman's Journal* on December 4, mentioned "Black and Yellow Bird Eye pattern" floor coverings.⁸⁰

The patterns of most ingrains were probably simple,

⁷⁹ ADA K. LONGFIELD, "Some Eighteenth Century Dublin Carpet-Makers," *The Burlington Magazine* (June 1943), vol. 82, p. 151.

⁸⁰ ADA K. LONGFIELD, "History of Carpet-Making in Ireland in the 18th Century," *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* (June 1940), vol. 70, p. 78.

but, as the designs of double-woven coverlets indicate, fairly complex patterns could be made and undoubtedly were. Possibly the floor covering seen in the portrait *Colonel Benjamin Tallmadge and his son, William* (fig. 16), done by Ralph Earl in 1790, is, if not a painted floor or floorcloth, an ingrain carpet. This room of the Tallmadge residence in Litchfield, Connecticut, also was the setting for the companion portrait *Mrs. Tallmadge with her son, Henry, and daughter, Maria* because the same floor covering is depicted with the geometric patterns and cruciform ornaments that resemble the turreted diamond-shaped motifs seen in central-Asian rugs. Ingrain could also be obtained with floral patterns. George Washington, in letters to be quoted shortly, mentioned both Scotch and Wilton in reference to the flowered carpet he wanted for the blue room at Mount Vernon. And "marble" carpeting was advertised for sale in association with English and Scotch ingrain in the *New-York Gazette and General Advertiser* of May 22, 1799.

The width of ingrain carpeting was of course fixed by the loom which in the 18th century was usually of a size that produced 36-inch fabrics. This was a width that could be comfortably worked by a single weaver. Although carpeting was woven wider and narrower than a yard, it is believed that the standard width of the pileless, two-ply carpeting was 36 inches. Most Scotch carpets of even medium size were therefore made of a number of pieces sewed together, and those described as "large" were, of course, seamed too. Consequently, the full size of such carpets was most likely based on either multiples of a single width of carpeting or a combination of different widths. In most cases, however, the single pieces would have been the regulation width of a yard. Both of the carpets ordered by Robert Carter would have been made in this way. Perhaps the dimensions were determined on the basis of the 36-inch module system as well as by the size of the rooms in which they were to be used because both carpets can be translated into even yardage. The one 15 feet square could have been made up of five yard-wide pieces and the other, 18 by 20 feet, of six pieces.

The dimensions of the carpets ordered by Carter in 1772 provide an idea of what the size may have been of the "very large and handsome Carpets" that were advertised for sale at public vendue in the *Boston News-Letter* of January 13, 1762. Or the measurements of the "very large and handsome Carpets" may have been closer to 11½ by 18½ feet because a Turkey carpet of this size was described as "very



COLONEL BENJAMIN TALLMADGE AND HIS SON, WILLIAM
by Ralph Earl, 1790
(Courtesy of Litchfield Historical Society.)

Figure 16.—The patterned floor covering of this room extends to the walls where it is edged with a harmonious border. This distinguished citizen of Connecticut, a Member of Congress from 1801 to 1817, and president of a bank in Litchfield, is depicted in a domestic setting with books, fringed-decorated chair and table cover, and vivid-colored floor covering.

large." This description was not used in the advertisement that appeared in the *Boston News-Letter* on July 11, 1771, for the sale of "a Carpet 14 Feet by 12, more Elegant than any which have been imported into this Province," although it might have been because the size of this carpet was in the category of very large. Another notice of the same year appearing in the *Virginia Gazette* on May 9, mentioned a carpet of "about eleven Feet by ten." This size might be considered large rather than very large. The adjective "large" was used for a carpet measuring 9 feet

6 inches by 6 feet 6 inches, as pointed out in connection with the Turkey and Persian carpets which because of their 9- by 9-foot dimensions also were classified as large. It seems likely that the size categories suggested for the terms "large" and "very large" in reference to Orientals also could be applied to the other kinds of movable floor coverings available in the 18th century. The large but otherwise unidentified carpets that were listed in the Suffolk County inventories of Mary Dorrington in 1776⁸¹ and Mr. Robert Gould and Dr. Pemberton in 1777, as well as in the newspaper advertisements previously cited, probably would have measured no more than 12 by 12 feet, since these seem to be the approximate dimensions at which carpets ceased being large and became very large.

Ingrain carpets of either large or very large dimensions would have been used in sizable parlors or chambers where they probably covered a large portion or all of the floor. The library was another room where ingrain carpets were used. According to the 1797 inventory of furniture at "Richmond Hill," the floor in "The Library" was covered with "1 Ingrained Carpet." Woven pileless carpets of considerably reduced dimensions also were used on chamber or bedroom floors because some ingrains were described as "small . . . for Bed sides." The entryway, according to the Gould inventory, was another place where Scotch carpets were used.

Available in "almost all sizes" and known by a number of names, these patterned but pileless, loom-woven, ingrain carpets were offered for sale in many of the larger cities on this side of the Atlantic and provided serviceable floor covering for American houses during the second half of the 18th century.

BRUSSELS

Brussels carpets and carpeting were characterized by a pile surface in contrast to the smooth-surface floor covering just discussed. That is, they had a surface similar to velvet fabric or to Oriental carpets. But, unlike the latter, the pile was woven and not handknotted. The Brussels-type pile was made by weaving extra warp or lengthwise threads over rods in such a way as to form loops standing up on the surface of the carpet. The manufacture of the Brussels carpet, as it was called after its supposed place of origin, is believed to have been first established in England

about 1740 at Wilton. Soon after its introduction, the Brussels pile was transformed by cutting the loops into a new type of pile surface known as Wilton which will be discussed shortly. Kidderminster was another place in England where Brussels-carpet weaving was carried on, having been introduced there about 1750. Place names sometimes may have been used for the loop-pile carpeting made in England, but Brussels carpet was, and in fact remains, the term generally used for this type of floor covering wherever manufactured.

When advertised for sale in 18th-century American newspapers, Brussels carpets were sometimes mentioned among the European imports. Nevertheless, in most cases the actual place of manufacture was the British Isles since Brussels carpets were listed with such other floor coverings of British origin as Scotch, English, and Wilton. For example, a Philadelphia upholsterer and paperhanger, C. Alder, stated in the *Pennsylvania Packet* of October 31, 1796, that among the goods that he had "received by the late arrivals from Europe" and was "opening for sale" at his shop was a "large quantity of Brussels, Wilton, and Ingrain Scotch Carpeting, of excellent quality." Occasionally a retailer provided information in a newspaper advertisement about the appearance if not the place of origin of his merchandise. A notice inserted by a New York merchant in the *Commercial Advertiser* of June 21, 1798, read: "Carpets and Carpeting of the very best Brussels quality, to the newest landscape and other elegant patterns, now opening and for sale at John Brower's." As the advertisement implies, Brussels-type floor coverings were sometimes rather elaborate. For the most part, though, they probably had floral or small neat patterns. Patterns, whether simple or elaborate, were created by using two or more differently colored threads for the pile, each colored thread lying unseen in the foundation of the carpet until brought to the surface according to the need for that color in the pattern. If the carpet was plain then all the pile threads would, of course, have been the same color.

Unfortunately most advertisements are not as informative as the above one about the appearance of the items being offered for sale. Usually the merchandise is simply listed by name as in the following two newspaper advertisements of 1798. On June 16, a New York upholsterer announced in the *Weekly Museum* that he had "an assortment of Brussels carpeting" for sale and in the *New-York Gazette and General Advertiser* of August 27, another upholsterer,

⁸¹ Inventory of Mary Dorrington, Nov. 18, 1776. In Suffolk Probate Books, vol. 75, pp. 436-38.

Andrew S. Norwood, stated that he would sell "Cheap for Cash . . . Brussels Carpeting."

Most of the types of floor coverings already mentioned were stocked by Norwood at his "Carpet Store" which was opened in 1799 according to an advertisement in the *New-York Gazette and General Advertiser* on May 22. A listing of the goods for sale included "Brussels and Wilton Carpeting and Carpets of all sizes from 3-2 by 4 up to 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ by 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ yds. striped Brussels carpeting for Stairs and Entries."

As with other woven carpeting, Brussels was made in narrow strips, probably of 27- or 36-inch widths, which necessitated the joining of several pieces to make a carpet. Based on this advertisement, it appears that both Brussels and Wilton were woven in the same widths and were made into carpets of similar dimensions. This apparent identity in sizes for carpeting and room carpets suggests that there also may have been a similar relationship in the measurements of stair carpeting of the two types. Most likely the width of the "Brussels carpeting for Stairs and Entries" was slightly under or over a yard, a size that could be woven in one piece and would provide adequate covering for most stairs.

Besides providing information about the dimensions of Brussels floor coverings, Norwood's advertisement reveals that the loop-pile carpeting was made with striped patterns in addition to the already mentioned "newest landscape and other elegant patterns." Whether the stripes were horizontal or vertical is not known, but the advertisement leaves little doubt that Brussels with striped patterns were intended for entryways and staircases. Presumably landscape and floral patterns were used in parlors or front rooms.

Although Brussels carpets and carpeting were being sold in the larger coastal cities by the latter part of the 18th century, according to the sources studied, they do not seem to have had the same popularity as Wiltons in this country. Nevertheless, the fact that Mrs. Margaret Beekman Livingston, mistress of "Clermont," the Livingston manor house in New York, purchased "Thirty six yards of Broussells carpett with border," valued at £36 according to her household account book, is an indication that this type of floor covering was considered fashionable and its qualities appreciated in the 18th century.⁸² This is

⁸² HELEN EVERTSON SMITH, *Colonial Days and Ways as Gathered From Family Papers* (New York: The Century Co., 1900), p. 204.



PORTRAIT OF MARY WARNER
by John Singleton Copley, 1767
(Courtesy of The Toledo Museum of Art, gift of Florence
Scott Libbey, 1950.)

Figure 17.—The colors of this elaborately patterned carpet are predominately deep red, white, and a soft dark blue, with touches of yellow and black. The floor covering, the richly tasseled squab or cushion on which young Mary is kneeling, and the tastefully upholstered chair suggest that the Warner house was handsomely and comfortably furnished.

further verified by Aaron Burr's use of Brussels carpets at "Richmond Hill." The floor in the dining room as well as the breakfast room was covered with "Brussels Carpet" according to the 1797 inventory of furniture. And Brussels appears to have been the stylish floor covering during the early 19th century because it was the choice for the White House, first by John Adams and then by Thomas Jefferson. As the first residents of the Executive Mansion, President and Mrs. John Adams lived there for only a brief four months. Nevertheless, the "Inventory of the Furniture in the President's House, the property of the United States, taken February 26th 1801," previously cited, indicates that both the public and private rooms had been furnished, including floor coverings, in that short

a time. On the first floor there was "1 Brussels Carpet" each, in the "Levee Room," the "Breakfast Room," and the "Lodging Room," while the "Dining Room" had "1 Brussels Carpet with Green Baize Cover." On the second floor the "President's Office," the "Ladies Drawing Room," and the "Secretary's Office" each had "1 Brussels Carpet." The "President's Bed Room," also on the second floor, had "1 Brussels carpet . . . in tolerable order." In addition, a number of other rooms, upstairs as well as down, had floor coverings. Downstairs the "President's Drawing Room" had "1 common carpet" as did some of the rooms upstairs such as bedrooms, the dressing room, and the hall. The "Back Stair Case" was "Carpetted compleat" and downstairs in the "Grand Hall" the floor was "laid with common carpeting." Thomas Jefferson probably used some of these carpets besides obtaining new ones during his stay in the White House. According to the inventory of 1809, the President's sitting room, the President's drawing room, and the large, northwest corner dining room as well as the small, south front bedroom each had an "elegant Brussels carpet." There was a "Brussels carpet on the floor" in the large, north side room, as well as in the President's bedroom and the passage adjoining it. Brussels carpet also was used in the large, south front bedroom, lady's drawing room, and the two, north front bedchambers. No doubt, then as now, Brussels carpets and carpeting provided a wool-pile floor covering that was long wearing and easy to care for and at the same time was available in "elegant patterns."

WILTON

Wilton carpets and carpeting are still being manufactured and, as in the past, continue to be characterized by a cut-pile surface. The surface of the Wilton was in fact a refinement of the Brussels-type pile. As already explained, the manufacture of floor coverings with a loop pile was first established about 1740 at Wilton and thereafter in other carpet-weaving towns. After its introduction at Wilton a change was effected in the Brussels-type pile by cutting the loops. Although this technique may have been practiced on the continent and elsewhere in England, it is believed to have been an early specialty of Wilton. Subsequently, woven floor covering with a cut pile was, and indeed still is, known as Wilton type in contrast to that with a loop pile known as Brussels type.

The carpets made at Wilton, according to Bishop Pococke who visited the English town in 1754, were

"like those of Turkey, but narrow—about three-quarters of a yard wide."⁸³ The comparison of Wilton to Turkey or Oriental carpets was most likely a reference to the cut-pile surface of a rich, soft texture. It also may have been to the color and design of the English-made carpets, but for the most part Wiltons probably had floral or geometric patterns or were plain. Wiltons often were patterned; this is suggested by the instructions issued in connection with the premiums awarded in 1757 and subsequent years by the Dublin Society to encourage carpet-making in Ireland. Wiltons were to be made "ordering the Flower, or Figure, so that they may join."⁸⁴ This seems to indicate that the previous entries of Wiltons, a type first mentioned in the 1752 premiums, had been patterned, and consequently presented some difficulties when the pieces were joined together to make a carpet. Information about patterned Wiltons also appears again in the Dublin Society's premium competition for 1780. In that year an award was offered for "the best Irish Carpet, 28 ft. long, 18 inches wide in imitation of ancient Mosaic with a foot Border round it, to be made of the Wilton kind."⁸⁵

The fact that the design was to simulate an ancient mosaic may reflect the new fashion based on Greco-Roman material that was beginning to characterize architecture and furnishings at that time. A later Irish reference to the sale of "a great variety of carpeting in the sprigway, from half a yard wide to eight quarters wide," in the *Hibernian Chronical of Cork* in 1783, although not mentioning the type of floor covering, does reveal a continuing taste in the 18th century for floral designs.⁸⁶ Further evidence that patterned Wiltons were favored in the 18th century appears in George Washington's instructions, to be discussed shortly, concerning the carpet for the blue parlor at Mount Vernon. Either "the ground or principal flowers in it ought to be blue," he wrote in 1797. No matter what form the pattern of a Wilton carpet may have taken, it was made in the same way as that of a Brussels: that is, by using differently colored threads for the pile and bringing them to the surface when a particular color was called for in the design. If the carpet was plain, then all the pile threads would, of course, have been the same color.

⁸³ *The Travels through England of Dr. Richard Pococke*, op. cit. (footnote 70) (1889), new ser., vol. 44, part 2, p. 48.

⁸⁴ LONGFIELD, op. cit. (footnote 80), p. 70.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.



PORTRAIT OF NICHOLAS BOYLSTON
 by John Singleton Copley, 1772-73
 (Courtesy of Harvard College and The Fogg Art Museum.)

Figure 18.—This rich and handsome carpet is a dark blue-green with large designs of leaves and dull red-orange flowers. Copley has depicted this Boston merchant informally attired in elegant fabrics, a blue morning robe or banyan, rose turban, and red morocco slippers.

Since the carpeting was woven in narrow widths, most Wilton carpets were formed of strips joined together. It was this method of transforming carpeting into carpets that Benjamin Franklin had explained to his wife in a letter from London in 1758, to be mentioned shortly. Of the carpeting he was sending, Franklin wrote that it was “to be sow’d together” either as “one large or two small” carpets.

The “Wilton carpets” offered for sale among other

London imports in the *Boston News-Letter* of October 13, 1768, were most likely made in this way as presumably were the “three very beautiful rich Wilton carpets, three yards square each,” that were advertised in the same newspaper on December 21 of the following year. The 3-yard size of the carpets may have been achieved by using strips either a full yard wide or the three-quarters of a yard dimension cited by the Englishman quoted above. There surely were some variations in the size of the strips because “Wilton Carpeting and carpets of all sizes from 3-2 by 4 up to 6¾ by 7½ yds.” were advertised for sale in the *New-York Gazette and General Advertiser* of May 22, 1799. The three-fourths of a yard width, however, was probably the standard one. Both the 6¾ and 7½ dimensions of the above Wiltons can be broken down into strips of the suggested regulation size, 9 widths being needed in the one case and 10 in the other. In spite of the fact that the overall dimensions are not given for the “few very handsome Wilton Floor Carpets; Stair ditto” included in the items for sale “just imported from London,” that were mentioned in the *Boston News-Letter* of May 23, 1771, or the imported “Wilton Carpets” which were “to be sold very cheap, for ready Money” in Williamsburg, according to the *Virginia Gazette* of October 29, 1772, the floor carpets were very likely seamed. But the stair carpets probably were not, since any width under or slightly over a yard, which was presumably adequate for most stair coverings, could be woven in one piece. Single or unseamed widths of cut-pile floor coverings also could be obtained “in the piece,” according to the sale notice of an upholsterer, John Mason, in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* of October 28, 1771, which included in a list of imported merchandise “the best Wilton Carpeting, in the piece.” Perhaps this was purchased for use in halls, or as foot carpets, or even as an upholstery fabric. That Wilton was, indeed, used for covering furniture as well as floors is revealed by James Beekman’s order for goods on December 9, 1769, addressed to Thomas Harris, London. The New York merchant wrote: “send me as much fine wilton Carpeting as will cover 7 chier Bottems, small figure and bright-colours.”⁸⁷

Although the sale of Mr. Penn’s town-house furnishings included “2 beautiful Wilton, beside carpets per-

⁸⁷ Letter from James Beekman, New York, to Thomas Harris, London, Dec. 9, 1769. In *Beekman Mercantile Papers*, op. cit. (footnote 72), vol. 2, p. 807.

fectly new," it is likely that the items sold at most auctions were used or secondhand. Presumably that was the condition of the "Turkey and Wilton Carpets" as well as the other "furniture of the late John Apthorp, Esq.," that was advertised to be sold at auction in the *Boston News-Letter* of May 13, 1773. There need be no doubt, however, about the "Wilton carpet" mentioned in an advertisement in the January 27, 1776, issue of the *Virginia Gazette* because the heading read: "FOR SALE, A GREAT Variety of Household Furniture of the very best Kinds, which have been little used." Williamsburg, Philadelphia, and Boston were not the only urban centers where floor coverings could be purchased at auction. There was a demand for secondhand Wiltons in New York and Baltimore, too. The *Maryland Journal and Baltimore Daily Advertiser* of June 24, 1777, carried an advertisement announcing the sale at "Public Vendue" of household furniture that included "a large elegant Wilton Carpet," and both "Wilton and Scotch carpets" were listed as items that were to be offered for "Sale by Auction" in New York according to a notice that appeared on April 28, 1781, in the *Royal Gazette*.

For the purchase of new floor coverings there was the "Furniture Ware-House" on Nassau Street in New York City. The upholsterer-owner, William Mooney, announced by an advertisement in the *New-York Journal* of October 27, 1785, that he had "Elegant Wilton Carpets and Carpeting" for sale. A notice in the *New-York Daily Advertiser* on January 1, 1791, indicated that Mooney's shop on Nassau Street was still supplying New Yorkers with "Elegant Wilton carpets" as well as such other underfoot furnishings as ingrain carpeting and Scotch carpets. And in Philadelphia, Wilton and other types of carpeting also were sold by an upholsterer, C. Alder. He described his selection in the *Pennsylvania Packet* of October 31, 1796, as "of excellent quality."

These woven cut-pile carpets, characterized by a fine velvety texture, undoubtedly provided an appropriate type of floor covering for the fashionably furnished rooms found in the houses of some of the wealthier colonists. For example, when Robert Carter moved his family from their plantation, "Nomini Hall," to Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1761, he wrote to his London merchant for numerous items. These included a large mirror, wallpapers "to hang three parlours" as well as a staircase and two passages, brass sconces, three pairs of yellow silk-and-worsted damask festoon window curtains and the same for the

seats of 18 chairs, and a Wilton carpet." Clearly the house "in the city" was to be elegantly furnished. In Boston, too, Wiltons provided suitable floor coverings in such well-appointed households as that of the merchant Mr. Robert Gould. There was a Wilton carpet in the front chamber, three pieces of Wilton in the second chamber, and three strips of Wilton carpet in the front room as well as the other underfoot furnishings, including "19 yd. Do. [Wilton] Stair Carpet" listed in the previously cited inventory of his property recorded in 1777. Another Boston inventory recorded in 1777 indicated that some of the floors in Doctor Joseph Warren's house were similarly covered, for he owned "two Wilton Carpets."

Houses carpeted with Wiltons also were to be found elsewhere in New England. In Newburyport, Massachusetts, the furnishings of James Prince's handsome brick mansion included two Wilton carpets of 72 yards each.⁸⁹ Perhaps these are the floor coverings depicted in two of the portraits of this merchant's family painted in 1801 by John Brewster, Jr., *James Prince and his son, William* (fig. 19) and *James Prince, Jr.* In both paintings the underfoot decoration has a medium-gray ground ornamented with lighter and darker shades of the same color in what might be a muted floral motif, a splotch pattern or marbelized design. Philadelphia was another urban center where Wilton carpeted floors were the choice of well-to-do and prominent persons. Governor Penn, as an example, had two "beautiful Wilton" carpets in his Chestnut Street residence. Farther south the taste in furnishings of country gentlemen compared favorably with that of their city cousins. Of his visit to "Sully," Richard Bland Lee's country seat in Virginia, Thomas Lee Shippen, a Philadelphian, wrote to his father on October 24, 1797, as follows.

I would fain give you some idea of the elegance in which this kinsman of ours has settled himself to make amends for the caprice of his fellow citizens. The house is new, built by himself about 3 years ago and lately furnished from Philada. with every article of silver plate, mahogany, Wilton carpeting and glass ware that can be conceived of that you will find in the very best furnished houses of

⁸⁸ KATE MASON ROWLAND, "Robert Carter of Virginia," *Magazine of American History* (September 1893), vol. 30, p. 124.

⁸⁹ NINA FLETCHER LITTLE, "John Brewster, Jr., 1766-1854," *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* (October 1960), vol. 25, p. 100.



JAMES PRINCE AND SON, WILLIAM
by John Brewster, Jr., 1801
(Courtesy of Historical Society of Old
Newbury, photo courtesy of The
Art Institute of Chicago.)

Figure 19.—The floor of this room is entirely covered with a pattern in shades of gray from light to dark. A letter on the portable desk is headed “Newburyport Novr. 24 1801.”

Philada. Parlours & chambers completely equipped with every luxury as well as convenience.⁹⁰

The use of woven cut-pile carpeting in this country almost coincides with its availability in England. Wiltons began to appear on the American market soon after the middle of the 18th century. Consequently houseowners and homemakers on both sides of the Atlantic were able almost simultaneously to cover their floors with carpeting that was both stylish and serviceable. And Wilton-type floor coverings have sustained this reputation so that they are in the 20th century, as they undoubtedly were in the 18th century, one of the most satisfactory kinds of underfoot furnishings. The desire of anyone today might be the same as

⁹⁰ Letter from Thomas Lee Shippen, Sully, Va., to Dr. William Shippen, Jr., Philadelphia, Oct. 24, 1797. (MS, Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division.) Shippen Papers, vol. 2.

that expressed by John Quincy Adams in his poem “The Wants of Man.”

And maples, of fair glossy stain,
Must form my chamber doors,
And carpets of the Wilton grain
Must cover all my floors.⁹¹

AXMINSTER

Axminster was yet another kind of pile floor covering available to the 18th-century American. As with Brussels and Wilton, the name was that of a type of pile as well as a place of manufacture. In contrast to the looped and cut-pile floor coverings which were woven in narrow strips, however, Axminster could be made in one piece without seams. And the pile,

⁹¹ JOHN QUINCY ADAMS, *Poems of Religion and Society* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1854), p. 18.

instead of being woven as an integral part of the foundation, was knotted to the threads which formed the foundation. In other words, Axminster-type carpets were the domestic Oriental carpets, for they were made by hand-knotting in the same way as Oriental pile rugs.

Carpet-knotting had, of course, been practiced in England at an earlier date, primarily in connection with the so-called Turkey work. The technique had, however, fallen into disuse by the second half of the 17th century.⁹² As a consequence when carpet-knotting was revived a century later it was looked upon as a new industry. Initial efforts to manufacture knotted-pile carpets were made between 1750 and 1755 by Peter Parisot, first at London in association with two French emigrant weavers who had applied to him for help when they had "run themselves into Debt" attempting to make a large carpet, and later at Fulham about 1753 where he employed other foreign as well as domestic workers in the production of floor coverings.⁹³

Although Parisot's enterprise failed, it provided Thomas Whitty of Axminster, who visited the Fulham manufactory in 1755—the year it closed—with the necessary stimulus and ideas to carry out his own scheme for manufacturing knotted-pile carpets. Whitty's experiments in carpet-knotting had begun in 1754 when he saw some Oriental carpets. One in particular, measuring 36 by 21 feet, led him to wonder how "a carpet of so great a breadth could be woven in figure without a seam in it." Up to the time of his visit to Fulham, Whitty's ideas "went no farther than a horizontal loom" which for commercial purposes, he later wrote, "would have been a very spare and tedious way of working." This "difficulty" was "removed" after seeing the manufactory at Fulham.⁹⁴

Presumably Parisot's looms were vertical like the ones used in the Near East, because this was the way Whitty set up his own looms. The carpets at Axminster "are wrought in perpendicular looms, by

females, whose fingers move with a velocity beyond the power of the eye to follow," noted Samuel Curwen, an American who, in 1777, saw the workshop some 22 years after Thomas Whitty had begun his first knotted-pile carpet.⁹⁵ Some idea of how the manufactory was run and the carpets made at Axminster is provided by Mrs. Abigail Adams, who visited Whitty's workshop during her husband's appointment as American minister to England. In a letter addressed to her sister and dated September 15, 1778, the future mistress of the White House wrote:

It [Axminster] is a small place, but has two manufactures of note; one of carpets, and one of tapes; both of which we visited. The manufactory of the carpets is wholly performed by women and children. You would have been surprised to see in how ordinary a building this rich manufactory was carried on. A few glass windows in some of our barns would be equal to it. They have but two prices for their carpets woven here; the one is eighteen shillings, and the other twenty-four, a square yard. They are woven of any dimensions you please, and without a seam. The colors are most beautiful, and the carpets very durable.⁹⁶

Writing in her diary on July 26 at the time of the visit, Mrs. Adams was more explicit about the quality and appearance of Axminsters. "The carpets are equally durable with the Turkey, but surpass them in colours and figure."⁹⁷

At the same time that Whitty was beginning to weave carpets at Axminster, a number of other people were also attempting the commercial manufacture of knotted-pile carpets in England. The infant industry soon received recognition as well as encouragement because in 1756 the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce offered premiums for the best carpets measuring not less than 15 by 12 feet made after the manner of Turkish carpets, that is, using the knotting technique. The winners were the principal makers of knotted-pile carpets in England, Thomas Moore of Moorfields in 1757, Claude Passavant of Exeter in 1758, and Thomas Whitty of Axminster with whom the

⁹² KENDRICK, op. cit. (footnote 52), pp. 139-141.

⁹³ PETER PARISOT, *An Account of the New Manufactory of Tapestry and of Carpets* (London, 1753). Quoted in C. E. C. TATTERSALL, *A History of British Carpets* (Benfleet, England: F. Lewis, Ltd., 1934), pp. 60-62.

⁹⁴ Thomas Whitty's recollections written in 1790. In JAMES HINE, "The Origin of Axminster Carpets," *Reports and Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature, and Art* (1889), vol. 21, pp. 331-37.

⁹⁵ *The Journal and Letters of Samuel Curwen, An American in England, from 1775 to 1783*, edit. George Atkinson Ward (4th ed.; Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1864), p. 172.

⁹⁶ Letter from Mrs. Abigail Adams, London, to Mrs. Mary Cranch, Braintree, Mass., Sept. 15, 1787. In *The Letters of Mrs. Adams*, op. cit. (footnote 33), p. 332.

⁹⁷ *Abigail Adams' Diary of a Tour from London to Plymouth, 20-28 July 1787*. In *The Adams Papers*, op. cit. (footnote 20), vol. 3, p. 206.

premiums were shared both years. The moderate prices, as well as the quality of Whitty's carpets, in contrast to those asked by his competitors, once again made him a winner in 1759, the last year premiums were offered.⁹⁸ No doubt this acknowledgment of his work coupled with the reasonable prices of his products accounted for the success of the Axminster enterprise, which was run by the family until 1835 when the firm was dissolved. The success of the workshop can also be measured by the fact that the name Axminster came to be synonymous with knotted-pile carpets wherever manufactured. Although the name is still used today, Axminsters are no longer hand-knotted carpets, but rather a machine-made complex fabric resembling them. The structure of various other types of floor coverings also was changed by power weaving in the 19th century. It is well to remember, therefore, that present-day carpets with the same name as those described in this study and with a similar appearance might be quite different in construction.

Whatever their place of manufacture may have been, the carpets described as Axminster in the advertisement for a sale of "elegant and valuable household furniture" that appeared in the *New-York Gazette and the Weekly Mercury* of June 29, 1772, would have had a knotted-pile surface. The identical construction also would have characterized the "elegant Axminster carpet" listed in a public-auction sale notice in the same newspaper on October 6, 1777, as well as the "1 elegant Axminster carpet" belonging to Governor Penn that was offered for sale with his other Philadelphia-household goods in 1788. That these or any other carpets of the same name owned by Americans may have been made at Axminster in Whitty's workshop is of course possible, especially in view of the fact that at least one "name" carpet, an example of Thomas Moore's weaving, is known to have been used in this country. Describing Mr. Bingham's residence where he was invited to dinner during his Philadelphia visit in 1794, the Englishman Henry Wansley wrote: "I found a magnificent house and gardens in the best English style, with elegant and even superb furniture. The chairs of the drawing room were from Seddons's in London, of the newest taste; the back in the form of a lyre, with festoons of crimson and yellow silk. The curtains

of the room a festoon of the same. The carpet one of Moore's most expensive patterns."⁹⁹

Extant examples of Moore's as well as Whitty's and Passavant's work reflect the fashion at the time for floral and Greco-Roman motifs. In addition, these firms made carpets that resembled Oriental rugs not only in their construction but also in their appearance. In 1768 during a visit to the carpet manufactory at Moorfields, Lady Mary Coke reported that besides the "several different kinds" of carpets made by Thomas Moore, presumably of his own design, "there are other kinds that are made like the persian, look quite as well."¹⁰⁰ At Axminster a similar situation was observed by Samuel Curwen in 1777 when he visited Thomas Whitty's manufactory. "Here is also wrought, besides his own, of a peculiar construction, Turkey carpet, so very like in figure, color, and thickness, as not to be distinguished from the genuine article."¹⁰¹ Clearly, Oriental carpets, no matter where they were made, in the 18th century were just as much a part of the current fashion picture in underfoot furnishings as were the newest creations of the day.

Fine carpets, no less than the other elegant furnishings made for the house, mirror the general stylistic trends of the 18th century. For example, the patterns of Passavant's signed and dated carpets of the late 1750's, though elaborate and somewhat heavy, are made up of scrolls, shells, foliated motifs, and flowers associated with rococo style. Carpets of a later date attributed to Axminster have delicate medallions, ribbons, and floral bouquets, baskets, and garlands arranged in restrained designs that show the influence of the Greco-Roman taste. The quintessence of the neo-classic style, however, is seen in carpets made by Thomas Moore. He is usually associated with this style because of his collaboration with the famous English architect-decorator, Robert Adam, whose designs of precisely arranged circular and octagonal paterac, bellflower swags and wreaths, with anthic-

⁹⁸ TATTERSALL, op. cit. (footnote 93), pp. 62-63.

⁹⁹ HENRY WANSEY, *The Journal of an Excursion to the United States of North America, in the Summer of 1794* (Salisbury, England: J. Easton, 1796), p. 136.

¹⁰⁰ Lady Mary Coke, quoted in TATTERSALL, op. cit. (footnote 93), p. 64.

¹⁰¹ *The Journal and Letters of Samuel Curwen*, loc. cit. (footnote 95).

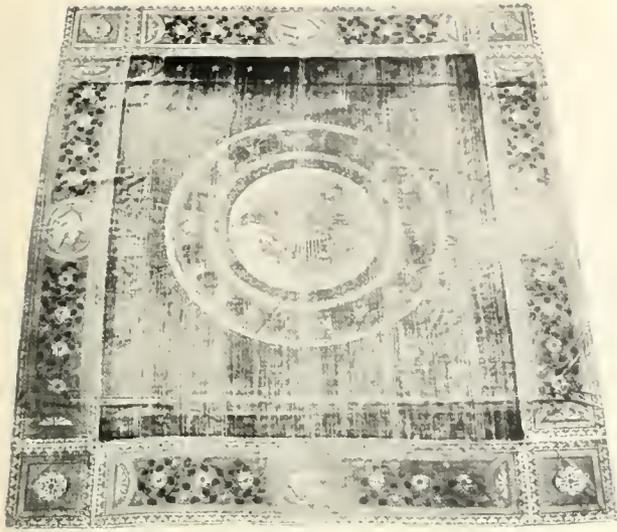


Figure 20.—WILTON-TYPE CARPET, measuring approximately 17½ by 15½ feet. The color scheme is brown, cream, orange, and gold, with red and white for the striped shield displayed on the breast of the eagle in the center medallion. (USNM 181747; Smithsonian photo 63477.)

mion, Greek-key, and guilloche borders were transformed into carpets at the Moorfields manufactory.¹⁰²

Perhaps a neoclassic design characterized the carpet Wansley saw in Mr. Bingham's Philadelphia residence. This does not seem improbable because the carpet was described as "one of Moore's most expensive patterns." Mr. Bingham's awareness of current fashions as indicated by his choice of furniture from one of London's most stylish furniture showrooms, Seddon's, further suggests that the carpet was probably an example of the newest taste in underfoot furnishings then in vogue in England.

Had he wanted to, Mr. Bingham could have had an equally tasteful Axminster-type carpet made in Philadelphia and at the same time been in step with other eminent and style-setting Americans who were encouraging domestic manufactories. This is what the more patriotic but no less fashion-conscious George Washington had done. The floor of the large dining room in the President's Philadelphia residence was covered with a carpet made by William Peter Sprague,

proprietor of the Philadelphia Carpet Manufactory. Washington's account books as well as the contemporary newspaper report mentioned here provide proof of this. Entries in the President's account books on April 1, 1791, record payments to Sprague "for a Carpet made by him for the large dining room," and again on April 24 for the same carpet "in the large dining Room."¹⁰³

At one time the large and handsome carpet with a central motif resembling The Great Seal of the United States (fig. 20), on loan to the United States National Museum from The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of The Union, was mistakenly attributed to Sprague and identified as the one mentioned above which was made for the dining room of the President's house in Philadelphia. The carpet, however, is neither an Axminster nor an ingrain, the two kinds produced at the Philadelphia Carpet Manufactory. Although most of the pile is worn away making it very difficult to see the structure, during a recent examination of the carpet it was possible to determine that it was of a Wilton construction. Furthermore, the carpet is made up of strips sewed together as was usually the case with Wiltons in contrast to Axminsters which were usually woven in one piece, an advantage they had over most other types of floor coverings. The carpet cannot be attributed to Sprague, therefore, because of its construction. Although the origin, ownership and date are still in question, this carpet may perhaps provide a visual clue to some of the products of the Philadelphia Carpet Manufactory. According to a report in the *Philadelphia Gazette of the United States* on June 22, 1791, Sprague's "carpets made for the President, and various other persons, are master-pieces of their kind, particularly that for the Senate chamber of the United States." To prove this, a full description was given of the carpet made by Sprague for the Senate Chamber, Congress Hall, Philadelphia.

The device wove in the last mentioned, is the *Crest and Armorial Achievements* appertaining to the *United States*. Thirteen Stars forming a constellation, diverging from a cloud, occupy the space under the chair of the Vice-President. The AMERICAN EAGLE is displayed in the centre, holding in his dexter talon an olive branch, in his sinister a bundle of thirteen arrows, and in his beak, a scroll inscribed with the motto, *E pluribus unum*.

¹⁰² THOMPSON, *op. cit.* (footnote 1), figs. 15 and 17-21, pp. 213 and 215-19; *Accessions 1960 by the Winterthur Corporation*, edit. M. Elinor Betts (Winterthur, Del.: The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1960), fig. 21.

¹⁰³ MARIAN SADTLER CARSON, "Washington's American Carpet at Mount Vernon," *Antiques* (February 1947), vol. 51, p. 119.

The whole surrounded by a chain formed of thirteen shields, emblematic of each State.

The sides are ornamented with marine and land trophies, and the corners exhibit very beautiful Cornu Copias, some filled with olive branches and flowers expressive of peace, whilst others bear fruit and grain, the emblems of plenty.

Under the arms, on the *pole* which supports the cap of liberty, is hung the *balance of Justice*.

The whole being executed in a capital stile, with rich bright colours, has a very fine effect.

The hand-tied Axminster type carpet was usually made in one piece. As already mentioned, the knotting process made the construction of a seamless carpet possible and was a major reason for employing the technique. The desire to produce a carpet with an elaborate and original design was another reason for using a hand-tied pile. And it was for just such creations as the carpet by Sprague described above that the Axminster process was best suited because hand-tying allowed complete freedom in the choice of colors, arrangement of motifs, and size of designs. Once Sprague had decided on the design for a carpet, a drawing of it was most likely prepared as a guide for the workers and was placed in front of them or slanting over their heads as they sat before the looms which were perpendicular. This was the standard loom position for making Axminster-type carpets and the one used by Thomas Whitty. Perhaps Sprague's workshop was also similar to that of Whitty's which was described in 1791 by an Englishman, E. D. Clarke, as follows:

The work is chiefly done by women. We saw forty of these employed; the pattern lays before them, and with their fingers they weave the whole. This they execute with great quickness, and it is amusing to observe how fast the most elegant designs are traced out by the fingers of old women and children.¹⁰⁴

In the same year, 1791, the *Philadelphia Gazette of the United States* on June 22, reported that Sprague's establishment "already gives employment to a number of poor women and children." According to Philadelphia directories and other sources, Sprague continued to manufacture carpets for a number of years. It is known that when Congress Hall was enlarged and the accounts settled in 1794, a payment

was made to "Peter Sprague for Carpeting," supposedly for the enlarged Senate Chamber.¹⁰⁵ Consequently, Sprague, who had supplied the original room with one of his carpet "master-pieces," was once again responsible for its underfoot furnishings. Most of the output of the Philadelphia Carpet Manufactory, however, was undoubtedly less ambitious in size and design than these emblematic carpets. Sprague also is reported to have manufactured ingrain carpets¹⁰⁶ as well as, according to the *Philadelphia Gazette of the United States*, "those durable kind called *Turkey* and *Axminster*, which sell at 20 per cent. cheaper than those imported, and nearly as low as Wilton carpeting, but of double its durability." The manufacture of the Turkey type parallels the situation that existed in some of the English manufactories of knotted-pile floor coverings.

Axminster-type carpets, whether imitations of Orientals or the newest designs of the day, were one of the most elegant and expensive types of underfoot furnishings made in the 18th century. Their use by Americans attests to an awareness in the newly formed United States of the current vogue in the fashions in furnishings abroad. Their manufacture by Americans attests to the ability and desire in the young and self-confident nation to produce a type of domestic floor covering equal to and competitive with foreign examples.

NEEDLEWORK

Needlework was another method used for making carpets. Unlike the previously mentioned types of floor coverings, most made commercially, carpets in needlework were almost exclusively the work of individuals in and for their own houses. Time and patience, skill in doing cross-stitch and tent-stitch—which were the ones generally used—wool thread for embroidering, coarse canvas for a foundation, and a design were the ingredients of a needlework carpet. Work in tent- and cross-stitch had of course been done by needlewomen for some time but the exotic floral creations and imitations of Oriental carpets made in the 17th century, like the contemporaneous handiwork with a knotted pile—Turkey work—

¹⁰⁵ CARSON, op. cit. (footnote 103), p. 118.

¹⁰⁶ WILLIAM R. BAGNALL, *The Textile Industries of the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1893), vol. 1, p. 169; PHILIP A. HALL, *The Rug and Carpet Industry of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Hardwick and Magee Co., 1917), p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ EDWARD DANIEL CLARKE, *A Tour Through the South of England, Wales, and part of Ireland, Made During the Summer of 1791* (London: Minerva Press, 1793), p. 49.

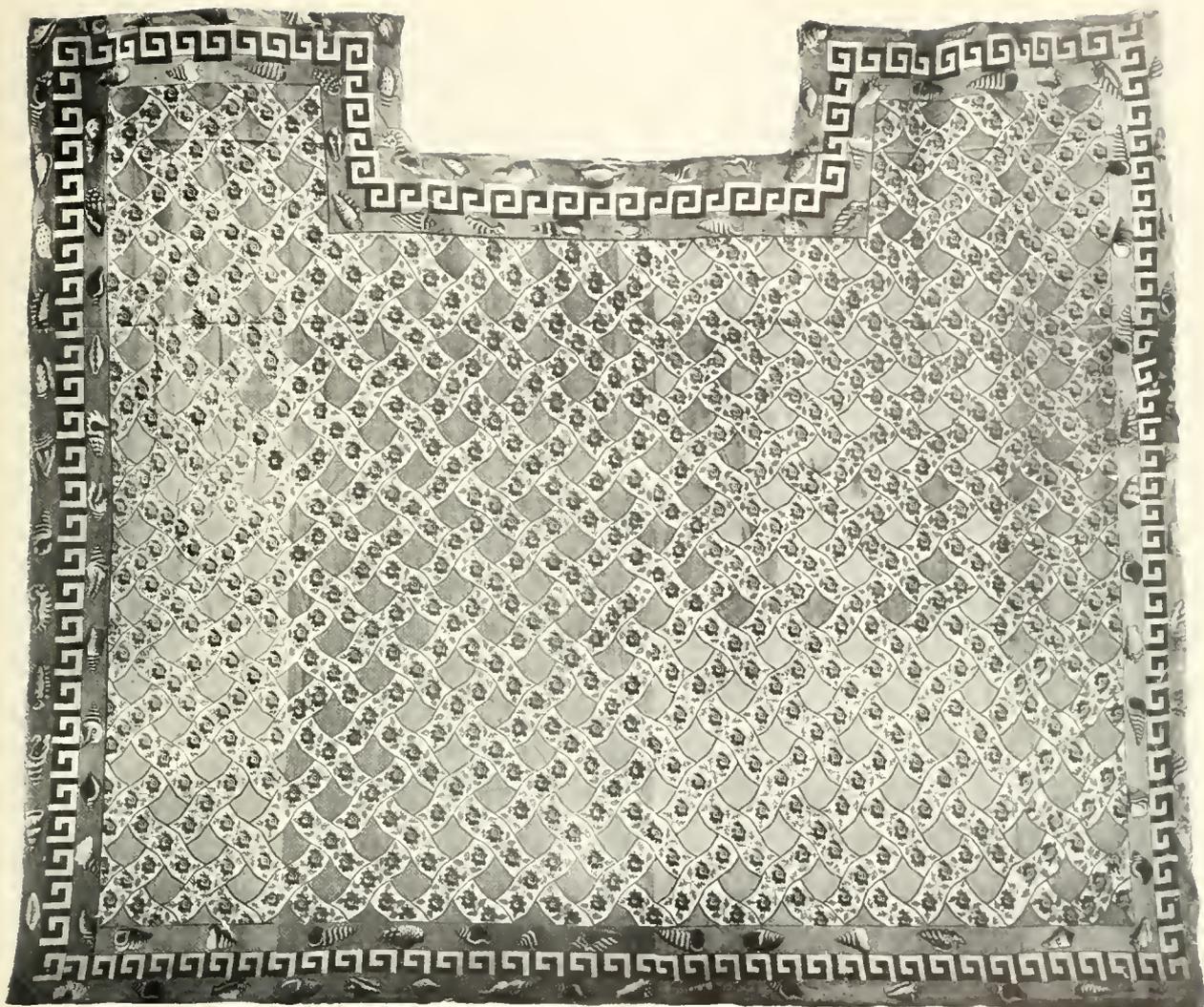


Figure 21.—FLOOR COVERING, AMERICAN, early 19th century. Brown flowers bloom on the white lattice spread over the gray-green ground of this needlework wool carpet. The Greek-key border and its surrounding sea-shells are brown and white. The inset section was made to fit around the fireplace hearth. (Courtesy of *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, gift of Miss Isabelle C. Mygatt, 1923.)

usually was used to cover furniture rather than floors. Although some of the 18th-century floor coverings in needlework may have been copies of Orientals, most seem to have been made with naturalistic floral patterns often in rich colors against a dark ground, according to extant English examples.¹⁰⁷ The field and border of these carpets may be lavishly strewn with flowers or filled with a balanced arrangement of

floral bouquets, garlands, and medallions. Presumably American needlewomen with the time and skill could have embroidered similarly patterned carpets. If they did or if needlework carpets were used on this side of the Atlantic in the 18th century no evidence seems to exist of it today.

There is, however, an American example made after the turn of the 19th century (fig. 21). This carpet is reported to have been made by the immediate members of Judge Pliny Moore's family for the drawing room of their house in Champlain, New York, and remained in possession of descendants until

¹⁰⁷ TATTERSALL, *op. cit.* (footnote 93), frontispiece and plates 26-28.

presented to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Wrought in cross-stitch on canvas or burlap strips, the carpet was begun in 1810 and completed in 1812, according to a descendant of the Moore family. This owner also stated that the "fireplace rug, six by two feet, made for [the] carpet, had [a] similar border, but narrower, [the] center design being two hounds in pursuit of deer."¹⁰⁸ On the carpet proper, the field is covered with flower-embellished ribbons forming a lattice design, and the border is composed of seashells and a Greek fret. As had been the custom in the 18th century, the carpet was made to fit around the fireplace, and the edges were neatly finished with bordering.

LIST

"List" is a term meaning generally a strip or band of material especially of cloth or specifically the selvage or edge part of the cloth. Consequently, a list carpet would be one made of pieces of selvage or strips of fabric. Such a floor covering may have been constructed in a number of ways, but, based on available information, it seems likely that the list carpet was the same as the so-called rag or, as it is sometimes termed, strip carpet (fig. 22). That is, a woven floor covering with the usual warp or lengthwise threads but with list or strips of cloth instead of threads used as the weft across the width of the carpet. This would appear to be the type referred to in an 1807 publication, *The Book of Trades or Library of the Useful Arts* in the section on carpets: "Another sort of carpet in use, is made of narrow slips of list sewed together; these of course are very inferior to those just described [i.e., Axminster], but they employ many women and children."

The use of women and children in this branch of carpet making, as in the knotting process of Axminsters both in England and this country, is an interesting sidelight on 18th-century labor practices in the field of floor coverings. Although carpet weaving seems to have been carried on mainly by professional weavers and was, according to the *Book of Trades*, a good business for masters and journeymen, the instances cited suggest that certain tasks were considered to be women's and children's work almost from the inception of the industry.

¹⁰⁸ CORNELIA BATEMAN FARADAY, *European and American Carpets and Rugs* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: The Dean-Hicks Co., 1929), pp. 278-79.

That underfoot furnishings made of list were available in the colonies by 1761 is shown by two advertisements of that year in the *Boston Gazette*—one on January 26 for the sale of house furnishings and the other on January 29 for imports from London and Bristol—that included list carpeting for stairs. Further verification of its use in the colonies is provided by the Sewell inventory of 1777 which had the following entry: "3 ps. List Carpeting 20/." Whether these items were commercially manufactured or homemade is of course unknown. Among the various types of underfoot furnishings used in the 18th century, however, it seems possible that list carpeting was one of the kinds that could easily have been made in the home if a loom were available. That this was the case in one community is revealed by Samuel Griswold Goodrich in his recollections of life in Ridgefield, Connecticut, in the early 19th century:

Carpets were then only known in a few families, and were confined to the keeping-room and parlor. They were all home-made: the warp consisting of woolen yarn, and the woof [or weft] of lists and old woolen cloth, cut into strips and sewed together at the ends.¹⁰⁹

Further evidence suggesting that list floor coverings were a product of the home appears in *Annals of Philadelphia*. According to this compilation of recollections, events, and extant records, "the manufacture of carpet was not introduced into this country, with the exception of the home-made rag-carpet, until some time after the Revolutionary War."¹¹⁰

Just how prevalent list carpeting was in the 18th century, however, is difficult to determine. The fact that it was of simple construction, might be made at home, and utilized materials commonly at hand, such as rags or narrow strips of fabric, would seem to favor fairly widespread use. Nevertheless, the available information suggests the contrary, since there is scant mention of list carpeting by name in the contemporary sources studied. Consequently, until additional information is forthcoming, little more can be said about list carpeting than that it was one type of underfoot furnishing that was available and used in 18th-century America.

¹⁰⁹ SAMUEL GRISWOLD GOODRICH, *Recollections of a Life Time or Men and Things I Have Seen* (New York: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1856), vol. 1, pp. 74-75.

¹¹⁰ JOHN F. WATSON, *Annals of Philadelphia*, edit. Willis P. Hazard (rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Edwin S. Stuart, 1898), vol. 3, p. 125.

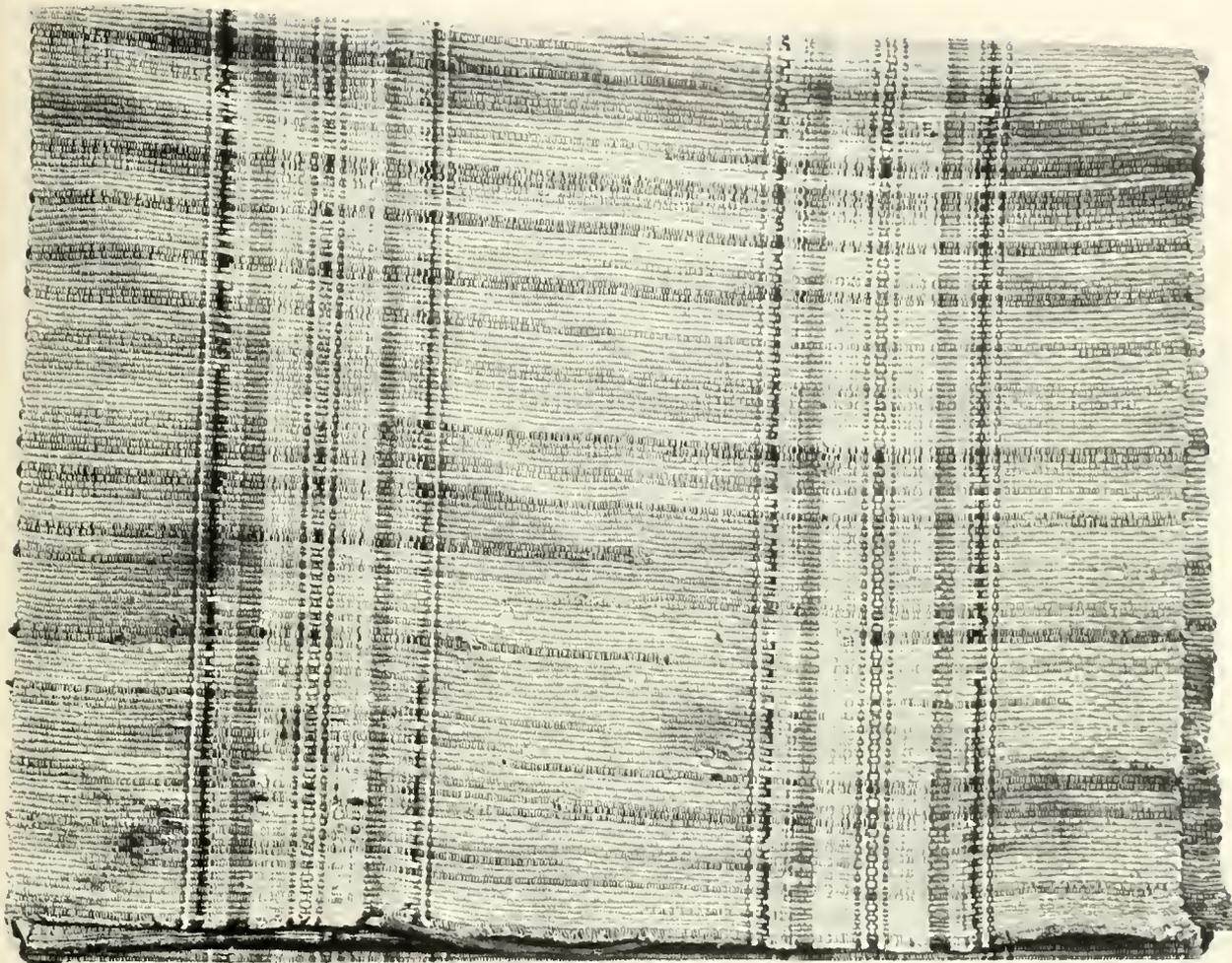


Figure 22.—FLOOR COVERING, AMERICAN, early 20th century. This piece of list carpeting is 3 feet wide and 10 feet long. Its warp is brown, with the two vertical stripes of multicolor yarns. The weft is tan and brown strips of cotton cloth. It is perhaps similar in appearance to the ordinary list carpeting of the 18th century. (USNM 393800; Smithsonian photo 48699.)

VENETIAN

Venetian carpeting is perhaps more rightly considered a 19th- rather than an 18th-century floor covering since it does not seem to have appeared here much before 1800. According to the sources studied, Andrew S. Norwood was one of the first persons to offer it to American shoppers. In 1799, when he opened his "Carpet Store," Norwood announced in the *New-York Gazette and General Advertiser* that his merchandise included Venetian carpeting "1-2 yd, 3-4 and 7-8" yards wide. Newspaper advertisements dating after the turn of the century, such as those in the *Federal Gazette and Baltimore Daily Advertiser* of October 18, 1805, and January 8, 1808, indicate that Venetian

carpeting was available in "1-2 5-8 3-4 & 4-4" yard widths.

Just where or why the carpeting received its name is puzzling. That the carpeting may have originated or currently been made in Venice, on the one hand, seems doubtful in view of the statement in Webster's *An Encyclopaedia of Domestic Economy* that "it is not known that what we call Venetian carpeting was ever made in Venice." On the other hand, however, Thomas Sheraton in his *Cabinet Dictionary* says that Venetian carpet was one of the "sorts, which have their names from the places where they are manufactured." As to its appearance, however, there is less doubt. "Venetian carpet" is described

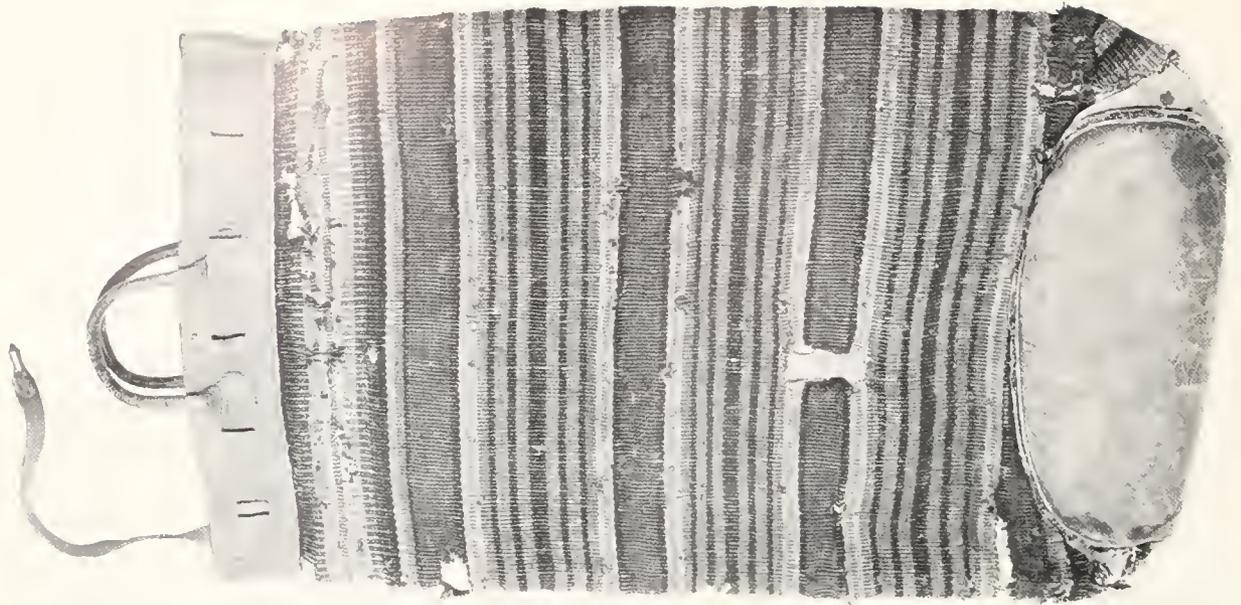


Figure 23.—VENETIAN CARPETING, leather-trimmed mail sack, American, early 19th century. The distinctive Venetian carpeting sold for covering floors was so durable that it was also used for mail sacks such as this one used on the route opened in 1815 from Rochester to Canandaigua, New York. The fabric is approximately 22 inches wide; the multicolored stripes are formed by the warp. (In the collection of the Rochester Historical Society; Smithsonian photo P-174.)

in Sheraton's *Dictionary* as "generally striped" (fig. 23). It also is reported to have been made in checks as well as simple stripes and to have been used mainly for stairs and passages in the 19th century.¹¹¹

In addition to the already available, moderately priced, nonpile carpeting, ingrain, the appearance of Venetian carpeting on the American market in the late 18th century forecast the increasing use of floor coverings and the developments in techniques and machinery for their manufacture that were to occur in the early decades of the 19th century.

SAND

Sand, too, served as an underfoot furnishing in 18th-century American houses. Among the reminiscences that were collected and recorded by John F. Watson in his book *Annals of Philadelphia* was one of a lady who spoke of "things as they were before the war of Independence." In reference to households at that time, she recalled that although a carpet was

sometimes seen, "a white floor sprinkled with clean white sand, large tables and heavy high back chairs of walnut or mahogany, decorated a parlour genteelly enough for any body."¹¹² As to the appearance and care of this most movable kind of floor covering, and incidentally the social and economic status of the people who used it, Watson wrote:

Turkey carpets were spoken of, and only to be seen upon the floors of the first families for wealth. Parlour floors of very respectable people in business used to be "swept and garnished" every morning with sand sifted through a "sand sieve," and sometimes smoothed with a hair broom, into quaint circles and fancy wreaths, agreeably to the "genius for drawing" possessed by the chambermaid.¹¹³

Speaking of East Hampton, Long Island, about 1800, Lyman Beecher recalled that the houses there "all had sanded floors." It also has been reported that sand was used in midwestern log cabins as well as in the homes of the eastern countryside well into the 19th century, and was spread on dirt floors for greater cleanliness, where it acted as an absorbent for boot

¹¹¹ BARBARA MORRIS, "Textiles," *The Early Victorian Period, 1830-1860*, edit. Ralph Edwards and L. G. G. Ramsey ("The Connoisseur Period Guides"; New York: Reynal and Co., 1958), p. 125.

¹¹² WATSON, *op. cit.* (footnote 110), vol. 1, p. 205.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 550.

tracks and aided in sweeping. Often it was spread in decorative designs, the favored patterns being herringbone and swirled dots.¹¹⁴ Presumably, sand was inexpensive and easy to obtain. In Philadelphia, according to Watson, at the time when white sand for floors was "an important article of consumption, the old sand man, for the northern part of the city, was looked for the same as the milkman."¹¹⁵

Recollections, of course, must be used with caution since an individual's remembrance of events and objects often is dimmed by the passage of time. There need be little doubt, however, that either Watson or the people whose reminiscences he recorded had been mistaken in regard to the use of sand as a floor covering. Their statements are verified by Abbé Claude Robin who traveled in this country in 1781. This Frenchman remarked that in the houses of wealthy Americans "their floors are covered with handsome carpets, or painted cloths, but others sprinkle them with fine sand."¹¹⁶ No matter how attractive a pattern the 18th-century housewife may have created or how fine and white the sand, a floor covered with a layer of this substance certainly would have had an untidy appearance once walked upon, and in most households must have been a messy business indeed. Nevertheless, it was used, and, if considered in terms of 18th-century conditions when pathways, sidewalks, lanes, and roads often consisted of little more than mud and slush, sand might well have been a more utilitarian and satisfactory form of floor covering than a woven carpet or painted floorcloth.

Sale of Floor Coverings

The sale of floor coverings in 18th-century America was common to auctioneers, painters, shopkeepers, and upholsterers, although it was an adjunct to their principal occupations of, respectively, conducting public sales, furnishing painting supplies and skills, providing a general selection of goods, and supplying interior fittings and furnishings.

Upholsterers form the largest portion of this group

who combined their craft with the sale of floor coverings. They seem to be the principal retailers of woven-pile and pileless carpets and carpeting at this time. For example, John Mason's advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* of October 28, 1771, stated that, besides selling Wilton carpeting and sundry other items, "The said Mason carries on the Upholstery Business, in all its branches." Francis Partridge, an upholsterer "in Old-Town, Baltimore," announced in the *Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser* on September 19, 1783, that he made "Carpets for Rooms," and William Mooney, the proprietor of a "Furniture Ware-House" according to the *New-York Journal* of October 27, 1785, was another upholsterer who sold floor coverings. Norwood and Kant, a partnership of New York upholsterers, also combined their trade with the manufacture and sale of underfoot furnishings according to an advertisement in *The Diary; or Evening Register* of September 16, 1794.

The dual role of upholsterer and carpet salesman was considered a satisfactory one by some men even when the locality of their business was not so satisfactory. This may explain why in 1799, C. Alder, associated with Philadelphia in prior newspaper notices, advertised in the *New-York Gazette and General Advertiser* of May 13 as "upholsterer, Paper Hanger" and retailer of "a great variety of . . . Carpeting" at No. 67 Maiden Lane, New York City. Although Alder continued to combine his craft skills with the sale of floor coverings, he apparently had left Philadelphia where, according to the *Federal Gazette* on November 16 of that year, another upholsterer was supplying the city's floor-covering needs in the form of "brass and iron rods and staples for stairs" in addition to the usual selection of carpets and carpeting.

Painters were another craft group often associated with underfoot furnishings. They usually applied their skills to the manufacture and sale of painted floorcloths as well as to painting coaches, houses, and signs.

Shopkeepers also sold coverings for floors along with a general miscellany of merchandise. An advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette* of October 15, 1767, announced the sale of "all sorts of dry goods," along with currants, figs, and almonds as well as "sugars of all sorts, carpets and carpeting of all sizes." Carpeting also was found among the general assortment of goods "imported by the last arrival from London" that Andrew Van Tuyl and Son listed in the *Daily Advertiser* of April 6, 1796, for sale in their New York store. In addition, floor coverings also could be obtained

¹¹⁴ ESTHER STEVENS FRASER, "Some Colonial and Early American Decorative Floors," *Antiques* (April 1931), vol. 19, p. 296.

¹¹⁵ WATSON, op. cit. (footnote 110), vol. 2, p. 550.

¹¹⁶ CLAUDE ROBIN, *New Travels Through North America*, [trans. Philip Freneau] (Philadelphia: Robert Bell, 1783), p. 13.



ASSEMBLY AT WANSTEAD HOUSE
 by William Hogarth, about 1730
 (Courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art, John Howard McFadden Collection.)

Figure 24.—The elaborate carpet in the foreground of this painting is ornamented with floral garlands on a brown ground with blue accents.

directly from England; this method was often used by Virginians. In 1773 the London firm of John Norton and Sons, who had attended to the floor-covering needs of Martha Jacquelin, Mann Page, and Thomas Nelson, were called upon to provide carpeting for Lord Dunmore, Governor of Virginia. The "Invoice of Several things for his Lordship and his familys use" which the Norton merchants received included "1 piece Carpeting."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Letter to John Norton, Esq., London, from James Minzies enclosing a letter from Lord Dunmore, Williamsburg, June 12, 1773. In *John Norton and Sons*, op. cit. (footnote 24), pp. 328 and 330.

Auctioneers were concerned with the buying and selling of floor coverings, too. Advertisements for public vendues in the *Boston Gazette* mentioned "a quantity of stout Carpeting both for Floors and Stairs" on December 6, 1762, and "articles of Household Furniture (almost new)" including "Carpets" on November 26, 1764. In the south as in the north, good buys in floor coverings were to be found at the auctions. "Two large new Carpets of the best Kind" were listed with other household and kitchen furniture "To be Sold by Joseph Kidd, Auctioneer . . . in the City of Williamsburg," according to the *Virginia Gazette* of July 25, 1771. In New York, "Sales by Auction" that included "elegant carpets" were

advertised in the *Royal Gazette* on June 3, 1780. In Philadelphia, a “public vendue” announced in the *Pennsylvania Packet* of September 28, 1784, listed “stair carpeting” among “a variety of Household Furniture” to be sold “on Tuesday next.”

Then, in the final year of the 18th century, a new venture in retailing was launched. On May 22 of that year the *New-York Gazette and General Advertiser* carried the following announcement which read in part:

Carpet Store. A. S. Norwood, impressed with a deep sense of gratitude for the many favours he has received in the line of Upholsterer, takes this method to inform his friends and the public in general, that he has now opened a Carpet Store, at No. 127 William Street, where he has just received from some of the first manufactories in Europe, an assortment of carpets and carpeting.

Floor coverings had become a specialized business. The future development of the carpet industry in this country, with its great growth of manufactories beginning in the 1830s and the concurrent widespread use of floor coverings in 19th-century American houses, was foreshadowed by the appearance of this advertisement in 1799 announcing the establishment of a “Carpet Store.”

Miscellaneous Uses

Floor carpets and carpeting, as pointed out, were uncommon in terms of household furnishings generally in 18th-century America. Stairs, nevertheless, were sometimes carpeted. The use of stair carpeting in this country seems to date from the middle of the 18th century. The practice was being followed in the 1750s by such wealthy Boston residents as Sir Charles Henry Frankland for he noted in his journal on January 4, 1757: “Gave manufacturer of stair carpet £5.”¹¹⁸

Since the carpet presumably was made locally it might have been either a woven one, such as ingrain, or a floorcloth. Or perhaps Frankland’s stair carpet was list, another type of carpeting that was manufactured domestically as well as being imported, and also was used on stairs and available in Boston as the advertisements of 1761 in the *Boston Gazette* reveal. In the same newspaper on January 26 and again on

December 6 of the following year, “a quantity of stout Carpeting both for Floors and Stairs” was advertised for sale. “Hair Cloth for Stairs and Passages” is reported to have been available in 1762 in New York. This, too, probably provided a stout covering for stairs if, as the name suggests, it resembled the sturdy horsehair fabric used for upholstery. In Baltimore, “painted Oil Cloths for . . . Stairs, of various Sizes and Patterns” could be obtained in 1764 according to the August 2 issue of the *Maryland Gazette*, and “staircloth, with iron rods and holdfasts” were among the items “To be Sold, at Public Vendue” in 1777 according to the June 24 issue of the *Maryland Journal and Baltimore Daily Advertiser*.

In Philadelphia stairs were carpeted, too. According to the *Pennsylvania Packet* of September 28, 1784, “stair carpeting” was among “a variety of Household Furniture” that was advertised to be sold at auction. Another notice appearing four years later reveals that there had been stair and entry carpeting in the Chestnut Street house of John Penn, Senior. And at the Philadelphia residence of President Washington on High Street, the stairs also were carpeted when an Englishman, Thomas Twining, called upon the General and his wife in 1795. Of this occasion Twining wrote: “I was conducted up a neat but rather narrow staircase, carpeted in the middle, and was shown into a middling-sized well-furnished drawing-room on the left of the passage. Nearly opposite the door was the fireplace, with a wood-fire in it. The floor was carpeted.”¹¹⁹

Wilton was another kind of carpeting that was available in this country for use on stairs, according to the *Boston News-Letter* of May 23, 1771. That it was used for this purpose by Bostonians is revealed by the Gould inventory of 1777. “1 Wilton Carpet 40/[and] 19 yds. Do. Stair Carpet 60,” are listed among the contents of the front chamber of the merchant’s house. There also was “1 Stair Carpet 18/” in the chamber entry. Information about the dimensions of such floor coverings is provided by Sheraton’s 1803 publication, *The Cabinet Dictionary*. According to the section on carpets: “stair carpets are, half yard, half ell [or 22½ inches], and three quarters wide.”

One method for holding in place the carpeting running up the middle of the staircase was to lay

¹¹⁸ ELIAS NASON, *Sir Charles Henry Frankland, Baronet, or Boston in the Colonial Times* (Albany, N.Y.: J. Munsell, 1865), p. 76.

¹¹⁹ *Travels in America 100 Years Ago. Being Notes and Reminiscences by Thomas Twining* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publs., 1894), p. 128.

rods of iron or brass over the carpeting, presumably at the back of each tread. Apparently this method was or had been used in the White House because Jefferson's inventory of 1809 listed among the contents of the "Store Room in the Garret . . . 32 Brass Carpet rods." When properly in place on top of the stair carpeting, the rods would be secured to the stair with some type of fastener. "Holdfasts" were used for this purpose in 1777 in Baltimore, while "brass and iron rods and staples for stairs" were available for the same use in Philadelphia according to the *Federal Gazette* of November 16, 1799. This was the same method used at Aaron Burr's residence in New York City. According to the 1797 inventory, the staircase had "Stair carpeting Brass Rods and Staples."

Entries and passages were on occasion carpeted in the 18th century, too, as a number of references have already indicated. Newspaper advertisements reveal that in New York and Baltimore houses, passages could have been covered with, respectively, "Hair Cloth" in 1763, "painted Oil Cloths . . . of various Sizes and Patterns" in 1764, or "Fancy Pattern-Cloths" in 1792. Evidence that some Philadelphia houses also had carpeted passages as well as stairways is provided by Brissot de Warville, whose opinions on the use of underfoot furnishings in this country already have been noted. This Frenchman further showed where his sympathies lay on this subject and at the same time provided another glimpse of 18th-century floor-covering customs in America when he observed in 1788:

The Quakers have likewise carpets; but the rigorous ones blame this practice. They mentioned to me an instance of a Quaker from Carolina, who, going to dine with one of the most opulent at Philadelphia, was offended at finding the passage from the door to the staircase covered with a carpet, and would not enter the house; he said he never dined in a house where there was luxury; and that it was better to clothe the poor, than to clothe the earth.¹²⁰

The residence of John Penn, Senior, was another household in Philadelphia where the passage was carpeted. "Entry carpeting" was included with other furnishings from the house that were to be sold at auction in 1788. In the late 18th century "striped Brussels carpeting," or "Patent Oil Floor Cloths," which were sold specifically for entries, might have

been the choice of New York shoppers. Earlier in the century floorcloths had been used in the same way by New Yorkers. The Schuyler's house, the "Flats," had an oilcloth in the lobby. Whether called a lobby, passage, or entry, the area adjacent to the front door in some 18th-century American households was covered with one type or another of floor covering.

Bedsides in some households were another place where carpets or strips of carpeting were used. For example, the Sewell inventory of 1777, listed "1 large Turkey Carpet, & Strip for Bedside." An idea as to how such bedside strips may have been used is provided by Mrs. Delany, an English gentlewoman whose correspondence abounds with details of domestic life and manners. In a letter of 1752, she explains that her "candlelight work, is finishing a carpet in double-cross-stitch, on very coarse canvass, to go round my bed."¹²¹ By creating a frame around the bed, carpeting strips used in this way would have been decorative as well as functional. This same arrangement apparently was used at Lansdowne, Governor John Penn's country house outside of Philadelphia, because in the south chamber there was "A Carpet round the bed," according to an inventory taken after Penn's death in 1795. In addition, the north chamber at Lansdowne contained "2 bedside Carpets" and the southwest chamber one.¹²² Penn also had bedside carpets at his townhouse. Two new bedside carpets were part of his furnishings that were "exposed to sale" at the Chestnut Street residence in 1788. Whether such unidentified items of underfoot furnishings as the "Chamber Carpet in 3 pieces 40/" listed in the Dorrington inventory of 1776, or the "3 Small Pieces of Carpeting" in another Boston inventory, that of Mrs. Mary Morehead recorded in 1777, served as bedside or "round the bed" carpets is not known.¹²³ Presumably the "Small Carpet" listed in the Dr. Pemberton inventory of 1777 was used by the side of the "Field Bedstead" which appeared as the inventory entry

¹²¹ Letter from Mrs. Delany, Delville, Ireland, to Mrs. Dewes, England, Nov. 25, 1752. In *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs. Delany*, edit. Lady Llanover (London: Richard Bentley, 1861), vol. 3, p. 176.

¹²² MARIE G. KIMBALL, "The Furnishings of Lansdowne, Governor Penn's Country Estate," *Antiques* (June 1931), vol. 19, p. 455.

¹²³ Inventory of Mrs. Mary Morehead, Jan. 18, 1777. In Suffolk Probate Books, vol. 75, pp. 391-93.

¹²⁰ BRISSOT DE WARVILLE, loc. cit. (footnote 65).



FAMILY AT TEA
 Dutch, mid-18th century
 (Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg.)

Figure 25.—The two floor coverings in this watercolor are a very large Oriental carpet and, on top of it, a small striped carpet with fringed ends. For this family scene, the chairs have been moved from their usual location against the wall to in front of the fireplace where a table with the tea equipage has been placed.

immediately prior to it. Bedside carpets may even have been made of straw; but whatever the material, they served a useful purpose in 18th-century American houses where, as Moreau de Saint Méry reported, “rooms are drafty.”

Hearths were seldom associated with floor coverings in this country during the 18th century. According to the sources studied, fireplace or hearthrugs seem not to have appeared on the American market much before 1799. In that year “an assortment of hearth Rugs” was offered for sale by Andrew S. Norwood, according to an advertisement in the *New-York Gazette and General Advertiser* of May 22. Further

evidence associating hearthrugs with the 19th century is provided by Jefferson’s inventory of the Presidential Mansion taken in 1809. In the President’s sitting room there was “1 elegant Brussels carpet and a fire rug.” This type of underfoot furnishing apparently was used in Europe in the 18th century because what seems to be a hearthrug appears in a Dutch watercolor of the mid-18th century (fig. 25). A small, horizontally striped carpet, possibly of list, though more likely woven of wool, is shown placed in front of the fireplace and on top of a room-size Oriental. Here the family gathered for tea, and to have their portrait painted. The facts that the fire-

place seems devoid of equipment and that the view out the window reflected in the overmantel mirror is of leafy foliage suggest that it is summer when, paradoxically, a hearthrug would serve little purpose. It is of course possible that the striped carpet is not a hearthrug but rather a carpet reserved for use under the table as were some of the previously mentioned floorcloths. Or, if it is a hearthrug, as seems a likely explanation based on its size, shape, and placement adjacent to the fireplace, the striped carpet may have remained in place both summer and winter.

According to pictorial materials dating from the early 19th century, hearthrugs seem generally to have been of rectangular shape. Their length was usually a bit more than that of the mantel or outer frame of the fireplace while the width was one-third or more but probably less than one-half the length of the rug. The hearthrug mentioned in connection with the Moore carpet of needlework would seem to confirm this, for it was stated to be six by two feet.

The use of hearthrugs in 18th-century American houses must for the time being, however, remain as problematical as the use of needlework carpets on this side of the Atlantic.

Maintenance and Upkeep

Maintenance and upkeep, of course, were factors to be considered by 18th-century carpet owners. Help in this matter could be obtained by consulting one of the housekeeping manuals of the day. *The Toilet of Flora*, published in London in 1775, gave the following instructions for cleaning Turkey carpets.

To revive the colour of a Turkey Carpet, beat it well with a stick, till the dust is all got out, then with Lemon Juice or Sorrel Juice take out the spots of ink, if the carpet is stained with any, wash it in cold Water, and afterwards shake out all the Water from the threads of the carpet, and when it is thoroughly dry, rub it all over with the Crumb of an hot White Loaf, and if the weather is very fine, hang it out in the open air a night or two.

Clearly carpet cleaning was an arduous chore. Fortunately, help also was available from another source. Professional cleaners such as "Baker and Yearsley, Silk Dyers and Scowerers from London," who advertised in the *New-York Gazette and the Weekly Mercury* on December 23, 1771, offered to "clean Turkey and wilton carpets, and make the colour quite fresh."

Carpets obviously were subject to wear and tear from being walked upon. Unnecessary abuse, how-

ever, could be alleviated, at least from one source, as indicated by the following advertisement that appeared in the *New York Mercantile Advertiser* on December 7, 1799:

William Carver, Horse Farrier and Shoeing Smith . . . makes patent springs for parlour doors which will cause the doors to clear, the carpets, and when shut prevent air drawing under the door into the room . . . it is presumed no gentlemen will be without them that have valuable carpets on the floors, as they are far preferable to any thing offered of the kind in this country. They are not to be perceived when fixed to the doors. He will wait on the gentlemen to shew the springs if required.

Carpet care required womanly understanding, too. The feminine view is best expressed by Abigail Adams. No doubt Americans fortunate enough to have floor coverings in their houses felt concern similar to that expressed by Mrs. Adams in reference to the carpets in her home in Quincy. On October 31, 1797, while en route to join the President in Philadelphia, she wrote to her sister: "I will thank you to go to our House and see that particular attention is paid the Carpets. I fear they will suffer."¹²⁴ That the task was undertaken and the carpets as well as other domestic affairs were being looked after is evident from another letter of the same year addressed to her sister and dated December 26, Philadelphia, in which Mrs. Adams wrote: "I thank you for the care of my Bacon & carpets. I had much rather they should be down on your floor than not."¹²⁵ It is interesting to note that Mrs. Adams did not choose to store the carpets. Perhaps she felt that they would suffer as much from disuse as use, or perhaps she wanted to share with her sister the nicety of having a carpet underfoot.

Selection of Floor Coverings

When selecting floor coverings, the decor of the room in which the carpet was to be used as well as the size of the carpet and its quality and color were all matters of concern to the 18th-century shopper. George Washington was no exception. As a consumer, he, too, considered details of this sort in the selection of underfoot furnishings. Writing from Philadelphia

¹²⁴ Letter from Mrs. Abigail Adams, East Chester, N.Y., to Mrs. Mary Cranch, Braintree, Mass., Oct. 31, 1797. In *New Letters of Abigail Adams*, op. cit. (footnote 51), p. 110.

¹²⁵ Letter from Mrs. Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, to Mrs. Mary Cranch, Braintree, Mass., Dec. 26, 1797. *Ibid.*, p. 119.



THE DUNLAP FAMILY. THE ARTIST SHOWING A PICTURE FROM "HAMLET" TO HIS PARENTS
by William Dunlap, about 1788
(Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, New York City.)

Figure 26.—The bordered floor covering seen here extends from wall to wall. It has a soft gray-green background covered with red and white blossoms and dark-green leaves.

on November 20, 1796, the President requested the following information from William Pearce, his plantation manager at Mount Vernon: "Let me know the size of the blue Parlour, that is the length and breadth of it, and how far it is from the hearth on each side to the sides of the Room that the size of the hearth may be taken out, the Carpet as it now is with the [mutilated]. The dimensions of the 4 sides must be sent also."¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Letter from George Washington, Philadelphia, to William Pearce, Mount Vernon, Nov. 20, 1796. In *The Writings of George Washington*, op. cit. (footnote 55), vol. 35, p. 287.

Early in the following year Washington once more turned his attention to floor coverings for the blue parlor. Returning to Mount Vernon after serving his country as President for two terms, Washington wrote the following from the "Head of the Elk" River, Maryland, on March 10, 1797, to his secretary, Tobias Lear, who was still in Philadelphia: "[If] you have means to accomplish it, let me request you to provide for me as usual *new* Carpeting as will cover the floor of my blue Parlour. That it may accord with the furniture it ought to have a good deal of blue in it; and if Wilton is not much dearer than Scotch Carpeting, I

would prefer the former.”¹²⁷

At the end of the letter, Washington added: “P.S. The parlour is about 18 foot Square, a suitable border if to be had, should accompany the Carpeting.” A few days later, Washington again wrote to Lear about the carpet. This letter was dated March 12, 1797, Baltimore, and read in part:

In my last from Elkton I mentioned the want of a Carpet for my parlour at Mount Vernon; and observed that as the furniture was blue, the ground or principal flowers in it ought to be blue also; and that if Wilton Carpeting was not much dearer than Scotch I should prefer it. Mrs. Washington says there is a kind different from both much in use (Russia) if not dearer or but little more so than the former I would have it got. The Room is about 18 feet Square, and the Carpet should have a suitable border if to be had.¹²⁸

Just what type of floor covering Mrs. Washington meant by “Russia” is uncertain, although it apparently was held in higher regard than Wilton which in turn was considered to be better than Scotch carpeting.¹²⁹ It does seem likely, however, from Washington’s reference to flowers in connection with the color of the floor covering that, as previously suggested, Scotch as well as Wilton carpets were available with floral patterns. And the request for a suitable border to accompany the carpeting points to the practice at the time, perhaps for esthetic as well as for practical reasons, of finishing the edges of a carpet by attaching a border. A border-trimmed carpet of the type Washington may have had in mind is depicted in the portrait *The Dunlap Family* (fig. 26), painted about 1788 by William Dunlap. Although neither the flowers nor the “ground” are blue, the colors of the carpet, which are a soft gray green for the background, red and white for the flowers, and dark green for the leaf sprays, would have pleased Washington as would the pattern because both seem to match the description given in the following letter written in New York on

¹²⁷ Letter from George Washington, Head of Elk, Maryland, to Tobias Lear, Philadelphia, Mar. 10, 1797. *Ibid.*, vol. 37, pp. 577–78.

¹²⁸ Letter from George Washington, Baltimore, to Tobias Lear, Philadelphia, Mar. 12, 1797. *Ibid.*, vol. 37, p. 579.

¹²⁹ Mr. Charles F. Hummel of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware, suggests that the “Russia” carpet Mrs. Washington refers to may have been similar to one in the Winterthur Museum (G59.159) which is a pileless type but rather like needlework than ingrain or Scotch in quality and has a geometric design.

February 10, 1790, by Tobias Lear to Clement Biddle of Philadelphia:

The President wishes to get a Carpet of the best kind for a Room 32 feet by 22. A Pea Green Ground, with white or light flowers or spots would suit the furniture of the Room, and Carpet as the former would be made to fit the Room exactly when it would be difficult to find one of the latter of the precise size; the length of the Room, 32 feet, is the full extent, but at each end there is a fireplace which projects into the room perhaps 3½ or 4 feet including Hearths. We can get no Carpet in New York to suit the Room, nor Carpeting of the best kind. Scotch Carpeting is almost the only kind to be found here. If you would be so good as to inform me if anything of the above description can be had in Philadelphia you will oblige me. The price is also necessary to be known.¹³⁰

A carpet was obtained in New York after all, because Lear wrote to Biddle on March 5, 1790: “We are furnished with a Carpet for the Room which I had described to you; but are therefore no less obliged to you for the trouble you have had in making inquires respecting it.”¹³¹ The carpet was, without doubt, for use in the Presidential Mansion in New York and, as with the one Washington later ordered for Mount Vernon, its predominant color was to be the same as that of the “furniture,” that is the upholstery and draperies.

There is no mention of bordering in connection with this carpet, although its use in America does date earlier in the 18th century. Benjamin Franklin, writing from London in 1758 to his wife in Philadelphia, mentioned it as well as explaining how to transform his purchase of carpeting into a carpet. “In the great Case, besides the little Box, is contain’d some Carpeting for a best Room Floor. There is enough for one large or two small ones, it is to be sow’d together, the Edges being first fell’d down, and Care taken to make the Figures meet exactly: there is Bordering for the same. This was my Fancy.”¹³²

Whether this carpeting was later used in Franklin’s new house and was among the floor coverings mentioned by Mrs. Franklin in her letter of 1765,

¹³⁰ Letter from Tobias Lear, New York, to Clement Biddle, Philadelphia, Feb. 10, 1790. In *The Writings of George Washington*, op. cit. (footnote 55), vol. 31, pp. 8–9.

¹³¹ Letter from Tobias Lear, New York, to Clement Biddle, Philadelphia, March 5, 1790. *Ibid.*, vol. 31, p. 18.

¹³² Letter from Benjamin Franklin, London, to Mrs. Deborah Franklin, Philadelphia, Feb. 19, 1758. In *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, op. cit. (footnote 16), vol. 3, p. 433.



SAMUEL GRIFFIN
American, about 1809

(Courtesy of The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., from the Collection of American Primitive Paintings given by Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch.)

Figure 27.—The floor covering in the parlor depicted in this portrait is a creamy yellow with green and pink motifs, neatly edged with a floral border. The chair and sofa are upholstered in black. The walls are bright green outlined with a floral border of blue, pink, red, and white motifs on a gray background.

previously cited, is not known. It is clear, however, that Franklin intended the carpet to be edged with a border in accordance with the prevailing mode. The same ingredients for fashionable floors also were available in Philadelphia. Among the English imports offered for sale in the *Pennsylvania Packet* of November 1, 1773, were “a beautiful piece of floor carpeting, with border suitable.” This practice of bordering carpets was still in fashion in 1803 when Thomas Sheraton’s *The Cabinet Dictionary* was published in London. In the section on carpets, the author wrote: “to most of the best kind of carpets, there are suitable borders in narrow widths.” Direc-

tions for cutting, measuring, and fitting carpets were also provided by Sheraton in *The Cabinet Dictionary*. They reveal that the problem of matching carpeting patterns, recognized by the Dublin Society in 1757 and noted by Franklin in 1758, was still unsolved approximately half a century later when *The Dictionary* was published in 1803. Sheraton’s directions were:

In cutting out carpets, the upholsterers clear the room of all the furniture, and having caused it to be dusted out, they proceed to line out the border with a chalk line, and marking the mitres correctly in the angles of the room, and round the fire-place in particular, as in this part any defects are most noticeable. They then proceed to cut the mitres of the carpet border, beginning at the fire-place, and endeavouring, as correctly as possible, to match the pattern at each mitre: and in order to do this, they must sometimes cut more or less of the border to waste. In this manner they proceed, tacking it down, in a temporary manner, as they go on. They then take a length of the body carpet, and tacking it up to the border at one end, they take the strainer, and draw it to the other, and tack it again, taking care, as they go on, to match the pattern, which sometimes varies in the whole length, for which there is no remedy, but by changing the lengths in such a manner as to bring them tolerably near in matching. Lastly, if the widths do not answer in number, it then becomes necessary to draw them in at that side of the room where it is least seen; and this must be done so as to make the contracted widths match, that there may be nothing offensive in the appearance of the whole. That they may not misplace any of the lengths or parts of the border, they take sealing thread, and tack them together, where they think it necessary, in which state they are taken to the shop and completed.

If a carpet be cut out at home, a plan of the room must be accurately taken on paper, with all the sizes of breaks, door ways, and windows, &c. which must be transferred to some convenient room at home, by a chalk line and square, and then marking off the border, and proceeding as before described.

In laying down a carpet, they generally begin with the fire-place first, and having tacked and secured this, they strain here and there, so as to bring it gradually too, till they get the whole strained close round the room.

That a handsome floor covering could be obtained, despite the problem of matching carpeting patterns, is indicated by the patterned or figured carpet with a border seen, faintly to be sure, in the portrait *Samuel Griffin*, painted about 1809 (fig. 27). The carpet, extending from wall to wall, was cut to fit around the hearth and then neatly edged with a floral border.

This carpet with its pattern of pink and green blossoms scattered on a creamy-yellow ground, however, is not "in accord with the furniture" but instead harmonizes with the bright apple-green walls and the painted or wallpaper border of floral pattern in blue, pink, red, and white on gray. This would seem to indicate the existence of an alternate plan to that noted in Washington's correspondence for choosing the color of a carpet. The scheme used by Samuel Griffin appears to have been favored by the Dunlaps, too, insofar as the grayish walls shown in their portrait (fig. 26), rather than the furniture which is upholstered in a brown damask-like fabric, harmonize with the greenish-gray carpet. In contrast, Chief Justice and Mrs. Oliver Ellsworth picked their carpet to "suit the furniture" for the chairs seen in the Ellsworth's portrait (fig. 1), are upholstered in red and edged with red fringe and red is the predominant color of the carpet. This color plan is duplicated in the portrait *Mrs. Noah Smith and Her Children*, mentioned previously. The red of the boldly patterned floor covering is emphasized by the couch and chair upholstered in bright red. The Cheney family also chose a floor covering to match the furniture, according to their portrait which was painted about 1795. The dark green of the stripes enlivened with red flowers and red-orange leaves matches the upholstery of the couch which is dark green.

That George Washington used a definite plan in the selection of carpet colors and so stated it, and that other people, as revealed by portraits, also followed a set scheme in regard to the color of floor coverings, is of particular interest since it strongly suggests that the decor of rooms in the 18th century was not necessarily left to chance or an individual's whim but was more often based on formal concepts. Further evidence that there were established ideas in the 18th century about furnishing rooms, at least in reference to color, is the frequent use of the same color and often the same fabric for both furniture coverings and window hangings. Robert Carter, as previously mentioned, planned to have yellow damask at the windows and on the chairs in a room of his Williamsburg house. Perhaps the room was the third parlor, the one for which Carter had ordered from England a wallpaper having a blue ground with large yellow flowers.¹³³

¹³³ ROWLAND, loc. cit. (footnote 88).

Yellow also was the color of the damask window curtains and of most of the silk-covered chairs and the three sofas in the smaller drawing room of the President's house in Philadelphia.¹³⁴

Such matching color schemes were applied in bedrooms or chambers, too, as the Cunningham inventory of 1748 indicates. Among the furnishings "in the Great Chamber first floor" of the Cunningham house in Boston were "6 Walnut Tree Chairs with Green China [silk] Bottoms . . . 1 Green Camblet Bed & Furniture Compleat & Lined with Strip'd Sattin . . . 1 Green Silk Quilt . . . 1 Sett Green Camblet Window Curts." Also listed among the furnishings of this room with its handsome-sounding green color scheme was "1 Canvas Floor Cloth." Perhaps the color of the floor covering matched or harmonized with the hangings and upholstery. This was the case in the larger dining room of President Washington's Philadelphia residence where, it is reported, "the window curtains were of crimson satin and the dominant color of the carpet was the same."¹³⁵

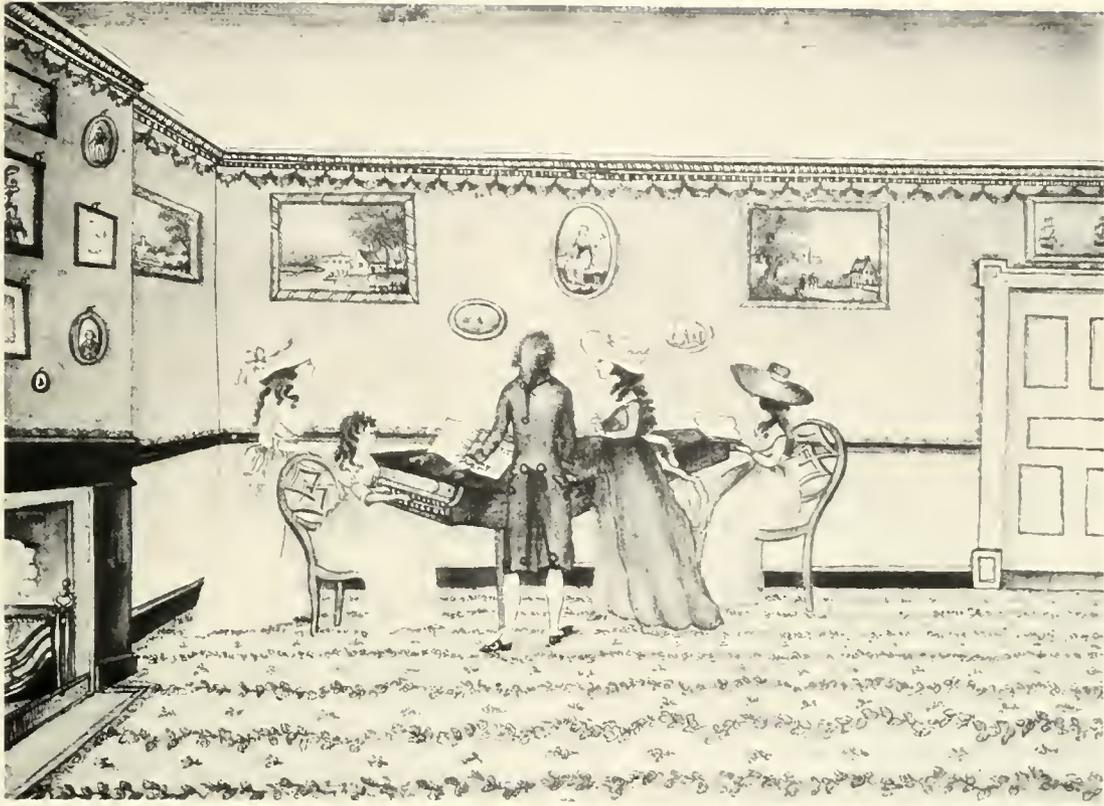
Although a thorough study of the choice, use, placement, and relationship of colors as well as of furnishings is necessary to substantiate these projected suggestions concerning 18th-century taste, it seems more than likely that conventional opinions regarding the treatment of interiors existed and that more often than not they determined the appearance of rooms. In any case, the material presented here in regard to floor coverings does point to the presence in 18th-century America of established ideas concerning the selection of carpet colors. Presumably these concepts applied to most types of underfoot furnishings as well as to Wiltons, the kind Washington desired for the blue parlor at Mount Vernon, if obtainable with the "ground or principal flowers" to match the furniture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is well to remember that floor coverings were the exception rather than the rule in the 18th century. Decorative for table coverings as well as decorative coverings for floors, carpets and carpeting were rare and valuable items of household furnishings even among the wealthy. In fact, their

¹³⁴ STEPHEN DECATUR, "George Washington and His Presidential Furniture," *American Collector* (February 1941), vol. 10, p. 15.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*



PIANO RECITAL
 (?) English, about 1800
 (Courtesy of Colonel and Mrs. Edgar W. Garbisch.)

Figure 28.—The floor covering seen in this informal study of a musical recital—the instrument is believed to be a spinet or possibly a harpsichord—has a floral pattern of red roses with dark-green leaves arranged in rows on a light-green background. Numerous pictures in a variety of sizes are hung quite high, according to the fashion of the day, on the green walls that are edged with floral designs around the chair rail, door, and cornice.

value was sufficient for them, on occasion, to be purloined and for their owners to advertise for their recovery. For instance, a Boston businessman in 1752 advertised that he had had “taken off a Shop Window, 2 small English Carpets for Bed sides.” A reward of three dollars was offered for “a Turkey carpet,” stolen out of a house in 1755. In the South as in the North appeared similar advertisements such as this one in the *Virginia Gazette* of May 9, 1771. “SOME Time last Fall a CARPET was left at my House . . . the Size of it about eleven Feet by ten, which the Owner may have by proving his Property and paying for this Advertisement.”

Such evidence, as well as letters, inventories, and diaries, suggests that carpets were scarce. This

condition continued well through the 18th century, even after their established use as floor coverings rather than as ornamental pieces for tables and cupboards.

Of course most carpets were obtained by more orthodox means than theft. Their purchase by Americans with means is a reflection of the value placed on floor coverings in the 18th century. This is further reflected in the attention given to the selection and placement of carpets by notable Americans such as Franklin, Washington, Jefferson, and Abigail Adams. The inclusion of floor coverings in portraits implying pride of ownership as well as status also has been pointed out. Perhaps the best indication that carpets were highly prized is that a young and newly

wedded Baltimore couple seem to have considered a good floor covering as valuable as a silver teapot with stand, certainly one of the items of prestige in the 18th century when tea drinking was the social activity.¹³⁶ In a letter of 1799 to his father in England,

¹³⁶ RODRIS ROTH, *Tea Drinking in 18th-Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage* (Paper 14 in "Contributions from the Museum of History and Technology," *U.S. National Museum Bulletin* 225), Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961.

Joseph Brevitt wrote suggesting that "If Mrs. Stracy should be induced to make me any present & request of you 'what may be best?' I would wish a silver Teapot & stand for my wife or a good carpet."¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Letter from Joseph Brevitt, Baltimore, to his father in England, 1799. (MS, Maryland Historical Society.) Brevitt Letter Book.

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