

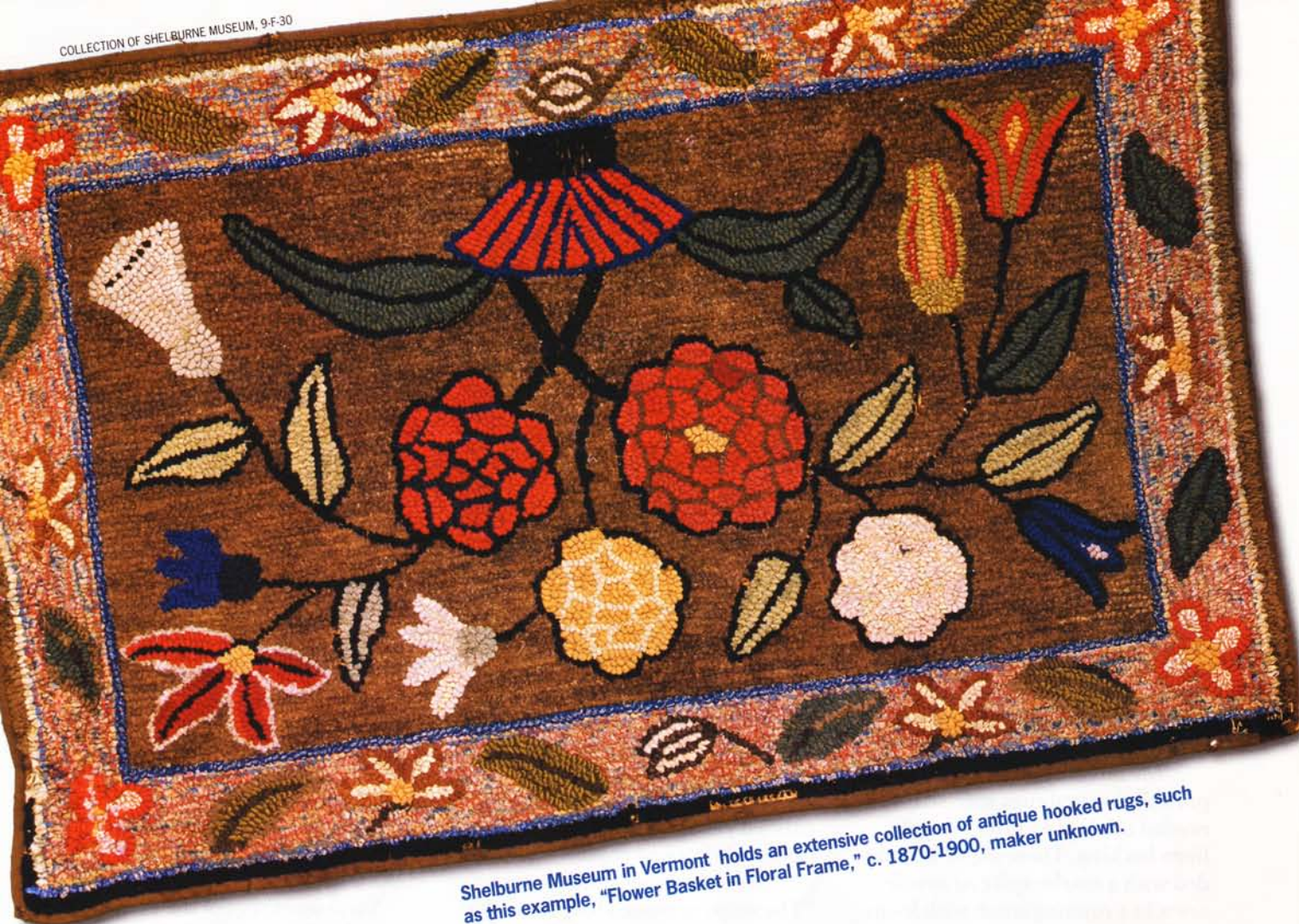
Primitive Hooked Rugs

BY EDYTH C. O'NEILL AND GREGORY LEFEVER

RIDING A NEW WAVE OF POPULARITY AKIN TO QUILTING, RUG HOOKING ATTRACTS TEXTILE FANS LOOKING TO BRING WARMTH AND A TOUCH OF WHIMSY INTO THEIR HOMES, INCLUDING THE SIX MAKERS PROFILED HERE.

Nina Fletcher Little collected and researched rugs, narrowing the definition of a true hooked rug. She displayed rugs on walls, floors, beds, and tabletops throughout her Massachusetts home, Cogswell's Grant, now a property of Historic New England. At the foot of the bed in the southeast guest room is a rectangular rug with a central floral motif, c. 1880-1910, maker unknown. The rug at right dates between 1880 and 1900, also by an unknown maker. Other rugs can be seen in the hallway.





Shelburne Museum in Vermont holds an extensive collection of antique hooked rugs, such as this example, "Flower Basket in Floral Frame," c. 1870-1900, maker unknown.

Like loops of wool pulled through burlap backing, rug hooking's popularity has risen and fallen since its introduction in the mid-1800s. It currently rides a crest of how-to manuals, kits, patterns, and classes that carry its wide appeal to women—and men—in all walks of life.

In the mid-1800s, housewives with meager means turned discarded scraps of clothing into colorful hooked rugs that brought beauty and welcome warmth to their homes. As Americans grew wealthier, hooking fell into disfavor because of its association with poverty, until the Colonial Revival in the early 20th Century, when interest in rug hooking again surged and then faded. It survived much of the last century thanks to a few exceptional women who brought unique visions to the art, though for decades it remained a specialized

niche in the textile world.

Rug hooking has experienced a sea change in the past thirty years, however. Hobbyists began picking up their hooks out of enjoyment rather than need, while collectors grew to appreciate the naïve quality of 19th-Century designs. Like quilting, rug hooking took on new life as hookers returned to the colorful, whimsical, artistically independent techniques and designs that characterize the rugs as folk art.

TWO BIRTHS

Historians divide into two camps when viewing the history of rug hooking. A broad approach sees an ancestry dating back millennia. A narrower view restricts its origins to 19th-Century North America—considering it an indigenous folk art.

Writing in the early 20th Century and a key contributor to that era's renewed interest in rug hook-

ing, noted American architect and scholar William Winthrop Kent traced the art back to the 3rd Century A.D., when Coptic Egyptians made mats with "loops of colored wool left standing above the surface of the basic material."

He found other ancestors in textile scraps from medieval Spain and France but most notably with the sea-faring Vikings, citing remnants of hooked textiles recovered from early Norwegian tombs. Vikings, the theory goes, brought hooked textiles to northern Britain.

In 17th-Century England, workers in the expanding number of carpet mills made their own floor mats and rough bed rugs from leftover scraps of carpet yarn instead of purchasing the expensive carpets their employers produced. They prodded these leftover scraps or "thrums" through a backing with a pointed spike or prod.



GAIN ASHORTH COLLECTION AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM, NEW YORK. PROMISED GIFT OF ELIZABETH IRWIN, AND MARK WARREN, P.213981.

This c. 1885 hooked rug, signed with the initials "M.M.," combines elements of folk art designs and geometric patterns often found on early rugs.

Meanwhile, English sailors purportedly created rugs with strips of raveled cloth or rope on a rough linen backing. These might be prodded with a marlin spike or needle sewn in a running stitch with loops left high, or perhaps hooked.

If the heavy proddy mats of England and Scandinavia provided the antecedent, these assorted rug-making techniques came together in a most colorful way in the late 1700s as English settlers and sailors put down roots along the Atlantic coast.

However, this loosely knit historical view of rug hooking's lineage fell out of favor later in the 20th Century when more in-depth scholarship into the history of textiles produced a more precise definition.

Nina Fletcher Little applied her considerable research skills to the colorful folk art rugs that attracted her attention as she and her husband traveled the back roads of New England, carefully assembling what became a major collection of American decorative arts. In her 1967 booklet, *Floor Coverings in New England before 1850*, she explained how several closely related techniques produced textiles that until the 1950s

had been grouped under the heading "hooked rugs." She clearly distinguished yarn-sewn and shirred rugs from truly hooked rugs.

Of hooked rugs, Little wrote, "The strips remained looped on the surface, but were carried along flat on the under side to be pulled through again to form the next loop. Thus hooking resulted in continuous rows of flat stitches on the reverse, with no open spaces between such as appear in a yarn-sewn rug. The back

of a hooked rug will be solidly filled in, its appearance closely resembling the surface pattern which may remain looped or be subsequently clipped to produce a soft pile."

Yarn-sewn rugs of the early 1800s closely anticipated classic rug hooking, and with the proliferation in the 1830s of Northeastern fabric mills, braided rugs made from fabric scraps began to appear, as did rugs using the appliqué technique called shirring, in which gathered strips

Waldoboro Scrolled Floral Medallion, c. 1880-1900, maker unknown. Waldoboro rugs, made in Maine beginning in 1838, are characterized primarily by their raised designs, which include central ovals, borders, lush floral, basket, leaf, wreath, fruit, animal, scroll, and geometric motifs.



COLLECTION OF SHELBURNE MUSEUM, 94-027

were stitched to a backing in swirls and lines to create a thick pile.

“Both hooked and shirred rugs utilized cloth scraps, but hooked rugs proved to be more durable and easier to make,” wrote Joel and Kate Kopp, authors of *American Hooked and Sewn Rugs*. “They also allowed a greater flexibility in delineating forms and figures.”

BOOSTED BY BURLAP

North America’s oldest surviving hooked rugs—constructed on woven foundations of linen, flax, or hemp—date from the 1840s. Pulling fabric through these tight foundations took time and effort, but that changed when jute burlap bags came into common use for shipping coffee, tea, grain, and tobacco. The strength of jute fiber plus burlap’s loose weave provided the ideal foundation for hooking rugs.

Burlap-backed hooked rugs first appeared in the 1850s in northern New England and the Canadian Maritime Provinces—an entire region characterized by small farming communities and seacoast towns, hard living conditions, and long winters. Few homes in the region could afford manufactured carpet or rugs, providing the key incentive to create hooked rugs. Within a decade, rug hooking had spread from the Maritimes down the Atlantic seaboard and into Pennsylvania, and by the late 1800s, rugs were being hooked throughout America.

“The fabric to be hooked into the foundation came primarily from clothing no longer usable,” observed Joan Moshimer in her 1975 book, *The Complete Book of Rug Hooking*. “These otherwise-worthless woven materials were washed, sorted, and then colored with home-made dyes extracted from local plants. The dyed materials were then cut into narrow strips to be worked into the foundation using hooks fashioned from nails, bone-handled forks, or whatever else was readily available.”

Plant-based dyes yielded a palette that has remained popular to this day. Yellows came from golden-

Two antique hooks are shown with stag-handled cutlery. Such forks could readily be converted to a rug hook. Another tool used for rugs, shown third from left, was a crochet hook embedded in a wooden handle.

rod, marsh marigold, sumac, oak, and sunflowers. Greens were gleaned from mint, ash, and smartweed. Shades of red originated with cranberry, bloodroot, dogwood, alder, and elm. Blues sprang from grape, sycamore, and larkspur, while rich browns were rooted in walnut, butternut, and alder trees. Later the availability of commercial home-dyeing products produced similar shades and saved time.

A rug’s design governs its originality and appeal. From the start, rug hookers looked to their houses and barnyards, farm animals and pets, trees and flowers, and countless geometric shapes for inspiration.

SURVIVAL AND REVIVAL

A viable cottage industry centered on rug hooking developed by the turn of the 20th Century, providing extra income for many isolated rural people. But after a time, the art waned as commercial rugs became more affordable.

“The once-prized hooked rugs that had graced the front parlor were often relegated to the kitchen and from there to the woodpile. Or they were rolled up and tucked away into the far corners of dusty attics and



COURTESY OF EDITH O'NEILL

barns,” Moshimer wrote.

Rug hooking owes much of its survival to Pearl McGown—born in 1891 and still active in rug hooking until the 1980s—who learned the art as a child sitting beneath a large hooking frame and feeding strips of wool up to her mother. She launched a pattern business then published a seminal book on rug hooking, *The Dreams Beneath Design*, in 1938. By the 1950s she had shifted her attention to training a multitude of rug-hooking teachers.

The highly structured style McGown developed set the art in a new direction. Often called “fine hooking,” she favored thin strips of wool dyed to specific shades from an intricate palette. Her complex patterns

This hooked rug, maker unknown, uses an unidentified pattern by Pearl McGown. The modern preference for using only cut wool strips in hooked rugs originated with McGown in the 1930s and might have saved the craft from disappearing in the United States. Although she designed thousands of patterns, McGown finished only one hooked rug.



COURTESY OF W. CUSHING & COMPANY



Edyth O'Neill's designs are characterized by a strong contrast between the central motif and the background as well as her use of muted rather than clear colors. Thomas Rice, the first owner of the Connecticut Cape the O'Neills own, sailed on the *Spy*.

can Folk Art in New York City.

Meanwhile, informal rug hooking clubs formed around the country and droves of women frustrated with the rule-ridden McGown method once again picked up their hooks and hoops with renewed vitality.

TODAY'S TRADITIONS

Thanks to an endless supply of patterns and instruction, rug hooking enjoys mass appeal, unlike many traditional crafts that require years of training and expertise. Most of today's rug hooking is characterized by two terms used interchangeably—"traditional" and "primitive."

Like the early makers, most modern rug hookers use textured wools cut into strips wider than would be used in the McGown method. They dye or overdyed their wool in colors reminiscent of a traditional palette, and their rugs feature the playful, simple, yet beautiful folk designs that

can create images as delicately textured as still-life paintings. To achieve such results, her method requires discipline and regimentation—a far cry from the free and spontaneous technique of folk art hookers.

That sense of freedom and spontaneity returned beginning in the 1970s when the Kopps, Moshimer,

and others resurrected rug hooking's true origins and spirit. Moshimer believed that the art should make room for all expressions and all styles, formal or folk, traditional or new artistry. The Kopps were instrumental in mounting the influential show *Hooked Rugs in the Folk Art Tradition* in 1974 at the Museum of Ameri-

Tish Bachleda's rug "Adam and Eve with Pomegranates" was inspired by motifs on early Pennsylvania German *fraktur*.



characterized the early rugs.

Rug hooker Anita White draws an interesting historical distinction. "Personally, I think the term 'primitive' is often misused. In the early primitive rugs, people just used what they had. When they ran out of one color, they'd start using another color. But a lot of what we do today is more sophisticated than true primitive. We have much wider choices of color, much wider choices of fabrics—so many different types of wools that we can use—so there's a lot more dimension to some of our rugs."

Although White's point is well taken, many makers keep the primitive spirit alive in their techniques. Barbara Carroll, who has been highly influential in the current revival, noted, "I like to teach everything, all kinds of things with different colors. In the old rugs, they didn't have a color palette. They had what they had. So I teach like that—I teach oddness in rugs. I don't have a color I don't use."

In Edgecomb, Maine—the heart of the region where rug hooking originated in the 1800s—Susie Stephenson creates rugs in a distinctive folk art style. "There are people who like to use patterns and almost a paint-by-number approach. Then there are a lot of artists out there today who are trying an amazing amount of stuff. Once people pull up the loops, you have a lot of choices as to what direction you want to go."

"People are starting to use different techniques with rug hooking," agreed Maria Barton. "They're not just using flat loops anymore. They're adding texture by taking fleece from a sheep and adding it to the face of a Santa. They'll take yarn and hook it into the tail of a rooster to add dimension, height, and color that you couldn't get with just wool. I see a lot of that going on right now."

Ultimately, rug hooking today comes down to a sentiment voiced by Peggy Teich, a dedicated rug hooker for thirty years. "You just do your own thing and you're much better off," she advised. "I like people to use their own imaginations. Rug hooking is not that hard to learn and

then you can start experimenting."

The six women we interviewed share common traits. For starters, they briefly relied on patterns when they began hooking but now focus on their own designs, often taking inspiration from antique rugs. "I design all of my own rugs and have almost from the beginning," said Tish Bachleda, who recalls buying one kit years ago and finding it too restrictive.

"I really don't do other people's patterns," Barton echoed. "I buy them sometimes, but then I don't

hook them. I mainly design and hook my own patterns."

TISH BACHLEDA

Tish Bachleda is at home—in more ways than one—creating hooked rugs and folk art in Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania. "I have a Pennsylvania German background and I'm drawn to things from that time, the hex signs, the architecture in my area, redware pottery, and *fraktur*."

She hooked her first rug about fourteen years ago after seeing ex-



Tish Bachleda took the inspiration for her hooked rug, below, from the folk art drawing above. "Man Feeding a Bear an Ear of Corn," c. 1840, was done in pencil, ink, and watercolor by an unknown artist, likely from Pennsylvania.



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Maria Barton uses traditional designs in a somewhat brighter palette for her hooked rugs, such as the house with birds, above, and the flowerpot below.



amples in a magazine. "I come from a long line of ladies who've done hand sewing, so I knew I could figure it out," she recalled.

Unlike many rug hookers who have gravitated toward selling patterns or teaching, Bachleda continues to create rugs, chair pads, hooked dolls, coasters, purses, tote bags, and other folk art bearing

Pennsylvania German and other antique designs as well as her own folk renditions through her business, The Tweed Weasel Primitives. Prices range from \$30 for a hooked coaster, for example, to \$6,000 for a large hooked rug, although most rug prices are in the \$200 to \$400 range.

In recent years, she also has been sought out to restore antique hooked

rugs for antiques dealers and collectors in her region.

MARIA BARTON

Maria Barton lives with her family in Michigan's north woods, where she serves as a district judge for two counties and plays ice hockey for recreation. And she hooks rugs. "Most of my rugs are traditional, and then there are my whimsical, holiday-themed rugs."

She began rug hooking in 1989 when she spotted a magazine article that displayed rugs by longtime rug hooker Polly Minick. "I thought, 'Hmm, I could probably do that,' so I went to Wal-Mart and bought a piece of burlap and a yarn latch-hook and taped down the latch. I used a quilting hoop and I hooked my first rug."

She describes her rugs as primitive but with a brighter palette than most traditional rugs. "I like to add more dimension to my rug hooking, to take it to a different level and be more creative with it," such as adding wire whiskers to a cat's face.

Barton operates her Star Rug Company online, selling patterns for primitive and antique reproduction rugs for between \$20 and \$70. She continues to hook rugs for special orders and sells some holiday-themed rugs at shows.

Under the mentorship of Barbara Carroll, Barton began teaching rug hooking in 2009 at rug hooking camps sponsored by Cynthia Norwood. "The camps are wonderful," Barton said. "There are so many people who are so creative and you're feeding off one another and they all come up with these great ideas."

BARBARA CARROLL

In the past twenty-five years, Barbara Carroll has established herself as one of the country's foremost rug hooking authorities. She has written several of the leading instructional books, including *American Folk Art: Rug Hooking*, *American Primitive Hooked Rugs: A Primer for Recreating Antique Rugs* with Emma Lou

Lais, and *Antique Colours for Primitive Rugs*, also with Lais.

Carroll has been instrumental in steering rug hooking toward primitive techniques, contributing to the art's surge in popularity beginning in the 1990s. After decades of exploring every aspect of traditional and primitive rug hooking, she now focuses on teaching.

"I like to teach everything, all kinds of things with different colors. I teach with the textured wools, and they can be dyed over or as is. It doesn't matter to me."

In her own work, Carroll personifies the exuberance of an inspired folk artist. "I use colors everywhere. I don't look at something and say, 'What color should that be?' Like if it's a tree, that the

"Rosie's Posies" and "Ned," top and center, are the work of Barbara Carroll, inspired by designs on antique rugs.

Susie Stephenson's whimsical "Nat's World" helped teach her youngest son the names of farm and forest animals. Her children drew the bats and owl and she drew the rest, hooking the scene in recycled, hand-ripped wool.



tree should be brown. Instead, I say it may be a purple tree. People don't come to me and expect me to teach trees with brown trunks."

Her popular classes are booked through 2012. Her business, Woolley Fox, in Ligonier, Pennsylvania, sells patterns, supplies, books, and her own pattern catalog, although she no longer hooks rugs to sell.

SUSIE STEPHENSON

Maine's seasons are the largest influence on the rugs Susie Stephenson hooks, day in and day out. "I hook the color of the seasons. My work can be very playful or kind of dark, depending on the season. When it comes to my palette, I look to Mother Nature. She always has the answer."

While working as a full-time teacher and raising four children, she also learned to hook from her mother. Stephenson's rugs are characterized by an exceptional level of playfulness. "I design all of my own rugs. I don't do patterns or any-

thing like that. The inspiration for my rugs comes from the world around me and I'm very simple."

Early on, she had a brush with a McGown-trained teacher. "That didn't work out," she remembers with a chuckle. "I didn't want to have somebody say, 'You're wrong, you have to do it this way.' I just wanted to pull up the loops and hook, so I developed my own style and took off with it because it was fun."

Recently she started raising sheep and goats and intends to use their wool in her rugs to replace the recycled wools she dyes in a pot hanging in her fireplace.

The author of *Designing and Hooking Primitive Rugs*, Stephenson sells her work from her home and through local galleries and accepts commission work. Prices run about \$200 a square foot. She also restores antique rugs and teaches classes both in Maine and Nova Scotia.

PEGGY TEICH

Antique rugs inspired Peggy Teich to begin rug hooking thirty years ago, and they continue to inspire her many designs. She is content to simply hook them. "I don't teach and I don't sell patterns. It would just take away from my real business, which is hooking rugs."

A class in 1980 on how to braid rugs led Teich to rug hooking. She and her husband, both longtime lovers of antiques, travel regularly from their home in Elm Grove, Wisconsin, to the East Coast for antiquing and museums visits, where she has been inspired by vintage rugs. "From the beginning, I might take designs from antique rugs or from groups of old things, maybe a border from something, a part of an old painting or something from an old textile. It's always like I'm painting a picture with my rugs."

She has maintained an allegiance to the traditional color palette. "Everything is dyed or overdyed. I use muted colors, like on an antique rug. I find that most colors, when they come from a bolt of wool, are too bright for me, so I like to mute them."

She sells her work through her web site, at occasional shows, and in shops in several states. Her prices range from \$200 to \$2,000, depending on size. She does no commission work or special orders.

ANITA WHITE

Anita White of Overland Park, Kansas, began rug hooking in 1994 when, as an antiques dealer, she wanted to decorate with antique hooked rugs but couldn't find any in suitable condition. Although self-taught, she picked up enough skill to obtain the rigorous McGown certification in 2001.

She now spends most of her rug hooking time sharing those skills, conducting classes at about



Peggy Teich's "Two Birds," above, is a reproduction of an antique rug she owns. "Five Houses and Flowers," below, is adapted from an old textile.



eight different rug hooking camps a year in several states. "For me personally, even though I don't do as much of the narrow-cut shaded tapestry, it does give you a better understanding of rug hooking and the ability to teach it. And while it's not where my passion is, I'm proud of my certification and I do think it has helped me."

White is rare among rug hookers at her level of proficiency in that only about 25 percent of the rugs she hooks are her own design. And although she still accepts some special-order work, she does not regularly offer her rugs for sale. "When you've put so much into making a rug, it makes it harder to sell it," she said.

For White, teaching satisfies another aspect of rug hooking.

Anita White hooked this geometric rug called "Naomi Hudson's Star," from a pattern by Patsy Becker. The floral rug at right is from a pattern by Edyth O'Neill called "Cape Ann."

"Rug hooking can be a very social art. In addition to fulfilling the need to create something with their own hands, women at hook-ins and camps have formed a lot of friendships, and they look forward to being inspired by one another." ★

Edyth O'Neill and her husband, Jack, share an interest in antiques and early homes. Her love of art and handwork came together in rug hooking in 1978. Within months her first two rugs were featured in national magazines, prompting a demand for her designs. Some of her more than 70 patterns appear in her book *Rugs for My Red Cape* and are sold through the Woolley Fox. Gregory LeFever is a contributing editor to *Early American Life*.

