



Teaching Textiles in 1917: The Cushman Swatch Books

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Two fabric swatch books were donated to the University of Rhode Island in the early 1950s. The first came from Franklin R. Cushman (1870–1952), a former teacher of bookkeeping and industrial history at Technical High School in Providence. The second came from Grace Whaley, who once taught with Mr. Cushman and later became the supervisor of home economics teacher training at the state college (now the University of Rhode Island). What can these two swatch books tell us about teaching textiles in the early years of the twentieth century? An analysis of the swatch books in light of recommended textile course content published in the *Journal of Home Economics* in 1911 provides answers. The author used a material culture approach to study the two swatch books (Fleming [1974]1982).

Franklin Cushman assembled the two swatch books in 1917 to use in his classes. He obtained the fabrics from three trunks belonging to an elderly relative, Emily Crouch (1836–1926), who moved in with him in 1917. Previously, she had lived in a colonial house built by her great grandfather in 1795. The house had stayed in the family through financial ups and downs until she became too frail to live there on her own. The attic of the house provided storage for the family for well over a hundred years. Everything ended up with Emily, the last family member to live at the house (Accession Records).

Many of the fabrics in the swatch books came from Emily’s mother, a New Englander, who married a man from Charleston, South Carolina in 1832. That was the year she left her natal home in Providence and moved with him to the southern city. Together they worked on a quilt in the hexagon pattern, a popular Charlestonian pattern at the time, for their bed. They had two children, one of whom died after sustaining head injuries when he fell from his crib. The other child was Emily. The husband, a doctor, died of yellow fever shortly after their son’s death. Mother and daughter returned north to live with her family bringing their belongings, including the unfinished quilt and fabrics, in trunks. The trunks were not opened for 75 years (Accession Records).

After Emily moved in with Franklin in 1917, he opened up the trunks. He cut samples of fabrics along with others he assembled from various sources and sewed, pinned, or glued them into the two loose-leaf binders along with notes of attribution. Most of the fabrics in the two binders are the same, but some swatches are unique to each book. His notes on the pages identify the samples as homespun linen (Figure 1), homespun cotton, ticking, French percale, shirtings from the Spring of 1937, and samples from NY merchant sales 1840–1850. Several of the swatches are accompanied by the notation “HW Crouch, Charleston SC” (Figure 2). One of the notes Franklin penned on the pages provide clues as to how enslaved people dressed in Charleston. It states simply: “probably for slave gowns” (Figure 3). Included, but not labeled, are many 1830s calicoes, a gingham, a pique, a swatch bearing a British export

stamp, and an overshot sample. Some samples are snippets of dresses from relatives. From the other items that came in with the donation, it is known that Franklin took apart sleeves from an 1830s dress for his sample books and to finish some hexagons for the quilt. The homespun samples were once a patchwork pocket made of linens belonging to Franklin's great grandmother, Abigail Chandler (1747–1834). The homespuns date from 1775 (Accession Records).

Franklin and Grace must have used these swatch books in their classes for a time. The high school where they taught, Technical High School, is listed as one that offered home economics courses in 1911 (Spethmann 1911: 289). At that time, textiles courses were far from standardized (Marlatt 1911: 217). Nellie Crooks proposed content for a college course that could also be applied to lower-level schools (Crooks 1911). She divided the course into historic, artistic, hygienic, and economic; included was a unit on the industrial revolution and the transfer of textile production from home to factory. This unit might be one where the swatch books were used, that is if Franklin and Grace structured their classes utilizing the suggestions of the American Home Economics Association as articulated by Crooks. One of the pages identified references from Ohio State University and Iowa State University, both of which had strong home economics units at the time. Thus, Franklin and Grace were connected to the larger network of textile instruction in the US.

They probably passed the swatch books around in class to show the development of textiles from hand-made to machine-produced. The books might also have been used as examples of textiles with different fabric names, and as evidence of the variety of textile print designs available in the past. At the time, the high school in which they were teaching trained students to work in the regions' manufacturing industries which included textile production, especially printing. In a letter, Franklin wrote that he had intended to expand the books "to add one of each print, gingham, etc. of each decade," but a change in the program interfered (Accession Records).

When Franklin retired in 1940, he kept the books until he began to have health problems. He and his siblings donated one of the swatch books to the university along with hundreds of other artifacts in 1952, the year Franklin died. Grace Whaley donated the second book.

For today's students, and for anyone interested in textile history, the fabrics in the swatch books mark the transition from hand-spun and hand-woven cloth to machine-made textiles. The samples show the range of print designs available in the early 1830s. They also speak to economic, social, and cultural practices in America during the antebellum period

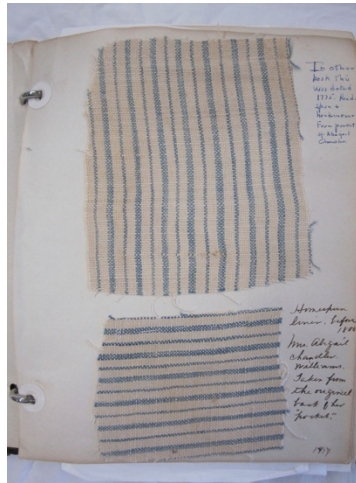


Figure 1. Homespun Linen

Cushman Swatch Book

Historic Textile and Costume Collection

University of Rhode Island



Figure 2. HC Crouch, Charleston, SC

Cushman Swatch Book

Historic Textile and Costume Collection

University of Rhode Island



Figure 3. “Probably for Slave Gowns”

Cushman Swatch Book

Historic Textile and Costume Collection

University of Rhode Island

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Accession Records. Historic Textile and Costume Collection, University of Rhode Island.

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Page 4 of 5

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