

Weavers William and Elsie Rose Collection

Overview of the Collection

Repository: South County History Center, 2636 Kingstown Road, Kingston, Rhode Island, 02881,
Tel: 401.783.1328, website: southcountyhistorycenter.org

Title: Weavers William and Elsie Rose Collection

Dates: 1852-2021, bulk dates 1890-1913

Media: Bound Volume, Textiles, Paper, Photographic Prints

Quantity: 5 boxes, 4.2 cubic feet

Language: English

Biographical Note

William Henry Harrison Rose, more commonly known as “Weaver Rose” or “Quaker Billy Rose,” was born on July 18, 1841, in Washington County, Rhode Island. His sister, Elsie Maria Babcock Rose was born on June 17, 1837, also in Washington County, Rhode Island. They were the youngest of the six children of Roland Robinson Rose (1793-1852) and Anstris (Northup) Rose (1795-1882). William and Elsie were part of a multigenerational line of weavers in the Rose family. William and Elsie’s maternal great-grandparents, Benjamin Crandall and Anstis Alice (Austin) Crandall, worked as weavers and wool sorters. William and Elsie’s maternal grandparents, Robert Northup and Mary (Crandall) Northup, were weavers as well, and Mary Northup was also a weaving teacher. Neither William nor Elsie ever married, and the two lived together in their family home in Exeter for their entire lives.

William Rose was a renowned weaver known for continuing the art of handwoven textiles in a time when industrialization and cheaper, faster methods of machine weaving threatened to drive the handicraft to extinction. He wove textiles such as door covers, carpets, couch covers, pillow covers, and coverlets. These textiles came in a wide variety of colors depending on the request of the customer, but he was most well-known for using a combination of dark blue and white yarns. He used wool, cotton, and linen yarns, which were primarily obtained from a general store in Kingston, or through the mail from mills in Germantown, Pennsylvania. William and Elsie most likely learned the craft of weaving from their mother, Anstris Rose, or from their maternal grandmother, Mary Northup (1771-1848). William and Elsie were the only Rose children to continue the craft of weaving.

While William and Elsie were primarily recognized and remembered for their weaving, they also ran a family farm. In addition to tending a garden of vegetables and flowers year round, the Roses kept animals, including cows, dogs, cats, and horses. Census records indicate that the Roses primarily viewed their occupations as farming and housework rather than the weaving that they became so well known for.

Unfortunately, relatively little is known about Elsie’s contributions to the Rose’s weaving business. It is suspected that several pieces woven by Elsie have since been attributed to her brother instead. It was reported that Elsie created some of the more finely woven pieces, but these reports have been difficult to confirm due to a lack of textiles attributed to Elsie. For similar reasons, it is unknown how much weaving Elsie completed following William’s death in 1913. Multiple sources cite that weaving at the Rose homestead stopped completely following William’s death, with Elsie choosing to leave William’s unfinished works untouched on the loom. However, Elsie taught the craft of weaving to others locally,

passing on her family's craft to others, until her death in 1926. Therefore, it is likely that Elsie wove after William's death, and that any textiles Elsie created after his death have since been misattributed or lost.

The house in which William and Elsie lived was built in 1816 by John Sherman and Roland Robinson Rose (their father), after a house fire destroyed the family's previous homestead. The 1816 homestead was the unfortunate victim of another fire in 1930, which left nothing but the chimney in its wake. William and Elsie are buried in the family cemetery (NK141).

Scope and Content

The records of the Weavers William and Elsie Rose Collection include magazine and journal articles, newspaper clippings, photographs, genealogical records, and textiles. The collection is an accumulation of a number of acquisitions that took place between 1963 and 2022. The series is organized as follows:

Series I: Textiles

Series II: Photographic Prints, c. 1895-1910

Series III: Digital Photographs

Series IV: Printed Media

Administrative Information

Access: Any qualified person doing personal or scholarly research is permitted to utilize materials in the South County History Center collections.

Preferred Citation: [item], Weavers William and Elsie Rose Collection, South County History Center

Provenance: The collection reflects acquisitions from multiple sources. Two of the pillow covers were donated by Maude Nichols who witnessed Weaver Rose in the process of weaving them. Detailed provenance information for each object can be found in the Center's PastPerfect database.

Processed by: Savanna Crowther; Erica Luke

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Subject Terms

Rose, Elsie Maria Babcock, 1837-1926

Rose, William Henry Harrison, 1841-1913

Hand weaving--Rhode Island--Patterns.

Weaving--United States--History.

Related Materials

Researchers interested in this collection may also wish to consult the following sources in the South County History Center holdings:

Rose Genealogy (library collection)

The Weaving Roses, Isadora Safner

In Old Narragansett, Alice Morse Earle

John Raleigh Eldred collection (1963.015): glass plate negatives of Elsie Rose's china cabinet and Elsie Rose in carriage.

Hendrick digital collection (2017.004): digitized images of Rose house, Elsie Rose, William Rose, loom, and others taken by Harry Knowles prior to 1900.

Researchers interested in this collection may also wish to consult the holdings from the following organizations, all of which contain textiles created by William (and perhaps Elsie) Rose:

National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Textiles Collection, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, Rhode Island

South County Museum, Narragansett, Rhode Island

Historic Textile and Costume Collection, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, Rhode Island

Contents Listing

Series I: Textiles

Object ID	Description	Date
1963.005.0001	Overshot purple and white pillow cover with orange peel designs. Machine sewn to pillow top, backed with blue and white printed fabric.	1890-1913
1963.005.0002	Overshot purple and white pillow cover with unknown pattern. Machine sewn to pillow top, backed with Pennsylvania Dutch printed fabric.	1890-1913
1995.001.0054	Overshot purple and white pillow cover with "Indian War" pattern variation. Backed with off-white handwoven panel in the same pattern.	1890-1913
1995.001.0092	Overshot purple and white pillow cover, unbacked, of unknown pattern.	1890-1913
2022.500.0002	Overshot orange and off-white panel used for draperies in "Blazing Star" pattern variation.	1890-1913
2022.500.0003	Overshot indigo and off-white panel in "Blooming Leaf" variation.	1890-1913

Series II: Photographic Prints

Object ID	Description	Date
1995.001.0745	William Henry Harrison "Weaver" Rose	prior to 1900
1995.001.0746	Elsie Rose in horse-drawn carriage with canopy	ca. 1895-1900
1995.001.0747	Elsie Rose in horse-drawn carriage	prior to 1900
1995.001.0748	One of Weaver Rose's looms in the 2nd floor of the Rose home	prior to 1900
1995.001.0749	Examples of Weaver Rose's weaving	prior to 1900

Series III: Digital Photographs

These photographs were taken at the Saunderstown Weaving School in August 2022 by the staff of the South County History Center. The photographs document two looms and a winder previously owned by the Roses. The use of these photographs is restricted, and details on the restrictions can be found in the PastPerfect accession record (2022.009).

2022.009.0001	Twelve digital photographs of a loom that was previously owned by the Roses
2022.009.0002	Eighteen digital photographs of a loom that was previously owned by the Roses
2022.009.0003	Three digital photographs of a winder that was previously owned by the Roses

Series IV: Printed Media (All Items - Object ID: 2022.500.0001)

Description	Date
“Weaver Rose of Rhode Island, 1839-1913: Last Weaver in the Early American Tradition” by George Pariseau, <i>Handweaver & Craftsman</i> vol. 6, no. 1	1954
Article about and photographs of Elsie Rose in the Weaver Rose homestead with looms in <i>Universal Windings</i> vol.7, no. 1	1924
“‘Quaker Bill’ Rose of Exeter An Artist in Yarns” newspaper clipping from <i>The Providence Journal</i>	1905
Miscellaneous clippings and copies from print publications and genealogical records	1852-2021