

Blackburn Family Coverlet

This stunning coverlet is believed to have been woven in the Blackburn home at War Eagle, Benton County, Arkansas. Unfortunately, the name of the weaver is unknown, but both the family and the home where they lived have a strong weaving connection.

In 1832, Sylvanus Walker Blackburn settled on a 160-acre tract of virgin land in the bend of the War Eagle River in northwest Arkansas.¹ After scouting for this property, he returned to Tennessee to get his wife and their young child, his parents, three brothers, and two sisters. By 1838, Sylvanus had erected a blacksmith shop, sawmill, and gristmill, all of which attracted other homesteaders to settle nearby. Sylvanus and Catherine had six sons and three daughters. Later, they took in eight more children orphaned by the Civil War and raised them as their own.

Sylvanus and Catherine built a fine two-story log home, complete with a weaving room, on the banks of the War Eagle River. In 1955, their great-granddaughter, Vera Key, wrote about the home and described the weaving room and its importance:

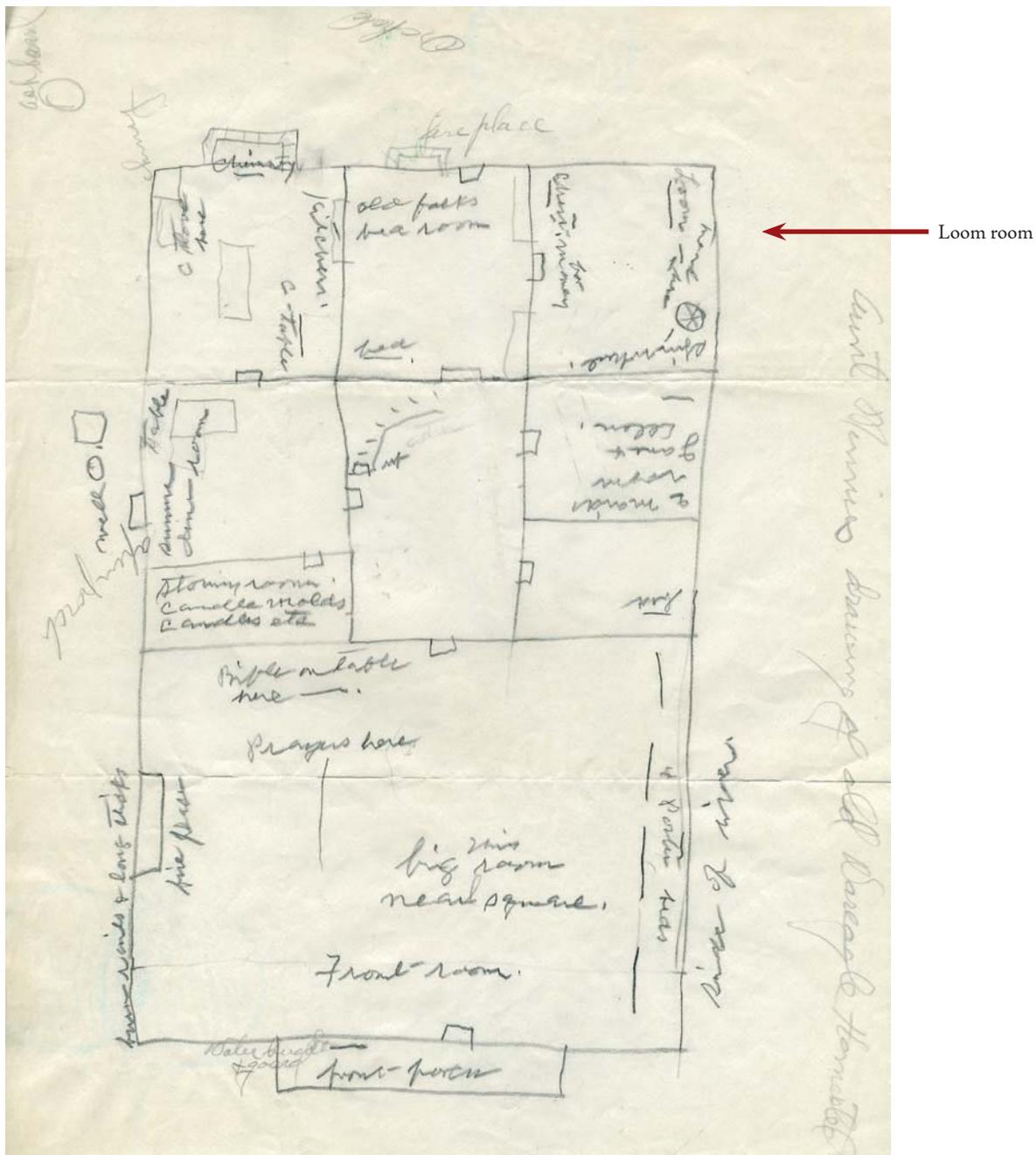
The one [room] back of it [the housemaids' room] was the loom room where there was always someone weaving from early to late for all the family clothing and bed linens had to be spun and woven in this room. I have some of these coverlets, blankets, and one of my great grandfather's preaching shirts, sewed together by hand, and an old linen "laying-out" sheet. All genteel families owned a choice hand-woven linen sheet to cover their dead while they waited for the coffin to be made.

In this loom room was also the money box. We can hardly imagine getting along without a bank today but as my aunt described this box, it was a sturdy one that looked similar to our old wood iceboxes and the interesting thing about it was that it had no lock. But I guess it was pretty safe there with those girls weaving all the time.²

Interestingly, a much later resident of the Blackburn house also had a weaving connection. In the spring of 1954, the Northwest Arkansas Handweavers Guild sponsored a weaving workshop at War Eagle Mills Farm (the old Blackburn homestead), which was then the home of Lester and Blanche Hanks Elliott. Blanche Elliott, a member of the handweavers guild and a former home demonstration agent, saw the importance of preserving the tradition of weaving. At the end of the course, the public was invited to view samples of antique weaving as well as samples of weaving done during the workshop. The weaving workshop and exhibition led to the creation of the famed War Eagle Arts and Crafts Fair in the fall of 1954. In later years, weaving classes were taught in Blackburn house and on the grounds of War Eagle Farm as part of an annual arts and crafts seminar.

Sylvanus and Catherine Blackburn, circa 1870. *Ada Lee Shook Collection* (S-85-323-36).



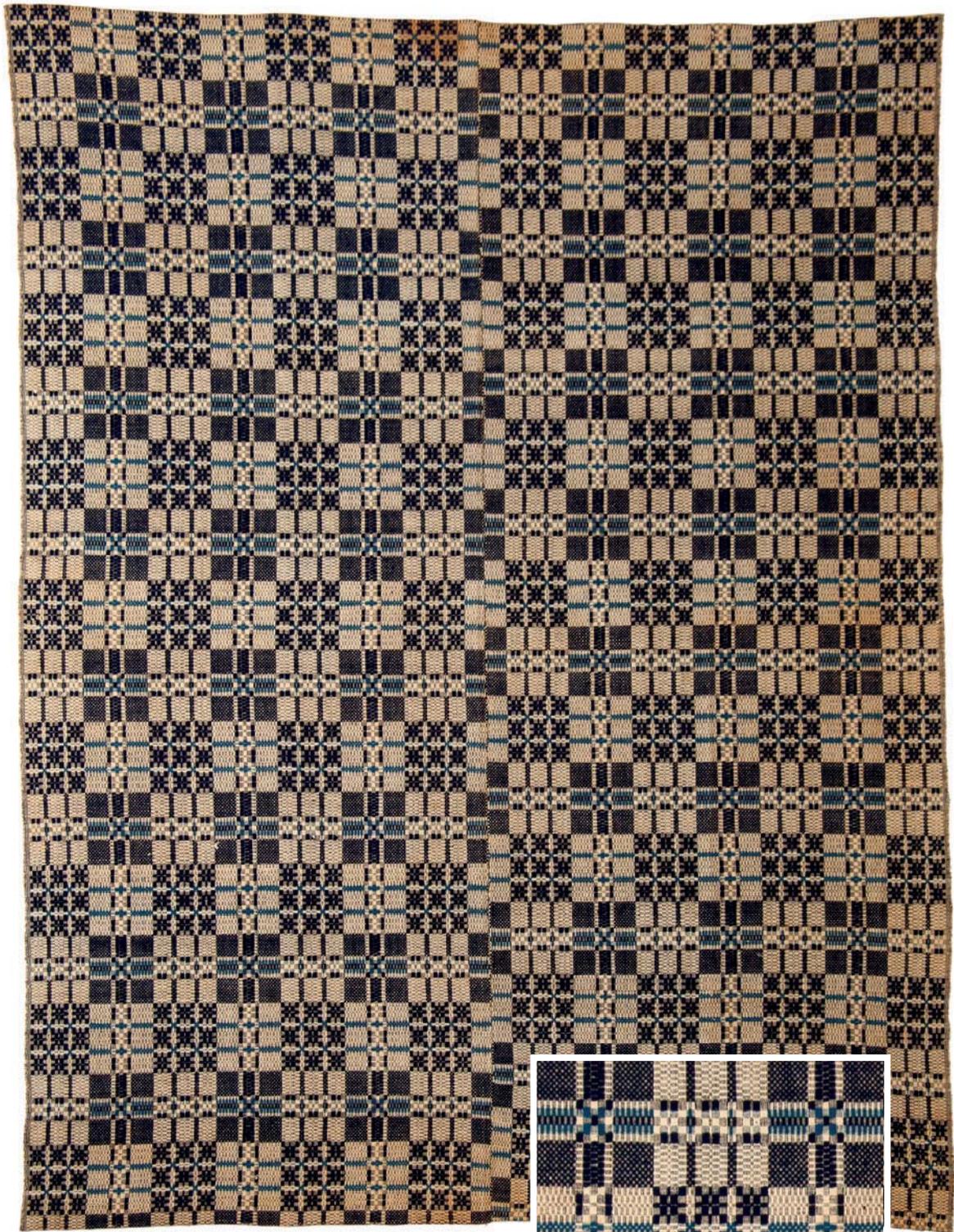


BLACKBURN COVERLET

This impeccably woven coverlet uses two shades of blue: the traditional dark indigo blue for the primary pattern weft and a brighter peacock blue for small accents. The combination gives a depth to the design.

This pattern is a variation of several known patterns. The three-by-three grid of stars is very like Sweet Briar Beauty, while the table motif is similar to a version of Federal City and Rose in the Wilderness. Except for the reduced number of stars, or snowballs, the Blackburn coverlet pattern is most like Forty-nine Snowballs and Window Sash Table.

House plan of the Sylvanus and Catherine Blackburn house as it looked in the mid-1800s, drawn in the 1950s by Minnie Blackburn Smith, granddaughter of Sylvanus and Catherine Blackburn. Note the loom room in the upper right corner. *Ada Lee Shook Collection.*



Blackburn Coverlet

85 inches x 65 inches.

Two panels, handsewn center seam.

Warp and tabby weft: z spun, singles, cotton.

Pattern weft: z spun, singles, wool, indigo blue and
lighter peacock blue.

See drawdown on page 144.

Ada Lee Shook Collection (S-93-102-1).

