

# HAND LOOMED AMERICAN LINEN

By NORA MILLER

Lady Halifax, wife of the British Ambassador, must have been impressed with hand weaving in the American way when she boarded the U.S.S. Potomac in the Chesapeake Bay last January. The textiles and some utility linens used in the decorative scheme of the Presidential Yacht are hand woven in a pattern that is truly American, and made from domestic flax.

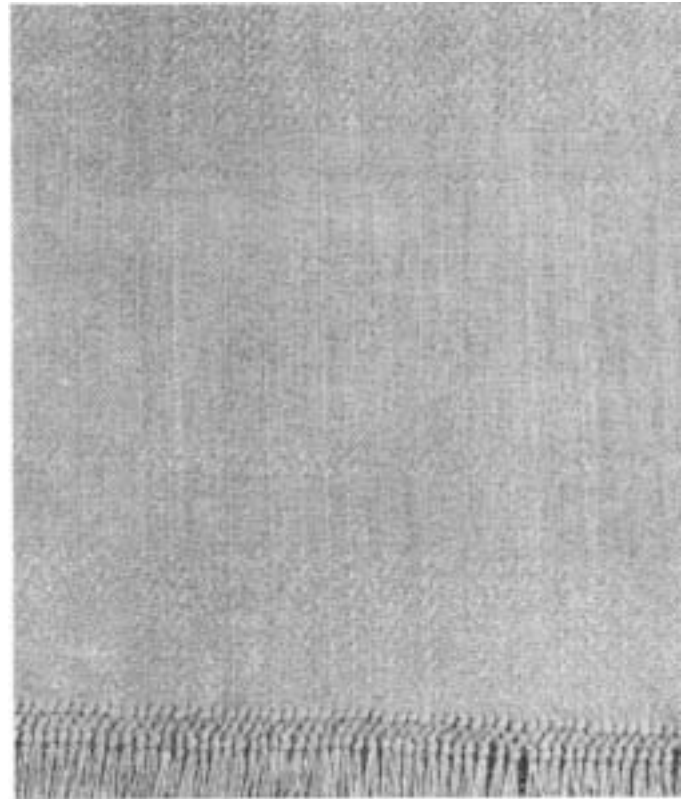
These linen products as well as others found in important places were made at the WPA service center in Accomack County, Virginia, on the bank of the Chesapeake Bay, where some fifty odd women have learned to turn out hand woven articles of the highest quality. The center was opened six years ago in connection with a sewing room to provide employment to needy women. It still serves its original purpose in a small way while assisting the women who have been taught a trade to use it in earning money.

The restoration of the almost lost art of linen weaving in the locality resulted from the combined visions of a local man and the Virginia director of WPA work for women. There were no craft trained people old enough to remember the technique of linen manufacture and little available help in books, but a man and a woman who had never seen each other before believed it could be done. The man passed away about the time the first loom was installed. The woman inspired her assistants to go forward and develop a technique, and this they did.

A quaint little one-story frame building with two rooms and enough windows to provide the light so necessary when colors are to be matched or blended, was secured for the center. Looms were installed one at a time till six were in working order. They serve the community adequately today as no woman works all the time. One loom is reserved for WPA workers and others used when necessary. The workers wear soft green smocks and move about as orderly as if visitors were expected any day, and they usually are. Sample products for which orders are taken are on display at all times and occasionally an article is marked for sale at once.

Linen making had a place in the economic life of the American colonies at an early date and probably had its beginning in the Chesapeake Bay country. Recently restored court records of this county show that planters were required to grow some flax annually as early as 1633. A few years later the county maintained a public loom and weaver for the convenience of the colonists. This practice likely prevailed until the end of the century judging from the proportion of flax wheels to looms listed in the old wills. Almost every one mentioned a flax wheel while the loom was rare. And, tradition tells us that during the eighteenth century still more weaving was done at home, with a master weaver going about threading looms and teaching the operator to make new patterns. He was contacted when his services were needed and paid by the planter engaging him. These practices applied not only to linen but to wool as well.

Work at the WPA center was naturally simple in its early days. The first year yards and yards of plain cloth in the natural linen color were turned out. Some was used for curtains while others found its way into the hands of an artist with a unique idea. He used the material for block



No. 1. "World's Fair" Towels, Draperies



No. 2. N. & O. Upholstery, Towels

print canvas and decorated it with historic buildings of Virginia. Then simple pattern weaving was introduced. Heirloom textiles and weaving books tho usually featuring wool offered valuable suggestions. Among the old patterns adapted to this work were: morning glory, E & F, N & O, honeysuckle, star of Bethlehem, and monks belt. The output was extended to towels, runners, luncheon sets, and drapery materials in colors.

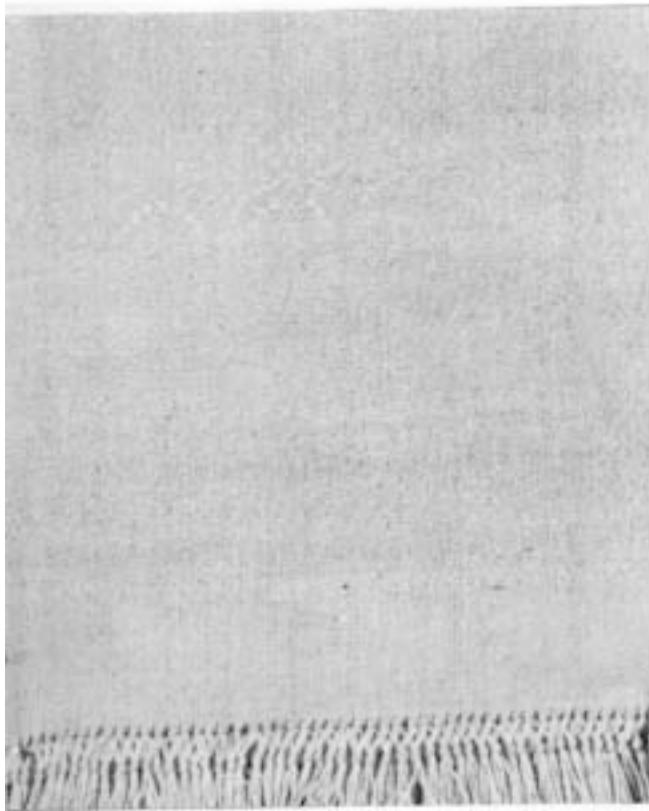
Original patterns at the center had their beginning when one of the workers went to the New York World's Fair to do exhibition weaving in the Virginia Building. Seated at a threaded loom and with the familiar pattern on her mind she began weaving when the first visitors arrived. In the excitement she made an error but got no chance to correct it as visitors streamed by all day and the next and the next. When the finished product was returned to the center with a note of apology both supervisor and workers applauded the new design and set out to create others. This they did. The first is called the World's Fair. Among other named patterns are: Queen Ella and Princess Pat in honor of state WPA employees who have done much to develop the project, and Hyde Park for a gratifying order which will be discussed later.

Distinguishing marks like the American Eagle, stars and stripes, initials and monograms are worked right in with the pattern weaving. And, each article bears the trade mark of the center. This is a tiny sea gull in flight and the letter V.

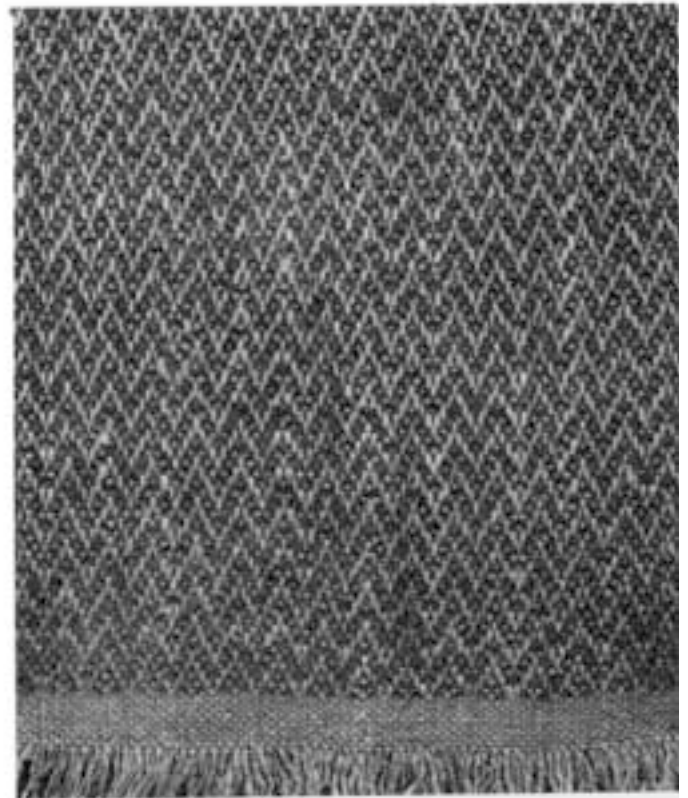
Work done by women being paid WPA wages is on articles for tax supported institutions. Among the recipients of such articles are home economics cottages, libraries, the Virginia Governor's Mansion and the S.S. Potomac men-



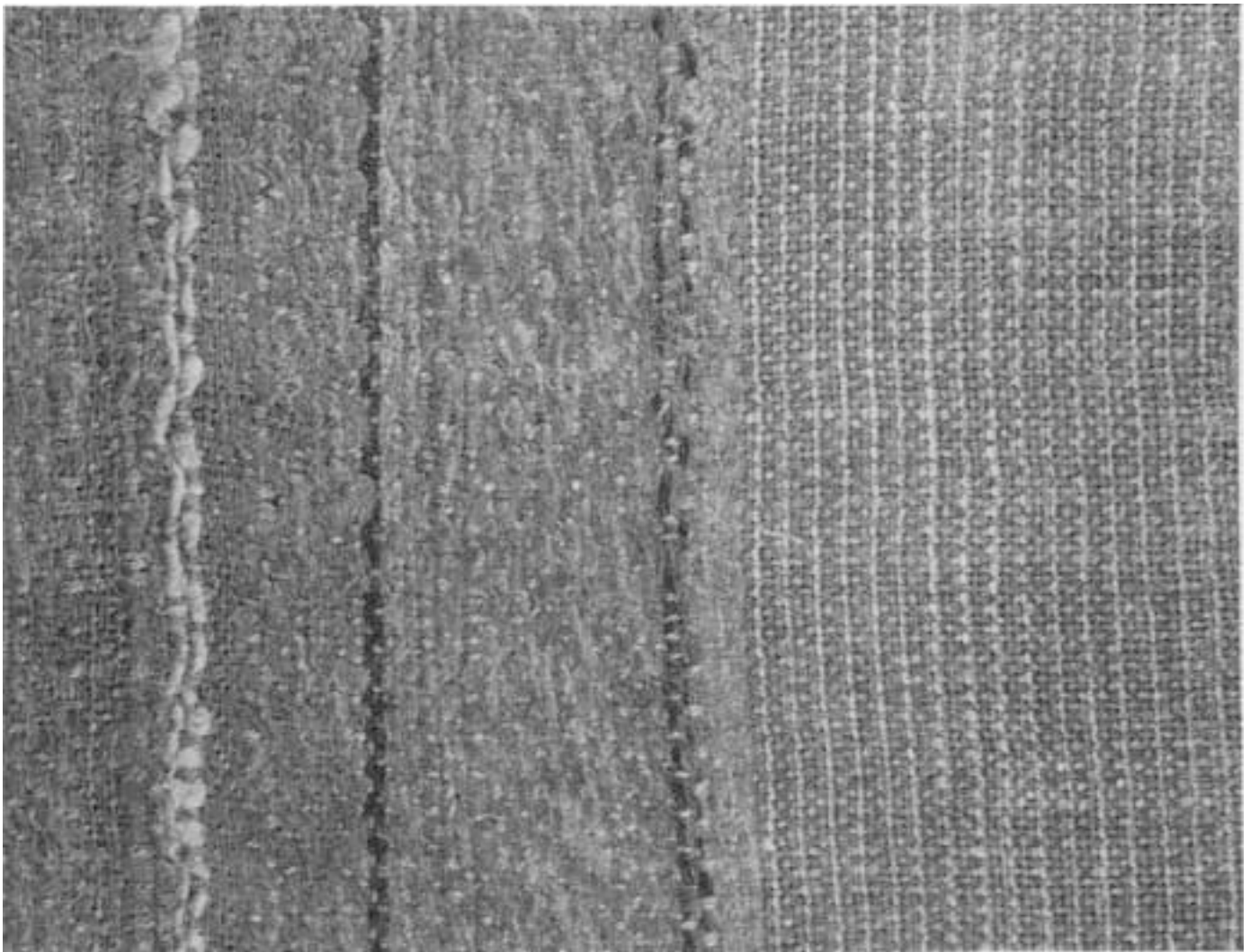
**No. 4. Morning Glory. Upholstery, Towels, Luncheon Cloths, Bath Mats**



**No. 3. Star of Bethlehem. Altar Linens, Towels, Upholstery**



**No. 5. Hyde Park. Draperies now being made up for Library Luncheon mat**



Cut 6

Cut 7

tioned above. Articles made for the latter were draperies, spreads, valances for the beds, towels, bath mats and luncheon sets. The draperies had a cream background with Eagles and stars and stripes in gold and blue forming the decoration.

Among the private customers are notables and friends of notables. Last year an order was filled for at least one customer who had the First Lady's name on her Christmas present list for the distinguished monogram was woven into some towels with Eleanor blue thread. When harmonizing materials are to be created for an interior decoration project, either private or for a tax owned institution the person in charge of the decoration gives the general specifications. The center in turn makes up samples and submits them and waits for the "go signal". An order of no small significance came recently for drapery material to be used in the President's library at Hyde Park. A new pattern was created for the textiles and named for the famous estate.

KEY TO SAMPLES UNDER SEPARATE COVER

Number	Weave	Uses
1.	World's Fair	Towels, draperies
2.	N & O	Upholstery Towels
3.	Star of Bethlehem	Luncheon Cloths Altar Linens Towels Upholstery
4.	Morning Glory	Upholstery Towels Luncheon Cloths Bath Mats
5.	Hyde Park	Draperies now being made up for Library
6. (7)	Accomack Madam Margie	Luncheon mat Napkins for set Weave No 6 is used for bath mats made from tow as filling.