

Delhi Coverlets

By Tim Duerden

In the early 1800s many professional weavers, guild-trained from Europe, migrated to the USA and set up shop. One of those immigrants included the weaver John Holmes, who emigrated from Paisley, Scotland, settling in Delhi, NY. Holmes produced the earliest known Delhi Coverlet in 1833. In addition to Holmes, two other weavers made Delhi Coverlets from the 1830s to the 1860s – Asahel Amora Phelps and his son John Benjamin Phelps II.

John Holmes came to New York City at the age of 60 in 1817 with his wife Ann, sons Walter and John Jr.. A letter dated Oct. 10, 1817 from a Daniel Peterson to Ebenezer Foote of Delhi tells how Holmes found his way to Delaware County:

“...the Bearer, Mr. John Holmes is just a few days arrived from Scotland and is wanting land. I have directed him up to you knowing you could furnish or sell what he wants, he has two sons strong young men with him, and I hope you will both agree. P.S. I understand the Bearer has a little money I saw about 400 dollars”

Holmes settled about 3 miles north of present-day DeLancey, NY in what has become

Holmes Hollow. *Munsell's History of Delaware County* states that Holmes introduced the use of the flying shuttle into country weaving. Several Delhi coverlets are thought to have been woven by him, from 1833 until his death in 1839.

“Died, at his residence, in this town on the evening of the 14th inst., John Holmes, in the 82nd year of his age. Mr. Holmes was a native of Paisley, Scotland, and emigrated to this country in 1817. He was an upright and honest man, and universally esteemed. He was warmly attached to republican institutions, and by devoting a considerable portion of his time to reading [illeg.] his mind with many [illeg.] useful information.”

- *Delaware Gazette*,
April 17, 1839



Asahel Amora Phelps was the most prolific weaver of Delhi Coverlets. He was just seven years old when his father, John Benjamin Phelps I, moved to Delhi in 1802. John Phelps bought a 136 ¼ acre farm from Samuel and Hannah (Foote) Frisbee, located about 3 miles south of the present day village of Delhi.

There is no record of Asahel being a weaver before 1828. A total of 110 Delhi

Coverlets are believed to have been woven by him from 1835 until his death in 1854.

“Melancholy Suicide – It is our painful duty to notice the death of one of our best and esteemed citizens by his own hand. Mr. Asahel A. Phelps, residing about 3 miles south of this village, and in easy circumstances was found on Wednesday morning last, about a mile from his house, on a cross road, lying near the track, with his throat cut, still holding the razor in his hand.

It appeared he had sat down upon a small hillock taken off his hat and placed it a short distance from him; also, his cravat, unbuttoned his shirt collar, and sitting in a position that the blood would fall between his feet, committed the fatal act, and it seemed as he became faint from loss of blood he leaned over on his right side and expired without a struggle.

Mr. Phelps was about 58 years of age, and had resided on the same farm from childhood, having removed with his father from Columbia County, - He has never enjoyed what is called robust health, and for some years past has been subject to nervous complaints, with depression of spirits, which has much increased for the last few months. He leaves a wife and 3 children, with numerous friends to mourn his fate.”

- Delaware Gazette May 31, 1854

John Benjamin Phelps II, 22 years old in 1854, was the son of Asahel A. Phelps. He attempted to continue the weaving tradition of his father and is credited with weaving 16 coverlets between 1855 and 1860. He continued the last pattern created by his father with the exception of the date in the corner square. He died Feb. 4, 1900 and is buried in Delhi’s Woodland Cemetery.

“John B. Phelps died at his residence below this village Sunday morning in the 69th year of his age. Mr. Phelps was born on the place where he died, his [grand] father having become the owner of the farm in 1804 and it has been the family home since that date. Mr. Phelps has not only been a life long resident of the town but has been one of our best respected citizens. He leaves a wife, two sons and one daughter.”

- Delaware Gazette, February 7, 1900

DCHA Coverlet Project

In 1976 the Delaware Rural Crafts Guild of Delhi began researching Delhi coverlets in hopes of recreating one. Shortly thereafter three Delhi coverlets were featured in the “Made In New York” exhibit by the New York State Museum in Albany. At that time Shirley Houck at DCHA did extensive research and created a register to identify the remaining Delhi coverlets including the size, patterns and owners. DCHA has continued to collect Delhi coverlet registry forms from newly discovered owners.

DCHA’s spring intern, Nichole Newbold, has cataloged the new registry forms adding fifty-six coverlets to DCHA’s Delhi Coverlet registry. These additions have identified 3 new patterns not previously known. In 1982 seventy-seven Delhi coverlets had been recorded. As of today one hundred and thirty-three Delhi coverlets have been identified. Some of these coverlets have been traced as far away as Texas, California and Canada; including a 1836 Delhi coverlet recently donated to the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, CA.

