# The Hunters and the Occupation of Weaving in Early Virginia

By Hunter McKelva Cole

Having passed his sixtieth year, Isaac Hunter of Chowan County, North Carolina, died in 1752. In September 1753, from items that the deceased's son and executor Elisha Hunter made available, an inventory of the large estate of chattels was compiled by Isaac's neighbors Josiah Granbery, John Gordon, and Timothy Walton.

At probate the lengthy roster of Isaac's assets was attached to his will. In this list Isaac's household items and barnyard supplies are conventional, much like those of any other planter in the Albemarle, but among Isaac's possessions something unconventional offers a surprise. In the inventory there is an abundant stock of textiles, a bountiful supply of cloth.

A close look at items in his estate reveals that Isaac was an acquisitive freeholder who had amassed productive land and implements for cultivation. The unusual presence of hundreds of yards of cloth in his estate links Isaac to his father's trade and discloses that Isaac not only raised crops but also produced and stocked merchandise for sale. He was, as his estate discloses, a farmer and a businessman. Thus, he fits into the evolving picture of a social order that is both rural and urban. Isaac was rich in land holdings. He was loyal in his faith (the Church of England). His plantation home was teeming in children, servants, and livestock. His business was abounding in wares, and these useful dry goods serve to place him in the second generation of New World gentry that had progressed socially and economically by combining trade with farming.

In Nansemond County, Virginia, directly north of Chowan, Isaac's father William Hunter, an indentured weaver, had been among those newcomers favorably classified as "mechanics," that is, as especial immigrants with an occupation of great value to the social and economic order of the colony. Most who immigrated to Virginia were yeoman who lacked specialized skills that would advance the pace of progress. Weavers, ironmongers, carpenters, and others in the working-class trades, however, were equipped to supply the essentials that the mother country and the upper class could not. Within his generation William Hunter rose quickly to prominence. Within twenty years, and before 1700, he was no longer a weaver. He had become a clerk of the court, then a judge (justice of the quorum). His family had standing and prominence in their community.

Philip Alexander Bruce's *Economic History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1896) portrays the colony as it existed before and after William Hunter arrived as a weaver indentured to one Charles Rountree. "In 1659," as Bruce reports, "a regulation was adapted prohibiting the exportation of wool, among other articles. Seven years later, the difficulty of obtaining clothing from England to supply the needs of the people became so great that the General Assembly determined to take more active steps for the encouragement of domestic woolen manufacturers" (p. 461).

Bruce says that because of the scarcity of cloth and clothing "it was the logical effect of these restrictive laws relating to navigation and the exportation of wool and woolen products that stimulated a manufacturing spirit in the Colonies . . . . At once, there arose a desire to make at home all the goods which were needed in the

plantation household" (pp. 466-467). Rountree brought William Hunter and his family to Virginia at a time when the colony, short of essentials, was under economic stress. William Hunter and his ilk filled an urgent need.

"It will be seen," Bruce reports, "that the authorities of the Colony looked upon a general system of local manufactures as a condition precipitated by low prices or deficient supplies from abroad . . . . The Virginians, when they made clothing at all, made it not for shipment, but for their own use . . . . As early as 1700, it had grown to be the habit of the people to mix cotton, linen, and wool in the manufacture of coarse garments for the use of their negroes and white servants (p. 468).

Bruce summarizes what was happening to newcomers like William Hunter who had left Britain with hopes of escaping occupational barriers. "Virginia extended the prospect of an improved condition of life and they [the immigrants] readily assented to the proposal to try their fortunes there, first as handicraftsmen bound to service by indentures, and after the expiration of their terms, as planters and handicraftsmen combined" (p. 400).

William arrived in Virginia shortly before 1685, and traditionally an indentured person served the sponsor for a period of five to seven years. After this, the indenture was removed, and a small tract was given to the former servant. When William's indenture expired, he himself chose to become a sponsor, and in 1695 he brought four slaves into the colony and settled them on his small tract. For each he was granted the traditional fifty free acres, thus a total of two hundred acres in Nansemond (*Virginia Patent Book Eight*, p. 431). In this transaction William is identified as William Hunter of Nansemond County, weaver. As a weaver at work William would have been termed "a mechanic." Bruce says that "the class of free mechanics in Virginia was an important one in spite of its small number. As late as 1680, it is stated that a handicraftsman was regarded by the planters with the highest esteem and courted with their utmost art" (p. 410).

"All the early Governors received instruction to promote the welfare of those engaged in the various mechanical pursuits [such as weaving] and to restrain any disposition on their part to abandon these pursuits with a view to producing tobacco" (p 410). In plain words, the colony needed mechanics even more than it needed tobacco workers, and weavers would produce the cloth for making the clothing of the king's subjects in Virginia. "As early as 1612," Bruce continues, "it was anticipated that Virginia would become an important seat of linen manufacture, owing to the adaptability of the soil to the production of flax . . . . In 1682 at the instance of Lord Culpeper, a law for the encouragement of linen and woolen manufacture was passed . . . . The statute [that every tithable person be required to produce at least two pounds of flax or hemp annually] was to continue in force until 1685" (p. 456).

Thread was spun from raw flax, and linen was woven from thread. In making cloth, a weaver relied on both a wheel and a loom. In the colony the source of flax was not only seed from England but also the native wild flax that proliferated in Virginia swamps. A spinning wheel was a mainstay in many a Virginia home. In Isaac Hunter's there were seven. In inventories of Virginia estates, Bruce notes that "linen wheels are frequently enumerated . . . . So numerous are the references to linen wheels . . . that it would be impossible to give a full list of them among the articles in

use which appear to have been often made of this Virginia linen." Bruce affirms that among the most prevalent items the weavers produced were napkins (p. 458).

William Hunter's son Isaac (born in Nansemond ca. 1690s) became a freeholder, a merchant, and a vestryman of St. Paul's Parish of Chowan. His position in the hierarchy of the local church boosted him in status. The vestry, elected annually, comprised a dozen leaders whose role was that of collecting tithes and making and enforcing local laws that were outside the scope of the governor and his council. Isaac served for twenty years. (See Raymond Parker Fouts, *Vestry Minutes of St. Paul's Parish, Chowan County, North Carolina, 1701-1776*. Cocoa, Fla.: GenRec Books, 1983.) Since the deceased also owned expansive acreage in Chowan and Bertie Counties as well as numerous slaves, his wealth was considerable.

However, like other prosperous men during his time and in his place, Isaac was poor in coin. In the American colonies English coinage and currency did not flow in abundance. The inventory of this man of property shows that at the time of his death his purse contained £30, 13, 9, a pitiful reserve, but it was typical among his class, since the financial standard of the planter was not in coin but in tobacco, the cash crop. Because English money was scarce, each colony produced its own coinage, which varied in worth. In Isaac's time the most envied was that of Virginia. Lord Culpeper had proclaimed and regulated its value. It was termed "Proclamation money of Virginia" and was favored in many of Carolina's land sales and in other financial transactions.

By 1752 Isaac's wife, née Elizabeth Parker, and one of their children, Jean Perry, were deceased. Accordingly, during probate of his father's estate Elisha apportioned Isaac's chattels equally among the living brothers and sisters. The siblings were Elisha, Jacob, Jesse, Isaac, Daniel, Sarah, Elizabeth Perry, Alee Perry, Rachel Walton, and Hannah Riddick. Each of the ten received an inheritance of appraised items valued at £25, 0. 66. Some of these heirs also received parcels of land and a slave each. Elisha, presumed to be the eldest son, inherited the family home. Since these bequests were stated in Isaac's will, they were not itemized and parceled out from the inventory of goods. What became of the profusion of fabrics? In the distributing of Isaac's chattels, each heir received a bequest of cloth. One sizable bolt was as large as ninety-one yards. Another was sixty-four.

It is natural to surmise that Isaac owned a store as well as plantations. If so, the site has not come to light in his records. In the estate settlement there's no mention of a business structure near his dwelling or in a nearby town or community. Perhaps it was located in Edenton, the site of St. Paul's Church and the Chowan County courthouse. The town skirts Albemarle Sound and its port. It was a likely marketplace for commerce. Isaac, as a vestryman, traveled to Edenton frequently for meetings held at St. Paul's Church or at the courthouse. A main road extending from Virginia down to Edenton passed near Isaac's home situated in the north of Chowan County near the southern boundary of Virginia. Today this farmland setting is within the town of Sunbury, which since the 1770s has been in Gates County.

The inventory of Isaac's estate is astonishingly large in yards of various textiles, including fabrics ranging from coarse hand-loomed cloth to cultured silk, silk poplar, seersucker, and lace. This impressive stock of homespun and refined dry goods also includes needles, buttons, and thread, in addition to raw cotton and flax awaiting to

be processed. This merchandise is not the inventory of a traditional landowner but of a merchant. It implies that Isaac, with masses of land in two counties, was both a freeholder and apparently also a linen draper. Imported fabrics and utilitarian yardages that likely were woven in Chowan or Virginia were on his shelves.

His granddaughter Sacharissa (Sacky) Hunter Nicholson Voorhies (1783-1873) of Maury County, Tennessee, would attest to his being a businessman. She would recall also that her great-grandfather William Hunter (of Nansemond County, Virginia) had been "in the weaving business" and that her grandfather (Isaac Hunter of Chowan) had been a merchant. Elisha's brother Isaac was Sacharissa's father (*Historic Maury*, July-September, 1972, p. 99).

The deceased's business profession had been based on buying and selling. It is likely that Isaac had attached a sales price per yard to each bolt on his shelves. The appraisers therefore could estimate the actual value of the yardage to be figured into the bequests. Included in the household inventory are the aforesaid "7 wheels," that is, 7 spinning wheels, but in the list of Isaac's possessions there is not even one loom. Thus, in his household seven spinners spun the raw flax, wool, and cotton into thread. Who were the spinners? The six daughters? The wife and the servants? Evidently the thread they created was loomed elsewhere, and prior to the spinning, some drudge must pick flecks of debris from the raw fibers. Afterwards, there would be the washing, dyeing, and drying of the thread. The home was filled with women who could perform these tedious tasks.

From Granbery, Gordon, and Walton's inventory the following is an itemized list of the various fabrics in this portion of the estate, amounting to some thirty bolts of cloth. Also mentioned are "money scales." Supposedly not all customers' cash payments were made in the Proclamation money of Virginia, and thus those made in other coinage were subject to being weighed. As for the stock, there's great variety, with cloth for both the upper and the lower classes. No doubt some female was assisting the male appraisers, for they were not likely to know a distinct classification as "fine Whitney," "garlix," "sagothy," or "narrow broads." At least one of the three men could somewhat write, but he was semiliterate and was no speller. Below, in the finished list the original misspellings have been retained, and the exotic, rather puzzling nomenclatures are left as recorded:

7 ½ yds of Broad Cloath
91 yds of home spun linen
¾ of a yd of mulen
4 yds of sesucker
49 ¾ yds of 7/8 linnen
64 yds of Hollon
5 ¼ [yds] of slamt linnen
51 ½ yds of narrow broads
3 ¾ yds of Carsey
3 ½ yds of corse linnen
5 sticks of hair
2 ¼ yds of cotton
1 ½ yds of sagothey
¼ of a yd of fine Whitney
9 ¾ Drest sk[ins]

2 ¼ yds of Bear Skin
6 pr of knitting needels
4 linnen handkirffs
7 ¾ yds of silk
26 yds of Fresh linen
1 yd of Kenten
6 silk handkersifs
1 ¼ [yds] of Farmin Sarge
5 ¼ yds of Camlinco
9 hats
3 duzen buttens
1 ½ yds of Saloon
1 ½ yds of lase [lace]
3 ¼ yds of chex
37 lb of battled flax

4 ½ yds of Blew Salene
7 yds of striped hollen
3 yds of Blew famlet
¼ of a yd of Camlet
24 ½ yds of Fresh linen
14 yds of ¾ garlix
39 [yds] of ¾ chex
15 yds of silk poplar
1 ¼ [yds] of bed ticking
3 hanks of silk
33 yds of cloth
¾ of a yd of carser
1 yd of corse cloth
7 wheals [spinning wheels]
15 lb of tear thread

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| 19 lb of toe thread | 10 lb of picked cotton | 26 lb not picked |
| 1 bed tick | 7 ½ lb of toe thread | a persel of wool |

At his death the dry-goods business was terminated, and Isaac's flourishing lands in Chowan and Bertie were dispersed to four of his five sons. A study of the ten heirs' individual bequests preserved in the estate papers reveals the monetary value of each item of cloth the son or daughter received in the settlement. The stated amount of each cloth appraisal can be studied for determining the grand total of their father's worth in his inventory of cloth. It must be remembered, however, that Isaac Hunter was wealthy in land and that the cloth business was probably a sideline.

Isaac's occupation as a dealer in cloth had stemmed from his father's profession, but there is little or no evidence that Isaac was trained to be a weaver. In 1713 he and his brother Robert, both young men and originally residents of Nansemond County, bought a tract in Chowan, settled there, and became North Carolina planters. Yet the adage "Like father, like son" can be applied to William's and Isaac's careers. Until Isaac's death and the dispersal of his estate, he bore a familial vestige of weaving. (*The author thanks Thomas Hunter for tips on Philip Alexander Bruce's source material*)