

Resilience in a Year of Pandemic:

Traditional Craft Mentorship Program at the John C. Campbell Folk School

As we all know 2020 turned into a year of great challenges throughout the world. Almost every aspect of our lives was upended, often for the worse. That was the case for the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina, USA when, in mid-March of 2020 the pandemic forced the hard decision to be made to cancel all scheduled workshops and events for the remainder of the year. However, ever resilient and creative, the Folk School staff soon found ways to offer alternative programming and events through virtual presentations, on campus outside workshops for limited numbers, and through a innovative initiative called the Traditional Craft Mentorship Program.

First, here is a bit of history about the John C. Campbell Folk School. Olive Dame Campbell and Marguerite Butler began the school in 1925; Mrs. Campbell was the widow of John C. Campbell, with whom she'd studied the Danish Folk High School movement that was inspired by the ideas of 19th century philosopher, theologian, and educator, N. F. S. Grundtvig. It was the Campbell's dream to establish a similar school in the Southern Appalachian Mountains of the United States to give the local people assistance through educational opportunities, as well as to initiate cooperative community efforts like a creamery. Although John Campbell died before seeing such a school come to fruition his wife later brought the dream into reality.

Since then, the John C. Campbell Folk School has become one of the premier folk schools in the United States. Typically numerous week- and weekend long workshops throughout the year bring hundreds of students for the non-competitive learning experiences. So it was with great sadness that the staff closed the regular programming for 2020. However, it was

down but not out for the Folk School! That's when a grant that had earlier been received to enhance outreach came to the rescue.

With the assistance of this significant grant, in just a few months time the staff developed, advertised for candidates, and hosted two, one-month long sessions in the Traditional Craft Mentorship Program. From September 20 through November 21, 2020, a limited number of early to mid-career artists/craftspeople and musicians came to the campus to live for a month during each session and to study with recognized masters in their fields. The two sessions each offered three disciplines, with three students apiece for a total of only nine students who lived on campus for a month at a time. These students, or mentees, worked with invited mentors for one or two weeks at a time.

The first month-long session offered basket making, music and dance, and weaving instruction. In weaving, there were four different topics as focus with one per week for the month with the mentors working in the studio with the mentees during their days at the Folk School. Weaving mentors for the first session were Pam Baker Howard, Susan Morgan Leveille, Tommye McClure Scanlin, and Kathy Tinsley.

The mentees were Allie Dudley, Margaret Dugger, and Hannah Watson; they are all fairly recent graduates from college fiber programs and so were not beginners in their skills. The mentors were available in the studio from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day and on some evenings. The students could be in the weaving studio at anytime, day and night, and freely took advantage of the opportunity. Because the weaving studio is spacious everyone was able to maintain distance and also wore masks when in closer contact.

The following reflections from each mentor and mentee give their personal insight into experiences gained in the month-long program.

Week One: Pam Baker Howard and Weavings of the Settlement Schools

Pam Howard is the Resident Weaver at the Folk School. She has taught and presented programs throughout the Southeastern United States and has also traveled to Denmark to study Scandinavian weaving, culture, and history.

“As Resident Artist in Weaving, I am the person in charge of the weaving program at the John C. Campbell Folk School. In late summer of 2020 the school’s administration told me about a grant that would make a unique opportunity possible. In my capacity as head of the weaving program, I designed a month-long session in which the culture of Appalachia and the weaving traditions would be explored in several ways. Because this topic is something that I am personally interested in, I was excited about the possibilities of the program. I reached out to several weavers I’ve recruited before as instructors to invite them to take part and I was able to create the weaving program very quickly.

I taught the first week’s class, Weavings of the Settlement Schools. My goal was to give the students the basic understanding of how important the settlement schools were to the people living in the Appalachian region in the late 19th and early 20th century. Numerous settlement schools sprang up in the Appalachian Mountains to help educate children and to enhance the lives of the mountain population. Highly educated, strong-willed women, often from the northern part of the U.S. and sponsored by both religious and women’s groups, started most of these schools as they came to the area hoping to make a difference in the lives of the local people.

Several of these women began weaving centers in local communities they came to serve. Those centers made it possible for adults, mainly women, to learn weaving skills as a way to earn supplemental income. The times were tough, and the men often left for better paying jobs in bigger cities in the northern U.S., leaving wives at home with the children. Weaving often

became a way for these many of the women to buy shoes for their kids, put food on the table, or perhaps purchase a sewing machine to make clothes for the family.

Local women wove all kinds of beautiful items such as table runners, towels, purses, aprons, coverlets, wall hangings and rag rugs. In addition to sales through the weaving centers, the finished handwoven goods would be taken by the school's founders to the North to sell at shops and to ladies' groups.

Why was this class important for my three students? Because the settlement schools gave the women a skill and an income, my goal for this week was to introduce the students to this concept of almost 100 years ago and see what they could come up with that related to their present-day lives. Boy, did they come up with some great ideas! They examined my samples, pored through my books, listened my stories and before I could blink they were weaving their own samples and coming up with ideas to market their own work.

I was glad I was able to spend a week with these creative young women and hope that this will be a reoccurring program.”

Week Two: Susan Morgan Leveille and Appalachian Textile Traditions—Overshot Patterning
Susan Leveille has taught weaving for almost 50 years. Susan comes from a family of weavers and craftspeople, and in 2014 she was presented North Carolina Heritage Award by the North Carolina Arts Council.

“Having been teaching weaving for all of my adult life, I will have to say that this class was one of the most exciting that I have been involved with. Beginners, for me, are such a joy to teach because of the level of excitement that students have learning something new. The students in this class showed that same level of excitement at learning a new technique, structure or

method. Each was an accomplished weaver already, but all three of them seemed to have such a passion for weaving that every new bit of knowledge that I had to share was seriously noted, tried out at the loom, or sparked further research.

Having only three students was a joy for me, because I could follow what was progressing at each loom. Each student indicated that one of the main things that drew them to this four-week session was their interest in learning more about the history of weaving during the settlement days of these Appalachian Mountains. The rugged remoteness, isolation and beauty of these mountains affected every aspect of life here. They wanted to understand how and why and I believe that all four instructors in this session were able to speak to this history from a different perspective. But it could have been a yearlong study for these students. They were so eager and wanted to weave a sample of everything.

Being at John C. Campbell Folk School was wonderful. The atmosphere for learning permeates the campus. And the school itself exists because of the settlement of these mountains by many who were determined to bring education to the area. The setting was perfect and the set-up of the program was well thought out and implemented. An important aspect was the attention to everyone's safety during COVID-19. Also allowing the studios to be open any hours was a real plus for the students. It was an incredible session and my thanks go out to the grantor, the school and all the students.”

Week Three: Tommye McClure Scanlin and Tapestry: The Weaving Style of Alice Tipton

Tommye Scanlin, professor emerita of the University of North Georgia, has taught weaving for over 50 years. She is a member of American Tapestry Alliance and one of the founding members

of Tapestry Weavers South. Her tapestries are exhibited in both solo and group shows throughout the U.S.

“I was there in the third week of the session and my focus was on tapestry weaving in the style of one of the early weavers who lived in the area and who had life-long association with the Folk School.

Alice Tipton first came to the school as a student in the 1930s and later spent several decades as an employee. Her tapestries were a bit different than traditional weft-faced ones in that the warp she used was closely sett and a heavier weft allowed the warp to show. She used single interlocks for the naturally dyed wefts as she wove beautiful versions of the surrounding fields and mountains of her homeland. My students were encouraged to carefully examine a few examples of her weavings from the Folk School’s collection and also those on loan to us from her family for the week. In addition to the tapestries we were able to see several historical examples of inlaid weaving and that method was also tried out.

We all studied her weavings closely to see how she used the technique and also to be inspired by her interpretation of the local landscape where she’d lived. I found the three students to be totally engaged as they absorbed as much as offered to them about the history of the weaver and the traditions within which she worked during the mid-20th century. They spent hours creating their own beautiful tapestries in the week. Being able to spend this time with these young people is truly one of the highlights of my decades-long teaching career”

Week Four: Kathy Tinsley and Appalachian Rag Rugs

Rag rugs have fascinated Kathy Tinsley since discovering one in a family farmhouse that had been woven by her grandmother. She says the nature of rag construction for its upcycling and

recycling potential brings her great satisfaction. She teaches and coordinates activities at Nonah Weavers in Franklin, North Carolina.

“It was an honor to be included as a mentor in the program. We began the week by examining how the early days of the settlement schools continue to influence craft in the region by using the example of Nonah Crafts in Franklin, North Carolina. We saw how those women who attended Penland School (North Carolina) and Berea College (Kentucky) came back to their communities to continue the work of craft and weaving.

Our weaving focus for the week was rag rug weaving. I chose Log Cabin as a starting point because it is a simple but interesting pattern that could have been woven by early weavers on a “barn loom”. These were large homemade looms often put together with mortise and tenon joints with only 2 harnesses. By alternating the order of threads usually of two values and creating blocks a design is created such as the traditional Kentucky Mountain Rug.

The young women in the class took the basic log cabin design or rag rug construction method and were very creative with their interpretations. At the end of the week I was incredibly inspired with their creativity and energy.”

The Mentees Describe Their Experiences in the Program

Allie Dudley

“I was initially drawn to the mentorship program because of its focus on history. We not only got to read historical drafts, but also learned how to weave like the ‘old timers.’ Each of these classes provided a window into not only a different technique but also into the lives of all these different weavers and the way they approached their craft.

Much of our work involved exploring the history of the settlement & craft schools in Appalachia, community weaving groups, and the way these institutions and people affected the communities they became a part of. Often the people who became important figures in reviving traditional craft also changed the cultures of the small mountain communities, for better or for worse.

The questions of who decides what craft skills are worth saving and why became important for my understanding of our shared weaving history, rolling around in my mind as I wove overshot samples and rag rugs cut from old sheets. The physicality of fiber connects us to each other across space and time: by weaving a towel or rug in the same way as another weaver did a century ago, I can gain a tactile understanding of their experience. I can feel the same softness of wool and weight of cloth, and I can smell the same woody scent of lichens boiling on the stove while dyeing my yarn.

Our teachers enriched the history I read with first-hand accounts of their experiences learning traditional crafts within their communities. I have emerged from this program not only with a deeper understanding of specific weaving techniques, but also with a clearer vision of the kind of craft community I want to foster in my own life. “

Margaret Dugger

“My experience at the Folk School left my heart renewed and I have been weaving in my home studio with more motivation and direction than I’ve had in a long time. As we slide into winter here I’m holding close to the tradition that this was the season for weavers of my area to be able to get their weaving done. The mentorship program was a unique opportunity, and in a year of cancellations it was a breath of fresh air. I applied to it

because I wanted the luxury of being a student, studying history, taking an in-depth look at a few topics, and being able to weave for a month with other weavers. What I didn't expect was to fall in love with the Appalachian Mountains again and to learn so much about what I thought I already knew.

The Appalachian people of the craft revival period were resilient and held fast to their traditions. They found a way to make their isolated way of life work for them without having to sacrifice their solitude. In a world that was moving quickly away from self-sufficiency they found a balance by remaining at their homes and finding ways to bring extra money through weaving. A few things that really changed me during the month:

- The indulgence of drawing and weaving a landscape.
- The excitement discovering the colors produced by natural dyes brought from materials that we gathered ourselves.
- The wonderful combination of basic techniques to make complex coverlet designs.
- The resourcefulness and resilience of mountain women in protecting their families and ways of life from those who thought they knew better.
- How versatile 4 harnesses can be for complex patterns.
- Rag rugs being the most fun exploration of color and weave that I've ever experienced.
- The idea of a one-bedroom log cabin with an overshoot coverlet on the bed."

Hannah Watson

"It is a rare thing, in my experience, to come by time and space to practice craft without the hustle of business closely following suit. To wake up each day, on the edge of a hayfield, at the foot of the rolling mountains of the Cherokee lands of western North

Carolina, and to just weave, learn, eat...weave, learn, eat...was truly a gift of an experience to have at the John C. Campbell Mentorship program in the autumn of 2020, six months into the global pandemic.

Each of the four classes taught over the month-long period began with research in the forms of storytelling from our dynamic and mountains-based women instructors, piles of books filled with more stories of Appalachian craft history, and samples upon samples of textiles, some heavily worn and dating as back as early as the 1800s, trailing the scent of mothballs and imbued with early settler family histories.

The rhythm of the classes altered dramatically over me and my two weaving mates' four weeks in study, shifting from an ease into the localized settlement school history, to an intuitive responding to overshot treadling while pounding the wool weft tightly into coverlet samples, to meditative, slow, and quiet tapestry work, and finally, to packing chunky strips of scrap cloth into traditional Appalachian rag rugs in the final week.

We received a hearty taste of all aspects of the home goods that namely women would have created out of necessity for their families before the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the American south. The connection from eyes to brain to heart to hand kept me fully engaged with the work throughout the month, each class opening up new design possibilities and an appreciation for the context of the craft that we carry into the future.”

If you would like to have more information about the John C. Campbell Folk School check out their website at www.folkschool.org. Read more about the Appalachian Traditional Craft Mentorship at the Folk School's blog <https://blog.folkschool.org/2020/08/05/traditional-craft->

[mentorship-program-faq/](#), and take a look at Margaret Dugger's blog post about her time in the program: <https://blog.folkschool.org/2020/12/03/margaret-duggers-perspective-on-mentorship/>

More about the about the mentees may be found at their websites:

<https://allie-dudley.squarespace.com/>

<http://margedugger.com/>

www.hannahwatsontextiles.com